

## HAMAN'S BRIBE AND ITS ANTIDOTE:

Purim and the *Machatzith HaShekel*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Talmud states:

It was known and revealed before the Creator of the world that in the future Haman would mete out *shekalim* against Yisra'el; therefore, He caused their *shekalim* to precede [Haman's].

(*Megillah* 13b)

Thus, Chazal tell us that the *machatzith hashekel* (half *shekel*) that was contributed to the sanctuary by each of the members of *benei Yisra'el* who were counted in the wilderness, as well as the annual *machatzith hashekel* later given for the sanctuary and the Beith HaMikdash (*Mish. Shekalim* 1:1), served to protect the Jews from Haman's decree.

Yet the connection between these *shekalim* and the ten thousand silver talents offered by Haman to Achashverosh for permission to exterminate the Jews (Ester 3:9) seems elusive. What is there in the *mitzvah* of *machatzith hashekel* which could serve as an antidote for Haman's plan? Furthermore, the Talmud states that G-d "caused their *shekalim* to precede [Haman's]," indicating that the protection afforded by the *mitzvah* of *machatzith hashekel* was readied in advance because of what had already been contributed in the past. Why then did this protection prevent only the actual execution of Haman's decree, instead of preventing the decree altogether and sparing the Jews all of the anxiety that it caused? In addition, assuming (as Chazal did) that some deeper connection exists between the two sums, one would expect the sum donated by *benei Yisra'el* to the sanctuary to have comprised at

least as much as Haman was prepared to donate for permission to destroy them. Why then did the relatively minimal amount of *machatzith hashekel* suffice to outweigh Haman's sum? All these *shekalim* combined amount to slightly more than one hundred silver talents (Shemoth 39:25), while Haman's proposed contribution to the king's coffers was one hundred times as much! Apparently, a deeper understanding both of the *mitzvah* of *machatzith hashekel* and of the decree of Haman is necessary.

## 2. THE EFFICACY OF THE *MACHATZITH HASHEKEL*

The power of the *machatzith hashekel* to protect is clearly indicated in the Torah itself, which states that the nation of Yisra'el was commanded to make this contribution so that "no plague may come upon them when they are counted" (Shemoth 30:12). But the Torah does not explain either how the census can precipitate a plague or how the *machatzith hashekel* can prevent it. Rashi explains that the potential source of the plague is the *ayin hara* (the so-called evil eye), which is "prevalent when a count is taken" (com., *ibid.*). From where, however, does this destructive capacity of the *ayin hara* derive?

Occasionally, a person may consider his friend's success with a dismay that is tinged with jealousy and wonder how his friend merited such good fortune. In order to prepare a response to these unstated accusations against divine justice, such critical questioning may arouse a closer scrutiny of the person enjoying this success by the heavenly court as well. It is here that danger lies, for G-d generally deals with us according to *middath harachamim* (His attribute of compassion). The complaint against divine justice, however, necessitates a more precise, individual assessment, to ascertain whether such divine benevolence is in fact deserved. If it is not, and the accusations of the *ayin hara* demand reply, G-d may be constrained, as it were, to modify the situation in accord with *middath haddin* (His attribute of strict justice) and proceed to withhold the good fortune that had previously been enjoyed.

We may then conclude that *middath harachamim* does not *actively* dictate a favorable judgment in place of a negative one dictated by *middath haddin*. Instead, divine mercy is expressed in inaction: G-d may "ignore" (temporarily) the just punishment dictated by *middath haddin*, which would otherwise

be executed immediately as the automatic consequence of sin. Yet how long can the demands of justice be ignored? The Torah expresses the limit on forbearance: until "the day of My accounting, [when] I shall bring them to account for their sins" (Shemoth 32:34). Thus, even without malicious intent, the critical *ayin hara* of one who questions his fellow's success demands an accounting — and an appeasement of *middath haddin*. Once the protection of divine mercy is withdrawn, divine judgment according to the letter of the law is activated.

Recognizing this function of the *ayin hara*, we can understand why it is especially "prevalent" when a count is taken. In reference to the *machatzith hashekel*, the Torah states, "This amount they shall give, each one who passes among the numbered" (Shemoth 30:13). Rashi explains that "the method of counting is to pass those being counted *one after another*" (com., *ibid.*). In a census, the individual is singled out; he is no longer part of the amorphous mass of the *kelal* (community).<sup>1</sup> Once the individual is no longer subsumed within the *kelal*, he must be treated *as an individual*. He can no longer be "ignored," nor can he benefit from any special mercy meted out to the community on account of collective merit. At the census, he stands exposed with only his own individual merits, without the concealment afforded by communal anonymity. Thus, by being counted, the individual stands in the focus of divine scrutiny — just as he does in the wake of the *ayin hara*.

It is noteworthy that, in the laws concerning the census, the Torah continually employs the root "פקד" (~ make accounting) — rather than the usual "ספר" (~ count) — implying "settling accounts" with the counted and actualizing the results of the "accounts" for better or for worse. Thus, we find the root "פקד" in the context of the fulfillment of G-d's promise to Avraham: "And G-d *took account* (פקד) of Sarah as He had said" (BeReshith 21:1). Similarly, the Torah warns that G-d "*keeps account* (פקד) of the iniquity of fathers [bringing punishment] upon children" (Shemoth 34:7). Likewise, regarding Amalek, G-d states, "I *have taken account* (פקדתי) of what Amalek did to Yisra'el" (Shemu'el I 15:2). As we have noted, such "פקדיה" ("accounting") marks the outer limit of *middath harachamim* — which is "slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness" (Shemoth 34:6) — beyond which, "on the day of *My accounting* (פקדי), *I shall bring them to account* (ופקדתי) for their sins" (Shemoth 32:34).

