

כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם וְנָתַנוּ אִישׁ כֹּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ לַה' בְּפֻקֹד אֹתָם וְלֹא יִהְיֶה כְּהֶם נֶגֶף בְּפֻקֹד אֹתָם (שמות ל"ב)

“When you take the census of the people of Israel according to their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul to the Lord, when you count them; that there should be no plague among them, when you count them.”

The commentators are puzzled as to why the Pasuk doesn't just write ונתנו איש כפרו (and each man will give his redemption). In addition, a couple of Pesukim later, the Torah tells us that the redemption required is "Half a Shekel" per person (פסוק יג). The question is, why not a whole shekel?

The אפריון (Rav Shlomo Gantzfried – the author of the Kitzur Shulchan Oruch) brings three possible answers:

1. The Gemara in Shabbos (88a) tells us that Hashem held a mountain over the Jewish people in order to force them to accept the Torah. It then suggests that this provides a loophole in case the Jewish people sin, as they can claim that they were forced to accept the Torah and didn't do it willingly –so they are not liable if they transgress it. Tosfos asks how this Chazal makes sense, when we know that the Jewish people did accept the Torah willingly when they said נעשה before נשמע? Rav Gantzfried answers this from a Medrash Tanchuma (Parshas Noach, Siman 3) which says that the Jewish people accepted the written Torah willingly, but they were reticent to accept the Oral law, until Hashem forced them to accept it. This answers our question above: The giving of the half shekel came soon after the Jewish people worshipped the Golden calf (even though the Torah writes it in a different order) and the Jewish people needed atonement for this. However, they only needed atonement for what they had accepted willingly (i.e. with their soul), namely, the written law. Hence they only needed to give half a Shekel.

2. He brings an answer from the בינה לעתים as follows: There were four different groups of people who sinned with the Golden calf. The first group worshipped the calf without being warned prior to this and without any witnesses. These people were tested by drinking water containing the ground golden calf. The second group were witnessed worshipping the calf despite being warned not to. These people were killed by the בני לוי upon Moshe's command. The third group worshipped the calf without being warned not to, but were witnessed. These people were killed in a divine plague. The final group of people didn't actually worship the calf, but sinned because they didn't object when they saw others worshipping it. These people were not killed. Since a person is comprised of both body and a soul – but these people only sinned with their soul, they were instructed to bring half a shekel to atone for their souls.

3. Although Hashem forced the Jewish people to accept the Torah (as mentioned above), this doesn't exempt us from keeping it. There is a famous Rambam (גירושין כ"ב) which explains that the Beis Din can force a man to give a טג in certain circumstance. He explains that this is because deep inside every Jewish person is a soul that wants to do what is right. The אפיקי יהודה suggests that the same thing is true when Hashem forced us to accept the Torah. Really every Jewish person wants to connect to G-d and accept his Torah. The forcing of the Jewish people to accept the Torah allowed our souls the opportunity to do what they really wanted to do. When the Jewish people served the Golden Calf, they broke this connection and therefore needed to bring redemption for it.

This desire of the soul to do what is right is due to the fact that our souls originate from Hashem. Moreover, since all the souls are connected to the same source, we have a responsibility of looking after each other and ensuring we, as a community, don't sin. According to the בן אלקביץ נהר"ש (brought down in the Alshich) this is why we only were commanded to give half a Shekel, because we are not complete without everyone else.