

## The Coin of Fire- Rectification of Material Wealth

Shimshon Stüart Siegel (with research by Jonathan Neril), Parshat Ki Tisa

*The Parsha of Ki Tisa is sponsored by Evonne and Jerry Marzouk in memory of Bella Greenbaum, a woman of grace and strength. May her memory be a blessing.*

*Parshat Ki Tisa* opens with G-d commanding Moses (*Moshe*) to take a census of the Children of Israel by collecting a half-shekel coin from each adult. The silver from these coins is to be used to make the sockets that hold the planks of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle that will be G-d's sanctuary among the people<sup>1</sup>. The previous two Torah portions (*parshiot*), *Terumah* and *Tetzaveh*, feature detailed instructions for the construction of the *Mishkan* and all its utensils. At the beginning of *Parshat Terumah*, G-d tells *Moshe* to call for a donation of precious goods to be used in the project:

“...gold, silver, and copper; and turquoise, purple, and scarlet wool; linen and goat hair; red-dyed ram skins, tachash skins, acacia wood; oil for illumination, spices for the anointment oil and the aromatic incense; shoham stones and stones for the settings...”<sup>2</sup>

The silver half-shekel, which is to be used to make the very foundation of the *Mishkan*, is not proscribed until now, two *parshiot* later. What is unique about these coins that they are not listed with the other materials donated in *Terumah*?

The Midrash says that G-d showed *Moshe* a half-shekel coin made of fire and said, “Like this one shall they give.”<sup>3</sup> The *Noam Elimelech* explains that money is like fire; it can be used to create, protect and nourish, or it can be used to harm and destroy.<sup>4</sup> The silver half-shekel stands at the opening of our *parsha* as a warning of the potential dangers of wealth.

Many of the donations for the *Mishkan* came from the great wealth that the Israelites, following G-d's command, requested and were given from their Egyptian neighbors as they were preparing to leave slavery.<sup>5</sup> In Biblical times, Egypt, more than any other nation, was noted for its prosperity. The thought of Egypt evoked massive pyramids and palaces, heavily adorned with gold and precious materials. The yearly flooding of the Nile produced fertile soil that was farmed to feed vast populations. Not coincidentally, in the Book of Genesis, both Abraham and Jacob go to Egypt when there is famine in the Land of Israel.

Yet Egypt stands as the Torah's prime symbol of the gross misuse of material possessions. “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for aid,” the prophet Isaiah says, “they did not turn to the Holy One of Israel and they did not seek out HaShem.”<sup>6</sup> Even though Egyptian wealth was at times used for good, feeding many in times of famine, the Egyptian relationship to wealth obstructs the awareness that G-d is the predominant power in the world. Rebbe Natan of Breslov<sup>7</sup> sees Egypt as the heart of materialism, pervaded by a lust for money so intense it became idol worship. According to the Midrash, Egyptians worshiped the sheep, a symbol of wealth.<sup>8</sup> Egypt's massive construction projects deified the wealth from which they were built, and the kings and queens whose power ordained their construction.<sup>9</sup> It was this spiritually toxic relationship with property that G-d wanted the Israelites to leave behind when they departed from Egypt.<sup>10</sup>

Leaving, however, was not enough. G-d intended that through the Exodus, Israel would create a new paradigm of materialism in the world.<sup>11</sup> Rebbe Natan explains that “Israel was exiled to Egypt in order to purify the wealth from there, because in the wealth... there fell all the [holy] sparks.”<sup>12</sup> The Torah does not condemn personal possession, even great wealth, but demands a certain mode of usage. Riches do not exist for their own sake or for the sake of man's ego. Rather, all the abundance of the

earth is focused on the implementation of G-d's Will.

The elevation of the wealth of Egypt occurred through the construction of the Mishkan, which was built from the donations solicited at the beginning of *Parshat Terumah*. From a certain perspective, the opulence of the Mishkan and the *Cohen Gadol*, the High Priest, whose lavish clothing was also made from the donated materials, may seem ostentatious and elitist. But the essence of all of this holy finery is that it originated in Egypt's culture of acquisition and material perversion, and passed through the purifying fires of the hearts of the Children of Israel, who gave willingly, rather than hoarding the wealth. This transformation returned the idea of wealth to its essential state, as a means through which G-d's in-dwelling Presence is made manifest in the daily lives of human beings.

However, the rectification of Egypt's wealth did not proceed unhindered. *Parshat Ki Tisa* climaxes with the tragedy of the Golden Calf, the ultimate example of the Noam Elimelech's destructive fire. Just as they are poised to affect a worldwide paradigm shift, the Children of Israel stumble. Moshe fails to appear in the moment he is expected, and the Israelites panic and demand a tangible representation of G-d's power. In contrast to the intricate details of the Mishkan (the viable channel for G-d's glory) the Golden Calf was made haphazardly, after the people demand no more than, "Make us gods that will go before us!"<sup>13</sup> The people celebrate the Calf, but their worship is empty worship; the golden statue is not a pathway to G-d.