This interpretation of *machatzith hashekel* is explicit in the Torah commentary of R. Bachyai regarding the census:

Scripture has revealed to us that the nation is reduced to its individual components during the count, each of whom is considered by divine providence, with all his actions scrutinized individually — at which point the plague occurs. This is not the case before [the census], when [the individual] was part of the many, but once everyone and his deeds are individualized, punishment is unavoidable. Thus, the Shunammith woman replied to Elisha, "*I dwell among my people*" (Melachim II 4:13). In other words, do not plead in my name before the king or the military commander; I prefer that my needs be included as part of the whole lest I be singled out for punishment.

(com. on Shemoth 30:12)

To spare us from these dangers of individualism, the Torah offered an antidote to the potential harm of the census and a way to restore the individual to the group. The *machatzith hashekel* was a uniform offering that negated individual identity: "The rich shall not add nor the poor detract" (Shemoth 30:15). No individual traits came to the fore in this commandment. In addition, the offering was specifically *half* of a *shekel*, not a whole one. This symbolized the desire of each person to be a part of something larger and more complete than himself.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the sums collected were destined for public projects. From the coins given in the first census, the *adanim* (the bases of the beams of the sanctuary) were made. Furthermore, the *adanim* were produced by melting down the silver *shekalim*, "one hundred *adanim* from the one hundred talents" (Shemoth 38:27), each talent containing three thousand *shekalim*. The *separate* coins were collected and *fused* into bases, an expression of cleavage to the *kelal* at the expense of individual form and identity. Moreover, each base was but *half* of a pair on which each of the beams of the sanctuary stood. Similarly, the second census, taken in the second year on Rosh Chodesh Iyyar with the erection of the sanctuary (BeMidbar 1), served to fund the public sacrifices.<sup>3</sup> And during the time of the Beith HaMikdash, the annual *machatzith hashekel* levy supported the "donation for the treasury," used for the purchase of public offerings. All this emphasized the individual's desire to be subsumed within the *kelal* by sharing in the *community's* needs and participating in its *collective* atonement by means of the sacrifices.

The very wording of the Torah in *parashath Ki Thissa* suggests that the *machatzith hashekel* effects this transformation of the individual into part of the *kelal*. The Torah initially speaks of the numbered singly: "*Each one* [singular] shall pay an atonement offering for *himself* [singular]" (Shemoth 30:12). Ultimately, however, after the collection, it relates to them as part of a plural group: "It shall serve for *benei Yisra'el* [plural] as a remembrance before G-d to atone for *yourselves* [plural]" (ibid. 30:16).

### 3. THE INDIVIDUAL VERSUS THE COMMUNITY

Nevertheless, it appears that our conclusions regarding the *machatzith hashekel* are insufficient. One wonders why — if it is indeed so important for the individual to be subsumed within the *kelal* — a census with its inherent dangers of individualism is ordered altogether, only to have its possibly negative consequences neutralized retroactively. Obviously, G-d is not in need of a census to assess the size of Yisra'el.

In addition, when we compare the *mitzvah* of *machatzith hashekel* with the gifts solicited for the sanctuary in *parashat Terumah*, we find a very different emphasis: "They shall take Me an offering from *every person whose heart moves him to donate*" (Shemoth 25:2). The offerings expressed the individuality of the donor in both quantity (as much as his "heart moves him to donate") and type (whichever of the thirteen materials — "gold, silver, copper, sky-blue [wool], red [wool], crimson [wool], " etc. (ibid. 25:3-7) — contributed). The purpose of the gifts likewise depended on individual preference (for the holy vessels, the priestly vestments, or parts of the sanctuary). If the concealment of individualism is so important, why did the Torah not demand uniform offerings for the sanctuary as it did in the case of the *machatzith hashekel*?

It seems that implied here is a fundamental principle regarding the dual nature of proper service of G-d: Both aspects — the individual *and* the communal — have essential roles. Clearly, each and every one of us must dedicate himself on his earthly mission in accordance with his unique abilities and talents. One must sense the greatness of one's *personal* responsibility as an individual standing alone before G-d. The individual dare not excuse himself from his obligation to make the offering that is appropriate specifically *for him* by comparing himself to his fellow: "*If I am not for myself, who will be*

for me?" (*Avoth* 1:14). At the same time, however, when we envision how G-d relates to *us*, we must labor to erase any trace of our individuality and to make ourselves part of the community as a whole; the individual dare not pride himself on his individuality to the point where he isolates himself from the *kelal*: "*When I am only for myself, what am I?*" (*Avoth* *ibid.*).

Both contributions — the offering to the sanctuary and the *machatzith hashekel* — highlight complementary aspects of this dual theme. Individualized donations to the sanctuary were intended to enhance in the donor the feeling that G-d dwelt in his midst. Thus, G-d emphasizes, "I shall dwell *in their midst*" (Shemoth 25:8): in the heart and soul of each and every one in Yisra'el.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the levy of the *machatzith hashekel* served to make all the nation of Yisra'el into a single entity before G-d: "It shall serve for *benei Yisra'el* [collectively] as a remembrance *before G-d*" (*ibid.* 30:16).<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the importance of individual donations, they lack the communal dimension and thus the inherent grace (*middath harachamim*) that goes along with it. The Torah employs the term "an offering to G-d" three times in this *parashah*, alluding to the individual offerings to the sanctuary and the two *machatzith hashekel* contributions for the *adanim* and the public sacrifices. The expression "to atone for yourselves," however, appears only twice: for the two uniform *machatzith hashekel* contributions, but not for the individualized gifts brought to the sanctuary (Rashi on Shemoth 30:15).

