BS”D

Dear Friends,

I'm sharing my thoughts for this Shabbat with you. If you'd prefer to watch a video of my drasha, you can do so at baisabe.com/streaming.

This Shabbat is not only Rosh Chodesh Adar, but also Shabbat Shekalim, when in addition to the regular weekly parsha, we read the passage which contains the commandment for every adult Jewish male to pay a half-shekel contribution every year, to provide the Tabernacle, and later the Temple, with its operating budget. Today when we don't have a temple to which to pay the half-shekel contribution, instead we read the passage that describes the mitzvah in order to fulfill with our own mouths and minds what we cannot fulfill in practice. In addition, there is a custom at this time of year to donate three coins valued at half a unit of the currency of the place where you live to tzedakah, in remembrance of this half-shekel contribution.

The Torah stresses that every individual would pay the same amount; no one would pay any more or any less than half a shekel, no matter how rich or poor they were. While if we think of this half-shekel as a tax, that might seem unfair, the wealthier you are, the smaller the portion of your wealth you will be paying, while poorer people are paying a higher proportion of their wealth. In the US, we try to do the opposite with our taxation systems, expecting, at least in theory, wealthier people to pay more of their income in taxes.

However, if we think about the purpose of the half-shekel, the equality of the contribution begins to make more sense. The collected half-shekels, besides being used as a proxy census of the people (since we generally speaking don't want to count people), not only provided a snapshot of how many adult men eligible for military service there were, it also was used to purchase sacrifices for use in the Temple, and specifically those sacrifices that were offered on behalf of the

entire Jewish people. By mandating the contribution one half-shekel by every adult male, the Torah ensured that the funds collected would be considered the equal shared property of the entire Jewish people, and that any sacrifices purchased with these funds would belong to the entire Jewish people, and could therefore be offered on behalf of the entire Jewish people as one.

The fact that women were not mandated to contribute a half-shekel may have to do with the way that the contribution was used as a proxy census, for purposes of assessing military capacity, as evidence by the fact that 20, the minimum age for military service was also the minimum age for the contribution. Perhaps this was also due to the fact that the funds were used for the conduct of public worship, which was, and in the Orthodox world, still remains largely the province of men.

Whatever the reason for the exclusion of women from the half-shekel contribution, I see in this exclusion perhaps an explanation for the amount of the contribution. Men contributed half a shekel because, without the contributions of women, the men's contributions were incomplete, only a half-measure.

Whether the Torah is indeed subtly critiquing the exclusion of women from public life by making this male-only contribution one of half-measures, I do think it sends a powerful message about the way that all of us, by ourselves are incomplete. No individual can give a whole shekel, because no individual is complete and self-sufficient. We are only complete when we come together with others, and to a certain degree, as Jews, we are only complete when we stand together with the entire Jewish people.

And so each individual would make his half-shekel contribution, embodying the incompleteness of the individual, but these half-shekels would come together to purchase sacrifices which had to be whole, complete. Each animal offered on the altar could have no missing limbs or even blemishes—it had to be whole, symbolizing the wholeness of the entire people, on whose behalf it was offered.

This idea that individually we are incomplete, but we achieve wholeness only in society, runs counter to the dominant ethos of individualism in this country. Some time ago, long before COVID, I used to go sit in coffee shops to work on my drashot. Once, I went to a coffee shop to work on my drasha and all the tables were filled. I was about to take my coffee and my laptop and go sit outside, when a man beckoned me over to share his table. We got to talking. The man's name was Luc, and he had recent moved to the US for a graduate program after years of working for NGO's in the Global South. Luc and I bonded over being new homeowners, and Luc commented about how strange he found it that in the US people feel the need to own all the tools they might ever need to maintain their house.

Luc said he preferred to buy only the tools he needed on a regular basis and borrow anything else he might occasionally need from his neighbors, not because he couldn't afford to buy his own tools, but because it seemed wasteful to him. Moreover, borrowing tools from neighbors helped him feel more connected to his neighbors, and to build a community for himself in this country that he was still getting to know.

I thought about when I bought my first home, how I immediately started filling its garage with tools. When I found I needed a particular tool for the job, unless I really couldn't afford it, I'd go to the store and buy it, even if I didn't expect to use it again for months or years. I don't think I'm alone in this. Why is it that most of us, as long as we can afford it, would prefer to have a garage full of tools, most of which we will use once or twice year at best, than to be in the position of asking our neighbors if we can borrow a drill, or a saw once in a while?

I think part of this has to do with the American ideal of Rugged Individualism; this idea of the homesteader out on the frontier taming the wilderness in isolation, or the self-made man, who rises from poverty to wealth. There are no self-made men. The myth of rugged individualism has given us an epidemic of loneliness which was widespread even before the social isolation that has accompanied

the COVID-19 pandemic.

We live in a society that tells us that depending on other people makes us weak, and perhaps even morally suspect. As a result, when we do rely on others, we are loathe to admit it. According to a 2012 study, 1/3 of American men prefer to hide feelings of gratitude. But the truth is everyone depends on a family, a community, a nation for their physical survival. This is no less true in the realm of the spiritual.

We are not a religion of hermits or monks on mountain tops. Except for a handful of prophets and mystics, which I could count on one hand, our spiritual heroes did not isolate themselves or separate themselves from society, because G-d's presence favors us when we are united, together. By mandating a gift of a half-shekel and not a whole shekel from each individual, the Torah drives home that each individual on their own is incomplete.

Perhaps one of the reasons we read Parshat Shekalim in Adar has to do with the fact that it emphasizes the individual's need for the community. One of the major themes of Purim is Esther's choice not to isolate herself from the Jewish people when they were threatened. Her choice to risk her own life to save her people is what ultimately saved her. As Mordechai tells her in the Megillah, if you just try to save yourself, you and your family will perish and G-d will bring salvation for the Jewish people from somewhere else. That was true not just for Esther but for all of us.

When we try to protect ourselves by walling ourselves off from others, by separating ourselves from community, we are separating ourselves from the very thing that will save us. That doesn't mean that we have to gather together physically at a time when doing so puts us and others at risk from COVID-19. Ironically, we are living at a moment when the most anti-social thing you can do is gather together in larger groups to socialize.

Right now, being a member of a community, being a good citizen, requires us to stay physically as separate as we can. At the same time, it is urgent that we find ways to stay connected. We can look

to the mitzvot of Purim for a model of techniques for building communal unity, even when we might be dispersed, as were the Jews in Achashveirosh's kingdom. On Purim we build unity through reading the Megillah, participating in the conversation around the history and narratives of our people. We build unity by having festive meals. Even if our Purim meals don't involve guests this year, they still amount to celebrating the joys of our people, connecting us with all others who celebrate. We build unity by sending food to our friends. Even if they have food to celebrate with, by sending gifts of food, we connect our celebration with theirs. And we build unity by giving gifts to those in need—looking out for the welfare of everyone in our community, making everyone's welfare our own responsibility, binds us together as one community.

May we each merit to bind ourselves together as one community by fulfilling the mitzvot of Purim this year. May we find other ways to connect ourselves deeply to one another, so that we can find the wholeness in community that will always elude us in isolation. If we do this, then we will experience the *orah v'simcha*—light and joy, that was shared by the Jews of Shushan.

Shabbat Shalom and Chodesh Tov!

Rabbi Garth Silberstein