

Special Shabbats

We are about to enter a period of four “Special Shabbats” which lead up to Purim and then to Passover. Each Shabbat has a special maftir (concluding reading from a second Torah scroll) which relates thematically to Purim or Passover.

The Shabbat, therefore, gets a special name according to the special reading. This week will be Shabbat Shekalim. The next three special Shabbatot are Shabbat Zachor (March 7), Shabbat Parah (March 14) and Shabbat HaChodesh (March 21).

The special reading for this upcoming Shabbat—Shabbat Shekalim—describes a census requiring every Israelite man to contribute a half shekel to support communal sacrifices in the portable tent of meeting and later at the Temple. The egalitarian nature of this contribution is emphasized— “the rich shall not pay more, and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel.” This requirement that all people contribute equally helped the community develop a sense of unity as they were creating their new nation following the Exodus from Egypt. Shabbat Shekalim occurs about a month before Passover as a reminder that the due date for the half shekel contribution is approaching—the 1st of Nissan.

Today, though there is no more Temple and therefore shekel contributions are obsolete, some people contribute to an institution of Jewish learning in remembrance of this half shekel custom.

There is also a connection between this half-shekel contribution and Purim. The Talmud says that these half-shekel contributions counteracted the 10,000 silver talents that Haman gave to King Ahasuerus to obtain the royal decree calling for the extermination of the Jewish people. Therefore, some communities follow the custom of giving three coins in “half” denominations, such as half-dollar coins, to tzedakah on the afternoon of the Fast of Esther (the day before Purim). The three half-dollars given for every member of the family commemorate the three contributions the Jews gave for the building of the Tabernacle and for its sacrifices.

In many synagogues, plates are set out with silver half-dollars so that all can purchase them to use in observance of this custom.

This Shabbat Shekalim we are reminded of our obligation to give—even a small amount! We can all contribute to the sustenance of our community. No amount is too small! Everybody counts and is counted on to help the community continue to thrive.

When we are strong and everybody feels like their contribution is valued, then we can truly celebrate!