In order to sense G-d in our midst, the personal offering is imperative. To this end, even the unspoken individual intentions of the donor are crucial: The contribution must be brought "'for Me' (Shemoth 25:2) — [meaning,] *in My name*" (Rashi, *ibid.*). Those who lack this personal dimension in their offering will not succeed in attaining the goal of perceiving G-d "in their midst." Conversely, as we stand *before G-d*, we must realize that individual distinctions have no *true* significance. Therefore, the public sacrifices — which are intended to be acceptable on behalf of all Yisra'el "before G-d" — are purchased specifically through the *machatzith hashekel* contribution. Even before the personal contributions for the erection of the sanctuary were brought, the *shekalim* were solicited, emphasizing that the individual dimension in the sanctuary literally *rests* on the communal effort, symbolized by the *adanim* that were forged from the uniform *machatzith hashekel* contribution and served as the physical base of the entire sanctuary.

It is noteworthy that, with regard to the individual gifts to the sanctuary, we consistently find the root "נָקַח" (~ take) employed, as in, "They shall *take* (נָקַחוּ) Me an offering; from every person whose heart moves him to donate, *take* (נָקַח) My offering" (Shemoth 25:2). Regarding the donation of the shekalim, however, the Torah uses the root "נָתַן" (~ give), as in, "This amount they shall *give* (יָתְנוּ)" (Shemoth 30:13). The emphasis in "taking" is that there is a "Taker" (G-d). It is the donor's relationship with this "Taker" that both determines the size and type of gift and is affected by this act of giving. The goal, as discussed above, is that G-d should "dwell in their midst." Conversely, "giving" makes no reference to a receiver; the uniform gift of the *machatzith hashekel* is one-sided.<sup>6</sup>

We may conclude, then, that the individual must suppress his unique role and merge into the whole *only* in terms of how he wishes to be perceived by G-d, but *not* in expressing *his* relationship to G-d. On this latter level, he must continuously reaffirm the unique nature of his personal mission in life. Lest an individual adopt a posture of feigned humility to avoid such a personal responsibility, the Torah commands him to be counted in the census and thus stand before G-d — *as an individual*. One must sense how vital one's role is, as "one who passes among the numbered" (Shemoth 30:13). "Each and every one is *obligated* to say, '*For me the world was created*'" (*Mish. Sanhedrin* 4:5). At the same time, such an individual mission must not separate the person from the community. To the contrary, the uniqueness of the individual is the basis of *his role in the community*. Thus, the better the individual's performance, the stronger will be his bond to the community. Standing before G-d as an individual counted alone, he gives a *machatzith hashekel* as a tangible expression of his desire to be considered an integral part of *kelal Yisra'el*: as an individual component of the greater whole. With this understanding of the importance of collective unity, we can proceed to consider what really precipitated Haman's decree.

#### **4. THE SIN OF THE JEWS IN THE TIME OF MORDECHAI AND ESTER**

Haman described the Jews as being "scattered and divided among the nations" (Ester 3:8). According to R. Yeshayahu Horowitz ("*Derush for Parashat Zachor*"), this portrayal contained a legitimate indictment of the Jews, which was accepted in the divine court as tentative justification for their decreed destruction. Haman's assertion — "it is not worthwhile for *the king* to leave them alone" (*ibid.* 3:8) — should be read in light of the Midrash's conclusion that "wherever 'the king' is said in the

*megillah* with no additional modifier, it refers to both the King — the Holy One Blessed be He — and the king — Achashverosh" (*Est.R.* 3:10). The Talmud, however, offers two other reasons why G-d sanctioned the decreed destruction of the Jews: either "because they partook of the banquet of the wicked [Achashverosh]" (*Megillah* 12a), or "because they bowed down to an idol [in the days of Nevuchadnetzar (Rashi)]" (*ibid.*). We can harmonize between R. Yeshayahu Horowitz's explanation and the Talmud's reasons by noting the Talmud's qualification that they did not actually serve idolatry, and "did so only for the sake of appearance," to be like their neighbors.<sup>7</sup> By trying to act like their diverse neighbors — there were one hundred twenty-seven different provinces within the Persian empire — the Jews lost their unique, unifying identity, making themselves perform "scattered and divided among the nations."

Understanding this as the true, *underlying* sin of the Jews of that generation, the heavenly decree against them was indeed measure for measure. They did not preserve their national identity as Jews, so they were now to be treated as individuals. They could not rely on the *middath harachamim* — based on collective merit — that is reserved for the community as a whole.

In his plot, Haman "the Agagi" — descendant of Amalek — followed in the footsteps of his ancestors. Amalek knew well how to exploit divisiveness in the nation of Yisra'el in order to vanquish them as individuals. Thus the Torah describes the first encounter between Yisra'el and Amalek: "He cut off all the stragglers to your rear" (*Devarim* 25:18). Rashi explains "stragglers" as "those who were weak because they had sinned and were expelled by the cloud [of glory that surrounded the nation]" (*com.*, *ibid.*); they had forfeited their connection with the *kelal*. The Midrash comments even more explicitly:

"*He encountered you* (קָרַךְ)" (*Devarim* 25:18) — R. Nechemyah says: He literally called you ["קָרַךְ" is expounded as "קָרַאךְ" ("he called you")]. What did Amalek do? ...He stood himself outside the cloud [of glory that surrounded the nation] and would call them, "Re'uven! Shimon! Levi! Come out for we are your brothers and we want to do business with you!"  
*When they would come out*, [Amalek] would kill them.

