



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Shemot

Parshat Mishpatim

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A Delicate Balance

By Josh Trump

Shabbat Shekalim is a week in which we read a special *Maftir* discussing that members of *Bnei Yisrael* aged 20 and older are commanded to give a *מִתְּצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל*, half-*shekel* each year. The half-*shekel* serves two purposes: first, to take a census to count the number of people in the nation, and second, to raise funds to support the communal *Mishkan*.

כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם וְנִתְּנוּ אִישׁ כֶּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ לַיהוָה וְלֹא־יְהִי־בָהֶם

When you take a census of the children of Israel according to their numbers, every man shall give God an atonement for his soul when counting them, so that there will not be a plague among them when counting them. (Shemot 30:12)

Rashi explains that the *נַפְשׁוֹ*, *כֶּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ*, *atonement of the soul*, means by giving this money it avoids bringing on some sort of *ayin harah*. Rav Aharon Soloveichik explains this *ayin harah* by way of referencing two antithetical descriptions of man: *baal basar* - a biological creature of the flesh, and *baal nefesh*—a more spiritual creature. Rav Aharon highlights that typically a census in this context was taken during wartime. A period leading up to war could be the pinnacle of the *baal basar*: a mindset of strength, strategic planning, and self-determination could easily take over, forgetting the involvement of God in the process. Thus the Torah provides that the census is not simply conducted as a meaningless count, but as the citizens' contribution to the communal coffers to tap into the spiritual element of man, and balance the *baal basar* with his *baal nefesh*.

The *Haftorah* we read illustrates an example in *Navi* in which the half-*shekel* census is performed and provides an obvious link to the Torah reading. However, this story also provides the reader with an extra reminder of the delicate nature of the human condition that can teeter between *baal basar* and *baal nefesh*.

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The episode described in the *Haftorah* told from Kings II, chapter 12, shines a brief spotlight on the story of King *Yehoash*, whose full biography might be one of the most fascinating in *Tanach*. While this *dvar* Torah does not allow a full retelling of the story, it has the drama of a Shakespearean tragedy mixed with the gore of a Tarantino revenge fantasy. During the period of division between the Kingdom of Judea and the Kingdom of Israel, *Yehoash's* grandmother, *Ataliah*, kills her children and grandchildren to preserve control over the crown of Judea for herself. While she believes she eliminated the rest of the seed, it turns out the one-year-old *Yehoash* was saved and hidden away by the *Kohen Gadol* and his wife. Following *Yehoash's* seventh birthday, the *Kohanim* reveal *Yehoash's* true identity and coronate him as king. *Yehoash's* first act as king is to have his grandmother *Ataliah*

killed, a noble act that restores God's law into the kingdom under the guidance of his mentor, the *Kohen Gadol Yehoyada*.

It appears *Yehoash's* second notable act is to find the right economic policy to restore the Temple to its former glory. First *Yehoash* institutes a system whereby each *kohen* would solicit money and be responsible to make improvements to the Temple. *Yehoash* realizes the system is not functioning effectively so he creates a central fundraising system with a massive *tzedakah* box into which all donations would be submitted and emptied periodically. This

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system is far more effective and leads to the successful renewal of the Temple. Improving the Temple's aesthetics with the contributions of the community represents the successful balance of *baal basar* and *baal nefesh*.

While our *Haftorah* ends on that happy note, the life of *Yehoash* takes a tragic turn following the death of his lifetime mentor *Yehoyada*. As relayed further in Kings II and Chronicles II, when *Yehoyada* died, it seems *Yehoash* lost his *baal nefesh*. The people revert to their idol-worshipping ways, and as an example of how far things went, *Yehoash* allows the prophet *Zechariah*, son of *Yehoyada*, to be killed by a mob of people in the Temple. Jerusalem is then attacked by *Hazael*, the King of *Aram*, and instead of turning to God for help, *Yehoash* raids the national treasury which he so carefully built up from gifts of the masses, and bribes *Hazael* to go away. While this buys Judea short-term peace, it is a clear sign of weakness, and *Hazael* attacks again a year later, takes *Yehoash* captive, tortures him, and sends him back to his people who kill him in retribution for *Zechariah's* murder.

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Josh and Lizzy are both Westchester natives who moved back to the area 14 years ago from Manhattan. Their four kids, Natalie, William, Simon, and Alex are all products of the incomparable Westchester Day School with some wonderful enhancement from Ramaz, Frisch, and NYU, making them regulars on the institutional dinner circuit. They love everything about living in the Scarsdale community and feel incredibly blessed to live among such a warm and inviting group of people.

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