Unfortunately in our time, we often see religious institutions with opulent external structures and well-paid clergy, but do not sense that these places are truly Tabernacles of G-d. Well-meaning congregants donate to the shul in exchange for a conspicuous honorary plaque, a personal parking spot or an entire building bearing their name. Yet, as contemporary commentator Dr. Aviva Zornberg points out, the most precious golden parts of the Mishkan (the Ark and the golden Cherubs resting on top of it) were not within view of anyone, ever, except for the Cohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, and to him only through the fog of incense.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the Golden Calf, and the orgies that attended it, stood exposed before all the people.<sup>15</sup> Proper use of material wealth sanctifies G-d's name in a way that is modest, practically unseen, and yet affects the whole world for good.

Today, wealth is portrayed as a gateway to personal fulfillment, power and status. Consumer products, from cars to clothes to personal electronics, promote a life that is generally a race for acquisition rather than a quest for righteousness and communion with G-d. Overpaid and misbehaving celebrities have become objects of worship, following one another to more indulgent levels of extravagance and glamorization, like the idolized sheep of ancient Egypt. Consumption has become an end in itself. The conveniences of modern life have freed us to pursue more consumption, while spiritual and emotional fulfillment is at an all-time low, as evidenced by the meteoric rise of the self-help and anti-depressant industries. People are seeking wholeness and healing, but they are turning towards consumer products and profit-driven media to find them.

And yet we celebrate the Exodus from Egypt every year at Passover, as if we were free, without even realizing that the ultimate slavery is not chains and forced labor, but the deification of wealth and human achievement. All of Egypt was enslaved to perverse materialism, and it was for this reason that G-d decimated the land and sent Israel out with its wealth. G-d commands Moshe to collect the half-shekel in the context of a census. "*Ki Tisa*," often translated as "when you count [the people]," literally means "when you lift." The elevation of material possessions elevates each of us when we dedicate all that we have to the furthering of righteousness in the world. The Jewish people were born out of the rejection of material worship, and charged with the mission of transforming the way societies view

wealth. Were we to really embrace this spiritual work, we would undoubtedly be a light unto the nations, and offer a model for satisfaction in Divine service over gratification in material excess.

### Suggested Actions:

1. Dedicate your wealth in service of something that will elevate you and make G-d's Presence manifest in your daily life.
2. Choose to buy something that is better for the environment, even if it will cost more.
3. Consider [sponsoring a Torah and environment project](#) through Canfei Nesharim.

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi on Exodus 30:15,16

<sup>2</sup> Exodus, 25:3-7 (translation by Artscroll Mesorah)

<sup>3</sup> Rashi on Exodus 30:13

<sup>4</sup> *Noam Elimelech* (Reb Elimelech of Lizensk; Poland, 18<sup>th</sup> century) on Ki Tissa, p. 130 in edition of Yarid Hasefarim, Jerusalem 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus, 12:35-36

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 31:1 (translation by Artscroll Mesorah)

<sup>7</sup> Rebbe Natan is the main student of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (Ukraine, 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> cent.) *Tikkun Mammon*, the spiritual elevation of money and property, is a recurring theme in Breslov Chassidic teachings.

<sup>8</sup> *Shemot Rabba* 11; In Gemara Chullin 84 a-b Rabbi Yochanan says "A person who wants to make themselves wealthy should become involved in [raising] sheep and goats." Understood in this context, the slaughter of the Paschal Lamb and the smearing of its blood can be seen as a dramatic statement of the rejection of the wealth-centered worldview of Egypt

<sup>9</sup> *Torah Studies*, adapted from the works of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, p.169; based on Igrot Kodesh, letter, 11<sup>th</sup> Nissan, 5725, vol. 23 p. 361-365.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the conflict between material desire and Divine love, see the commentary on the Torah portion of Yitro entitled "Love of G-d and Material Wealth" in *Canfei Nesharim's Eitz Chaim Hee* series.

<sup>11</sup> The construction of the Mishkan was the first time that rectification of the material was attempted on a national level. Both Abraham and Jacob made elevations on wealth. For Abraham and the wealth of Egypt, see *Likutei Halachot*, Shabbat 7:75, based on Bereshit 13:2. For Jacob's work elevating wealth at Shechem, see Tractate Shabbat 33b; *Likutei Mohoran* 23, paragraph 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Likutei Halachot*, Purim, 6:9

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 32:1

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Aviva Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, Image/Doubleday: New York, New York, 2001.

"...in Byzantine art and architecture...gold serves the 'politics of bedazzlement'; it represents blinding power. One looks and is amazed. In the Mishkan, however, the gold remains, in an important way, *invisible*. [author's italics] It is donated by the people in the most homely, familiar forms — personal jewelry, for instance. But the interior of the Mishkan is never seen by them, never grasped by their eyes. It is, strictly — and for all but those who serve in the Mishkan, the priests and the Levites — the stuff of imagination..."

<sup>15</sup> Rashi on Exodus 32:6