(*Tan. Thetzei*:9)

Perhaps the roots of this lack of unity are implied in the Torah itself, regarding the sin of *benei Yisra'el* in Refidim, which directly precipitated Amalek's attack.<sup>8</sup> The Torah relates, "The people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Mosheh and said, 'Why did you bring *us* up from Mitzrayim to kill *me* and *my* children and *my* livestock with thirst?'" (Shemoth 17:3). At the beginning of the verse the people speak as one — "*us*" — but the end of the verse is expressed completely in the singular. Scripture implies that, in spite of the seemingly unified front presented in the demand for water, in reality everyone was concerned solely about himself and his possession, oblivious to the needs of his fellows. Such an attitude destroys the communal whole and exposes Yisra'el to the assault — and indictment — of Amalek. Haman's campaign was essentially no different, and the repentance of Yisra'el was gauged by Yisra'el's ability to unite before G-d, a unity that is symbolized by the *machatzith hashekel*: the antidote for Haman's ten thousand silver talents.

#### **8. THE ATONEMENT FOR THE SIN — AND THE MACHATZITH HASHEKEL**

To redress this sin and dispel the decree against the nation of Yisra'el, a united front before G-d was then necessary so that He would once again treat them communally. Appreciating this, Ester summoned the Jews to repentance by telling Mordechai, "Go and *gather all the Yehudim* in Shushan, and fast for me" (Ester 4:16). Likewise, in their letter effectively nullifying Haman's decree, Mordechai and Ester stress that the Jews must "*assemble together* to defend their lives" (ibid. 8:11). This they in fact did: "The Yehudim *assembled together* in their cities in all the provinces of the king Achashverosh" (ibid. 9:2). The threat of Haman precipitated their repentance, and — by gathering together — the decree of the divine court was revoked.<sup>9</sup>

This emphasis on unity appears manifest in the celebration of Purim as well. Perhaps the most vivid expression of the reunification of the Jewish nation was their celebration of the victory by "sending portions one to another and gifts to the poor" (ibid. 9:22). Such acts deepen the sense of relatedness and responsibility for others and increase the feeling of belonging to the *kehal*. The perpetuation of these acts as the *mitzvot* of Purim stresses what was indeed the true miracle of Purim.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the custom of masquerading on Purim expresses the same theme. As we saw in our interpretation of the *machatzith hashekel*, one may submerge oneself in the community by suppressing individual traits — even positive ones — that stress the distinctions between different

people. While such conduct is not desirable on a regular basis, the Jews at the time of Purim were in need of radical measures to rectify their having been "scattered and divided." Similarly, a disguise hides the identity of the individual and renders him — at least externally — indistinguishable from his fellows.

On a more sublime level, *Zohar* notes a connection between Purim and Yom HaKippurim (which can be read as "יום הכפורים" ["a day that is *like* Purim"]),<sup>11</sup> even though these two days appear to have opposite characters and motifs. Perhaps this relationship can also be understood in terms of the theme of community that permeates both days. While Rosh HaShanah is a day of individual judgment for each and every person, when "all mankind pass before Him like *benei maron*"<sup>12</sup> (*Mish. Rosh HaShanah* 1:2), Yom Kippur is a day of atonement for the *kelal* as a national group, through which the nation of Yisra'el achieves collective atonement without a personal accounting for every individual. This may be at the root of the distinction that Ramban draws between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur: "On Rosh HaShanah [G-d] is distinguished by *middath haddin* in guiding the world, and on Yom HaKippurim by *middath harachamim*" (com. on VaYikra 23:24, ד"ה זכרון תרועה). The mercy of Yom Kippur is expressed pre-eminently in the very fact that G-d relates to the nation as a *kelal* and not as individuals. Thus, the linkage between the ostensibly disparate days of Purim and Yom Kippur is that both stress the individual's attachment to *kelal Yisra'el*. Interestingly, we find a similar connection between Yom Kippur and the *machatzith hashekel*, which is also described in the Torah as "*kesef hakippurim* [money of *atonement*]" (*Shemoth* 30:16). Indeed, the first collection of *shekalim* to build the sanctuary was taken on the day after Yom Kippur.<sup>13</sup>

In this light, it is clear why the Talmud relates the events of Purim to the *mitzvah* to give *machatzith hashekel*, for these unifying *shekalim* were the proper counterbalance to the sum Haman was prepared to pay in order to bolster his indictment of the Jews as a people "scattered and divided among the nations" (*Ester* 3:8) and therefore lacking any sense of collective nationhood. In particular, the Tosafot's explanation for the mathematical basis of Haman's offer of *ten thousand* talents to the king in exchange for permission to execute his plan amplifies this theme: "Ten thousand talents amount to fifty *shekalim*<sup>14</sup> for each of the six hundred thousand males who left Mitzrayim"<sup>15</sup> (com. on *Megillah* 16a, ד"ה ודחי עשרה אלפי ככרי כספא). These "fifty *shekalim*" are in accordance with the evaluation rate determined by the Torah: "The evaluation for a male from twenty to sixty years of age

shall be fifty *shekalim* according to the sanctuary standard" (VaYikra 27:3). Haman thus related to each "scattered and divided" Jew as an individual, using the evaluation rates for each single person.<sup>16</sup> He therefore had to pay one hundred times as much as the Jews, who hastened to bring their unifying *machatzith hashekel* first as an antidote to his silver talents.

We may conclude that the connection between the themes of Purim and those of the *machatzith hashekel* is the basis of the current custom<sup>17</sup> to contribute money in remembrance of the *machatzith hashekel* prior to the reading of the *megillah*. Logically this remembrance should have been advanced to Rosh Chodesh Adar, when — in the time of the Beith HaMikdash — "they would proclaim [the imminent obligation to donate] the [*machatzith hashekel*]" (*Mish. Shekalim* 1:1), and indeed various commentators have struggled to elucidate the basis for the timing of our custom. Likewise, it is perhaps no coincidence that (in ordinary twelve-month years) the Torah reading of *parashath Ki Thissa* (which begins with the laws of the *machatzith hashekel*) invariably occurs on the Shabbath immediately following Purim or Shushan Purim. (In leap years, the same is true regarding Purim Katan.) Indeed, both Purim and the *mitzvah* of *machatzith hashekel* reiterate the same theme.

