

# The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn

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## POWER WITHOUT INSPIRATION

Parshas Ki Sisa begins with the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel*. Commenting on the words "*Zeh yitnu* – This is what they should give," Rashi explains that Hashem showed Moshe a fiery coin that weighed a half a shekel, and said, "So shall they give." The Midrash adds that Hashem took this coin from underneath the *Kisei Hakavod*, the supernal Throne of Glory.

Why was it necessary for Hashem to show Moshe what a *machatzis hashekel* looked like? We can understand why He showed him a fiery menorah, as the details of the menorah were quite complex. But what is there to understand about the appearance of a half a shekel?

Tosfos explains that Moshe was bothered by something else entirely: He couldn't understand how giving a small coin could bring atonement for the sin of the *chet ha'egel*. While this explains Moshe's question, Hashem's answer is now puzzling. How did showing him a coin satisfy his doubts?

Furthermore, why was Moshe perplexed specifically with the *machatzis hashekel*? The same question can be posed about many other matters, for example, with regard to *korbanos*: How can bringing an animal or other offering bring atonement for one's sin?

### FORCED ATONEMENT

*Machatzis hashekel* is subject to a unique law: it was collected even against the donor's will. If someone did not agree to give a *machatzis hashekel*, the Beis Din would send an agent who would extract it by force.

Mitzvos are comprised of two parts: the physical act, the "body" of the mitzvah, and the underlying intent and feeling, the mitzvah's "soul." With most mitzvos, there is some degree of *neshamah* apparent in the mitzvah's performance. But *machatzis hashekel*, which can be collected involuntarily, appears to consist of nothing other than a physical act.

With *korbanos* we also find a similar law: If someone was obligated to bring a *korban* but did not want to do so, he would be forced to bring it. However, that case requires some form of intent: he

ultimately needed to state, "I desire to bring it." And even if these words are verbalized unwillingly, they express the person's true desire, as the Rambam famously explains. *Machatzis hashekel*,

on the other hand, did not require such a statement, and may seemingly be bereft of any type of intent.

This is what puzzled Moshe. How was it possible for something that is nothing more than a physical act, devoid of any intent or feeling, to achieve atonement for a sin as severe as the *chet ha'egel*!

What's more, the *chet ha'egel*, the sin of *avodah zarah*, is largely a sin of the mind and heart, in which the mind entertains

heretical beliefs and the heart surrenders to idolatrous ideas. The accompanying physical motions seem to be secondary. That being the case, its atonement should seemingly need to be in kind, through a mitzvah that includes intent and feeling!

### A COIN WITH WEIGHT...

This seeming irony is also associated with the fact that this mitzvah entails giving a half a shekel, a measurement of weight.

The concept of weight denotes physicality. The barometer by which an object is weighed is not the quality of its spirit, but the quantity of its physical matter. The larger the mass of an object, the greater its weight.

Furthermore, spirituality and physicality differ in that the more spiritual an entity is the more it rises above, while physical entities tend to descend downward. In this light, the concept of weight represents the epitome of physicality. An object's weight causes it to fall, and what's more, this is how it is weighed: two items are placed on a scale, and the heavier one descends.

The fact that a *machatzis hashekel* is a measurement of weight further demonstrates its association with physicality. How, then, can it serve as atonement?

### ...AND MADE OF FIRE

To answer this question, Hashem showed Moshe a coin of fire.

Fire is synonymous with excitement and passion. Furthermore, fire represents spirituality. From all of the four elements—fire, air, water, and earth—it is the only one that is constantly on the rise. Air often travels sideways (as seen with wind); water gravitates downward; and earth descends even lower. Fire, on the other hand, continuously strives heavenward.

At the same time, the fiery coin had a weight (as Rashi states, that the coin *weighed* a half a shekel). The coin thus combined two radical opposites: Fire, the ultimate climber—spirituality—and weight, the epitome of physicality!

But it is this very paradox that is the key to the answer: Even a physical, “weighty” act, seemingly devoid of excitement and fervor, is in reality composed of “fire.”

How can this be? Because the fiery coin was taken from underneath the *Kisei Hakavod*.

Regular fire might be spiritual, but since it is a created entity, it too has its limits: it is “limited” to spirituality. The fire of this coin, however, was different. Since it was sourced in Hashem’s throne of glory, it was not constrained to being spiritual, and was able to transform even a weighty, physical coin into fire.

This was Hashem’s response to Moshe: Even being forced to give a half a shekel can achieve atonement, because in reality this act, too, is illuminated with the fire of the *neshamah*.

## SUBCONSCIOUS KINDNESS

When a Jew does a mitzvah, he might say to himself: “What kind of value can it have? I didn’t enjoy or appreciate it; I merely did the motions. It’s not worth anything!”

The fiery coin teaches us that this is not the case. Each Jew possesses a *neshamah*, which is similarly “hued from beneath the *Kisei Hakavod*.” The *neshamah*’s divine source allows it to affect even purely physical acts and make them special and meaningful.

Not only that, but the *neshamah* can even transform actions performed unknowingly:

The way to arouse a Jew is not through philosophical debates, but through igniting the “candle” of the *neshamah* with the “candle” of mitzvos.

The Sifri states that if a Jew loses a coin and a poor individual discovers it, he has performed the mitzvah of *zedakah*. The Jew doesn’t realize what happened, and when he does, he is pained by the loss; yet, he has given *zedakah*!

What’s really going on here? The *neshamah* desires to give *zedakah*, so it subconsciously causes a coin to be lost, so it can be found by someone who needs it! This is because

a Jew’s very essence is united with *Eloku*, extending even to purely physical acts done unintentionally.

## POWER OF AN UNINSPIRED MITZVAH

A similar question is sometimes asked regarding influencing others.

A person might argue:

“What’s the point of going on *mitzvoyim* and convincing someone to put on *tefillin*? You think you accomplished a lot, but who are you fooling? Do you really think he wanted to put on *tefillin*? You were harassing him, and he simply wanted to get you out of his hair! If you truly want to have an influence on him, teach him about Hashem and about Torah, and ultimately he’ll *want* to put on *tefillin*!”

The fiery coin shows us otherwise. If you would be dealing with a non-Jew, his connection to Hashem is indeed limited to how much he understands and appreciates. But a Jew is intrinsically connected to Hashem. The way to arouse a Jew is not through philosophical debates but through actual performance of mitzvos. The “candle” of mitzvos will arouse the “candle” of the *neshamah*. Even if a mitzvah is initially done without feeling, the action itself will eventually inspire him.

For further study, see *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 16, pp. 381ff. *Toras Menachem* – *Sefer Hamaamorim Melukat* vol. 1, p. 243.



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