## 6. RECTIFYING THE SIN: THE DUAL LEGACY OF BINYAMIN AND YEHUDAH

It remains for us to show why Mordecai and Ester were chosen to correct the flaw of "scattered and divided" by renewing the sense of nationhood that ultimately undermined Haman's decree. Ester sacrificed herself to a wicked, gentile king in deference to the wishes of her cousin Mordechai. She abnegated herself for the sake of the community, stressing her own passivity to the point that the Talmud concludes that "Ester was like natural ground" (*Sanhedrin* 74b). Even her name "Hadassah" (Ester 2:7) expressed her suppression of all her outstanding characteristics, "because she was ... intermediate like a *hadassah* (myrtle)" (*Megillah* 13a). Indeed, she is explicitly described as unassuming: "*Ester did not tell of her kindred or her people*" (Ester 2:20) — a description that Chazal regard as expressive of an inherent humility that may be traced back to her ancestors, Rachel and Sha'ul, both of whom concealed outstanding character traits or achievements that set them apart from their fellows.<sup>18</sup> Such suppression of *individual* characteristics certainly serves to enhance the communal dimension.

On a deeper level, both Mordechai and Ester, as descendants of the tribe of Binyamin (ibid. 2:5), were particularly fit for the role they were to play in the restoration of national unity among the Jews — a role played already by Binyamin himself. The Midrash links the sale of Yosef by his brothers with the events of Purim, regarding Haman's decree as the punishment for, or the natural outcome of, that sin:

Said the Holy One Blessed be He to the tribes, "You sold your brother in the midst of eating and drinking, as it is said, '*They sat down to eat bread*' (BeReshith 37:25). Thus, Haman will come and seize you in the midst of eating and drinking, as it is written, '*And the king and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Shushan was confounded*' (Ester 3:15)."

(*Yal.Sh. Ester:1056*)

The seeds of divisiveness that precipitated Haman's decree against Yisra'el were sown by their ancestors, the sons of Ya'akov, progenitors of the tribes of Yisra'el.<sup>19</sup> From among the sons of Ya'akov, only Binyamin took no part in the sale of Yosef. Indeed, it was in Binyamin's presence (and indirectly *because* of his presence) that Yosef forgave his brothers and restored peace and unity among them, after witnessing the extent of his brothers' fraternal dedication to Binyamin.<sup>20</sup>

Binyamin and his descendants appear to have a unique propensity for harmonizing among the different components of the nation of Yisra'el. According to the Midrash, the color of Binyamin's stone in the breastplate of the *kohen gadol* (high priest), and similarly the color of his banner, "resembled all the twelve colors [of the other tribes]" *BeM.R. 2:7*). Binyamin was able to live in peace with the individual character traits that each other tribe embodied; his color "resembled" each and every other color. This extraordinary capacity resulted from his readiness to tolerate in silence even personal suffering and pain, just for the sake of avoiding strife. Thus, the Midrash comments:

*"He has no slander on his tongue"* (Tehillim 15:3) — This is Binyamin son of Ya'akov, who knew of the sale of Yosef and did not reveal [it] to his father.

(*Yal. HaMachiri* on Tehillim 15:8)

He maintained this silence, in spite of the personal suffering that this caused him (as expressed) in the names of his ten sons," all of whom were called in Yosef's name" [*Sotah* 36b]). He realized that anyone with "slander on his tongue" — however justified — may precipitate hatred and divisiveness, just as his brothers' hatred of Yosef was rooted in slander (*BeReshith* 37:2). Binyamin, wary of repeating the same mistake, refrained from even the justified slander of reporting that his brothers had sold Yosef.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, even silence, however, virtuous, becomes vice when carried to an extreme. There are situations in which excessive silence and complacency are as dangerous as excessive speech. As we have seen (above), in discerning one's personal mission in serving G-d in the world, it is forbidden to hide behind collective anonymity and thus to avoid individual responsibility. Such appears to be implied in the Midrash's indictment of Binyamin himself:

Binyamin caused the tribes to tear their clothing [when Yosef's goblet was found in his sack]. And he was repaid in Shushan: "Mordechai tore his clothing [upon hearing of Haman's decree]" (*Ester* 4:1).

(*BeR.R.* 84:19)

The contention of the Midrash seems astounding: Binyamin was not the *cause*, but the involuntary *victim* of Yosef's plot! Apparently, Chazal are suggesting that Binyamin could have utilized his neutral position to reproach his brothers for the sale of Yosef and thus heal the festering wound of their enmity. By opting to remain silent and not to involve himself in the dispute, he is considered by Chazal to have shirked his *personal* responsibility, and thus indirectly caused the far more severe measures that Yosef had to employ later in order to rectify the wrong that had been perpetrated. Therefore, it is as if he caused these measures himself, resulting later in the tribes tearing their clothing on his account.

The duty to remain silent and the obligation to speak out and reproach actually both stem from a common source, for both are intended to prevent divisiveness and enhance unity among Jews. Silence should be motivated by a concern to avoid evil, just as reproach expresses a commitment to do good. Indeed, the obligation to reprimand is rooted in the principle that "all Yisra'el are responsible for one another" (*Shevu'oth* 39a). In this sense, that both reproacher and reproached are parts of an organic whole, the Midrash concludes, "Any love without chastisement is not [true] love.... Any peace without chastisement is not [true] peace" (*BeR.R.* 54:3).

We find a similar dichotomy, between the constructive and destructive aspects of silence, in King Sha'ul, who hailed from Binyamin as well. He too exercised modesty and reserve, de-emphasizing his own exceptional character traits. Scripture testifies that "Sha'ul was a choice young man and good, and there was no man in the nation of Yisra'el better than he; from his shoulders and upward, he was taller than all the people" (*Shemu'el I* 9:2). Nevertheless, when Shemu'el came to anoint him king, he protested, "Am I not a Binyamini, from the smallest of the tribes of Yisra'el, and [is] my family [not] the youngest of the families of the tribe of Binyamin?" (*ibid.* 9:21). Even at his coronation, he concealed his outstanding features, by "hiding among the vessels" (*ibid.* 10:22). This humility indeed furthered the unification of Yisra'el around its single leader. But exaggerated reserve was also King Sha'ul's downfall. There are situations which demand vociferous response, particularly from the leader. Thus, the Talmud explains:

Why was Sha'ul punished [by being placed in a situation in which he would lose his monarchy (Rashi)]? [This was] because he waived his honor, as it is said, "And some base fellow said, 'How will this one save us?' ...but *he held his peace*" (*Shemu'el I* 10:27).

(*Yoma* 22b)

Because King Sha'ul was silent when he should have spoken out, he eventually was "placed in a situation in which he would lose his monarchy."

We know to which "situation" Rashi is alluding. Sha'ul lost his monarchy by acquiescing in the people's desire not to annihilate Amalek as G-d commanded. He confessed to Shemu'el, "I transgressed G-d's will and your words, because *I feared the people and heeded their voice*" (Shemu'el I 15:24). But this was neither the time nor the place for humility and self-abnegation. Shemu'el reproached Sha'ul, "Even if you are small in your own eyes, you are the head of the tribes of Yisra'el; G-d has anointed you as king over Yisra'el" (ibid. 15:17). When the people sin, the king dares not remain silent; it is his responsibility to rebuke them and redress their sin. Because Sha'ul "held his peace," not only was he punished personally with the loss of his monarchy, but the nation of Yisra'el suffered collective punishment that Sha'ul could have prevented: "See what the Yemini [Sha'ul] paid me, by Sha'ul not killing Agag, who begat Haman, who persecuted Yisra'el" (*Megillah* 13a). Excessive silence — like unnecessary speech — can have disastrous repercussions.

Under analogous circumstances, we find very different conduct by Yehudah, who was characterized by his father as "the cub of a lion" (BeReshith 49:9) — meaning "that he was given the might of a lion and the brazenness of its cubs" (*BeR.R.* 98:12). He did not hesitate to speak, even when his harsh words were less than pleasing to his audience. He did so particularly where the collective needs of the *kelal* mandated such active involvement. Thus, he addressed himself to Yosef on behalf of his brothers: "Yehudah approached him and said, 'Please, my lord, let your servant speak before my lord, and do not be angered with your servant'" (BeReshith 44:18). Comments Rashi, "From here you learn that [Yehudah] spoke with [Yosef] harshly" (com., ibid.).<sup>22</sup>

Throughout Yehudah's descendants — in particular the lineage leading to David -- we consistently find forceful characters who acted with initiative, even at personal risk, on behalf of the *kelal*. Thus, Kalev -- great-grandson of Yehudah<sup>23</sup> and ancestor of David<sup>24</sup> — when confronting the slanderous report of the spies, "hushed the people for Mosheh and said, 'We shall by all means ascend and inherit the Land!'" (BeMidbar 13:30). Against the verbal calumnies of the spies, silence was of no avail, and Kalev was prepared to shout out.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Chur — Kalev's son<sup>26</sup> — selflessly endeavored to prevent the sin of the golden calf (and according to Chazal he was actually killed in this attempt).<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Nachshon son of Aminadav — another direct ancestor of David<sup>28</sup> — jumped into the Red Sea before it split, as the nation of Yisra'el stood desperate on its bank.<sup>29</sup> Finally, King David himself, when only a young shepherd, confronted the giant Golyath, even though all the warriors of Yisra'el fled

from him, in order to "remove shame from Yisra'el" (Shemu'el I 17:26), and so that "all the world may know that there is a G-d in Yisra'el" (ibid. 17:46).

Recognizing the challenge to Jewish leadership posed by Haman's decree, it is clear that the unassuming silence of Binyamin is — while indispensable to restore unity — insufficient. For a leader to succeed in correcting the flaw of "scattered and divided," he must also possess the brazenness of Yehudah in order to rouse the nation to repentance. Thus, the leadership of Mordechai, whose "father hailed from Binyamin and [whose] mother hailed from Yehudah" (*Megillah* 12b), was ideal given the circumstances: a Binyamini on the one hand and a Yehudi on the other, where both affiliations merge in reinforced dedication to unify the nation. Thus, he warns Ester, "If you *remain silent at this time*, relief and salvation will arise for the Yehudim from elsewhere, but you and your father's house will perish" (ibid. 4:14). "*At this time*" — as opposed to previously, when "Ester did not tell of her kindred or her people, *as Mordechai commanded her*" (ibid. 2:20) — the self-effacing silence of "your father's house," Binyamin, is inappropriate; if you "remain silent" now, "you and your father's house will perish," as befell your father's house previously because of the acquiescent silence of Sha'ul. By not being silent, but crying out "greatly and bitterly" (Ester 4:1) and selflessly struggling to "gather all the Yehudim in Shushan" (Ester 4:16), Mordechai and Ester succeeded in revoking the decree of Haman, by rectifying the ancestral sins of the tribes' divisiveness and Binyamin's silence, which were its ultimate cause.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In light of the above, we can also understand the following explanation of the *mitzvah* of *machatzith hashekel*, offered by Chazal:

Said the Holy One Blessed be He to the tribes: You sold [Yosef] the son of Rachel "for twenty silver pieces" (BeReshith 37:28), Thus, the relative share for each of you is half [a *shekel*] per head, as it is written, "half [a *shekel*] per head, a *machatzith hashekel*" (Shemoth 38:26).

(*BeR.R.* 84:18, *Yer. Shekalim* 2:3 [8b])

The *machatzith hashekel* donation — equivalent to two silver pieces — is intended to atone symbolically for the two silver pieces that each of the ten brothers received in exchange for the sale of Yosef. Indeed, as we have seen, the most effective means to combat the symptoms of divisiveness that originated in the sale of Yosef — and to reunify the nation of Yisra'el — is the *mitzvah* of *machatzith hashekel* and what it represents. This is the principal message of the miracle of Purim, which was above all the miracle of reunification of the nation of Yisra'el. Thus, observes the Midrash, "A people newly created" (Tehillim 102:19) — a new creature" (*Mid. Tehillim* 102:3). Indeed, through their renewed unity, the Jewish *individuals* in the generation of Mordechai essentially re-created *kelal Yisra'el*: "a people newly created [that] shall praise G-d" (Tehillim *ibid.*).

## NOTES

1. Compare the *halachah* that even where a forbidden food is diluted in sixty times its quantity, if it is "something countable" it is never considered negligible. Likewise, a forbidden food that is an "organic whole" is never considered negligible, since it signifies an autonomous unit. (See *Chullin* 100a.) According to the Talmud Yerushalmi, this latter rule — considering an "organic whole" as an autonomous unit — applies to the laws of final blessings on foods as well. (See *Yer. Berachoth* 6:1 [37b] and the Tosafoth on *Berachoth* 39a, ד"ה בצר ליה שיעורא.)
2. See also *HaTorah VeHaMitzvah* (Malbim) on Shemoth 30:12, where among the three explanations that Malbim provides for the linkage between the census and the plague, he submits: "As long as the people are united as one man, collective merit is very great. But when they are counted, whereupon each one is singled out and his deeds scrutinized, the plague may strike. To remedy this, [G-d] commanded that each person give a *machatzith hashekel*, which indicates the collective whole, for every individual is only a 'half' and not a complete unit, and he must be joined by another in order to become a complete unit."
3. See Rashi on Shemoth 30:15.
4. The Torah (*ibid.*) states, "They shall build Me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell *in their midst*" (referring to Yisra'el), not "in its midst" (as a reference to the sanctuary). See also *Or HaChayyim*, *ibid.*, and Gra on Shir HaShirim 1:17.

5. The Talmud attributes to G-d a similar characterization of the nation of Yisra'el's reciprocal relationship with Him.

You made Me [recognized as] a *single*, unique entity in this world, as it is said, "Hear, Yisra'el, G-d is our L-rd, G-d is *One*" (Devarim 6:4). And I shall make you a *single*, unique entity in the world, as it is said, "And who is like Your people, Yisra'el: a *single* nation in the world?" (Divrei HaYamim I 17:21).

(Berachoth 6a)

Note that while every member of Yisra'el is obligated individually to affirm the oneness of G-d, G-d's relationship, as it were, to Yisra'el is specifically collective (as a "single, unique entity").

6. It should be noted that the *machatzith hashekel* is also described repeatedly as "an offering to G-d" (Shemoth 30:13-15), thus specifying the "Taker." Nevertheless, the *personal* connection conveyed in the donations for the sanctuary, when G-d says *in first person*, "They shall take Me an offering; from every person whose heart moves him to donate, take My offering" (Shemoth 25:2), is absent.
7. See also the view advanced by R. Tam, "that the image of Nevuchadnetzar was not idolatrous but rather a monument erected in honor of the king" (Tosfaoth on *Avodah Zarah* 3a, ד"ה שלא השתחוו לצלם).
8. See Shemoth 17:8 and Rashi, *ibid.*
9. It is indeed this unifying quality of their repentance that we celebrate on Purim in the liturgical hymn "*Shoshanath Ya'akov*," received after the reading of the *megillah*: "The blossom of Ya'akov exulted and rejoiced when they saw *together* the [royal] blue vestments of Mordechai."
10. Regarding our contention that this reunification was the essence of the Purim miracle, see also Rashi's explanation of the Talmud's assertion that "the thirteenth [of Adar] is a time of assembly for all" (*Megillah* 2a): "All *assembled* then to take revenge on their enemies.... Thus ... the essence of the miracle was on that [day]" (com., *ibid.*). In other words, "the essence of the

miracle" was not the miraculous success of the military venture but the miraculous success of the attempt to unite all the Jews; hence "the thirteenth is a time of assembly for all." (Compare, however, alternate explanations of the Gemara offered by Rosh in the name of Ri and R. Tam; see *Piskei HaRosh* 1:1). Perhaps this is the justification for the Talmudic principle allowing village-dwellers to advance their reading of the *megillah* to the nearest "day of *gathering* (יום הכניסה)" (*Mish. Megillah* 1:1), since such a day is expressive of the same motif of *gathering* that is manifest in the original Purim as well. Furthermore, given that a holiday is generally not perpetuated in remembrance of "hidden miracles" that occur within the framework of nature, it appears that the decision to establish Purim as a permanent holiday was intended as commemoration not of the military victory but of the penitential measures taken that reunited the nation — "the records of the fasts and their cries" (Ester 9:31) — through which the miraculous victory was merited. (Indeed, the date of Purim does not even coincide with that of the military victory, but instead with the following day, when the Jews rested from battle.)

11. See *Tikkunei Zohar* 86.

12. The language of the *mishnah* is obviously reminiscent of the Torah's reference (quoted above) to the *individuals* in the census: "each one who *passes* among the numbered" (Shemoth 30:13), in particular considering Rashi's explanation that "the method of counting is to *pass* those being counted *one after another*" (com. *ibid.*). Regarding the focus of Rosh HaShanah on the individual, see also R. Bachyai on Shemoth 30:12.

*Ed. Note:* Regarding the meaning of *benei maron* and the nature of the judgment of man as an individual and as part of a community on Rosh HaShanah, see also R. Beryl Gershenfeld, "Judgment on Rosh HaShanah," *Jewish Thought*, 1, No. 1, 29-45.

13. See *BeM.R.* 1:10.

14. The Tosafoth as printed (*ibid.*) actually reads, "Ten thousand talents amount to a *half shekel* (נצי שקל)" etc., which does not accord at all with the arithmetic calculations (see n. 15 below). It may be surmised that the original manuscript versions referred to "fifty *shekalim* (חמשים שקלים)" by the initials "ש"נ," which were incorrectly expanded in subsequent transcription as "a half *shekel* (נצי

שקל)." Support for this supposition may be found in *Est.R.* 8:19 (which cites the calculation, specifying "fifty *shekalim*"); *Tosefot HaRosh*, *ibid.* (which contains the correct version); and R. Bachyai on Shemoth 38:25 and in *Kad HaKemach*, "*Purim*." Compare, however, HaChizkuni on Shemoth 20:14.

15. Fifty *shekalim* for each of six hundred thousand males amounts to thirty million *shekalim*. Since three thousand silver *shekalim* are equivalent to one silver talent (see Rashi on Shemoth 39:26), these thirty million *shekalim* are equivalent to ten thousand silver talents.
16. In this light, we can elucidate Rashi's cryptic commentary on the verse "Mordechai related to [Hathach] all that had happened to him and *the sum of money* (פרשת הכסף) that Haman had promised to pay the king's treasuries against the Yehudim, to destroy them" (Ester 4:7): "*The sum of money* (פירוש הכסף)" (*com.*, *ibid.*). To what "meaning" is Rashi referring? Considering the deeper meaning of the question Ester posed, which Mordechai was answering — namely, what is the underlying cause of the decreed punishment against the Jews in the heavenly court (see Ester 4:5 and *Est.R.* 8:4) — the comment is clear. Mordechai wanted to clarify to Ester what the *meaning* of "the sum of money that Haman had promised to pay" was: It was an attempt to negate the Jews' communal strength by relating to them as "scattered and divided" individuals. Therefore, after being alerted by Mordechai to the underlying challenge posed by Haman — "the meaning of the money" — Ester instructed Mordechai to commence corrective measures: "Go and *gather all the Yehudim* in Shushan" (Ester 4:16).
17. See Rema on *Orach Chayyim* 694:1.
18. See *Megillah* 13b.
19. Indeed, even Ya'akov himself is reproached for his sibling rivalry — however justified — with Esav"

Ya'akov caused Esav to cry out once [BeReshith 27:34], and he was repaid in Shushan, as it is said, "[Mordechai] cried out greatly and bitterly" (Ester 4:1)

(*BeR.R.* 16:14)

Although Ya'akov's actions against Esav can be justified, Chazal still find in them some basis for the divisiveness that subsequently surfaced in his progeny.

20. Therefore, Yosef gave Binyamin "five changes of clothing" (BeReshith 45:22): "hinting to him that he was destined to have a descendant [Mordechai] who would go forth from before the king [Achashverosh] in five royal vestments" (*Megillah* 16b, referring to Ester 8:15). Yosef thereby stressed that the renewal of brotherly love that was caused (indirectly) by Binyamin and spared the tribes of Yisra'el from the apparent decrees of Yosef would also be necessary to protect Yisra'el from the actual decrees of Achashverosh and Haman. Just as the tribes eventually recognized that their troubles were in retribution for the sin of divisiveness and the sale of Yosef — which Binyamin symbolically redressed — (see BeReshith 42:21), so too the Jews in Shushan would have to seek the underlying root of the decree against them in the lack of unity among them, striving to rectify it through "Binaymini" reunification.
21. It should be noted that this trait of reserve in speech contrasts markedly with the character of Haman: "No one could slander like Haman" (*Megillah* 13b). Far from wary of inadvertently eliciting hatred through slander, he exploited slander deliberately to generate hatred. It is particularly appropriate that his slanderous plot was thwarted by Mordechai and Ester: descendants of Binyamin, who "has no slander on his tongue."
22. See also *BeR.R.* 84.16 regarding the "three places where Yehudah spoke before his brothers."
23. See *Divrei HaYakim* I 2:3-5, 9, 18. See also *Sotah* 11b and *Sanhedrin* 69b.
24. See *Sotah* 11b and *Sanhedrin* 69b.
25. Therefore, the Torah principally credits Kalev with the opposition to the spies' report: "My servant Kalev ... had a different spirit and followed Me wholeheartedly ..." (BeMidbar 14:24; see Rashi, *ibid.*). Although Yehoshua — descended from Rachel — strove to achieve the same goal as Kalev, he is not singled out, since only Kalev spoke out vociferously. (For ample justification of Yehoshua's silence, however, see *Shemirath HaLashon*, II, ch. 19, in notes.)

26. Chur's father was Kalev; his mother was Miryam (sister of Aharon and Mosheh). See *Sotah* 11b and *Sanhedrin* 69b.
27. See *Sanhedrin* 7a and *Sh.R.* 41:7. (Obviously, the fact that Kalev's own son had lost his life under such circumstances emphasizes Kalev's selfless dedication in confronting the mob in his opposition to the spies only thirteen months later.)
28. See Ruth 4:18-22 and *Divrei HaYamim I* 2:4-15, where the ancestry of David, and Nachshon's position therein, is explicitly detailed.
29. See *BeM.R.* 13:7.