

Our *Parashah* begins with the commandment that, when a census of *Bnei Yisrael* is taken, it should be done by collecting a half-*shekel* from each person who is to be counted. The Torah emphasizes (30:15), "The wealthy shall not give more and the destitute shall not give less than half a *shekel*." Everyone is the same. Everyone is counted equally.

The *Gemara* (*Bava Batra* 10b) relates that Moshe Rabbeinu asked *Hashem*, "Master of the Universe! How will *Yisrael* be exalted?" *Hashem* answered, "Through *Ki Tissa*"--the opening words of the commandment described above (30:12). What does this mean?

R' Avraham Zuckerman z"l (1915-2013; *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Bnei Akiva Kfar Ha'ro'eh and chairman of the network of Bnei Akiva *Yeshivot*) explains: Moshe Rabbeinu was asking that the Jewish People be clearly distinguishable from other nations, as we read later in our *Parashah* (33:16), "How, then, will it be known that I have found favor in Your eyes . . . unless You accompany us, and I and Your people are made distinct from every people on the face of the earth!" What highlights the special nature of the Jewish People? Having each person donate a half-*shekel*, which simultaneously demonstrates that every person counts but also that no person is a "whole" by himself. Just as we were "like one man with one heart" when we received the Torah, so we are always--one united nation, with one *Hashem*, one Torah, and one *Mishkan/Mikdash*. That is our uniqueness. (*Luchot Even*)

Shabbat

"Moshe will rejoice in the gift of his portion: that You called him a faithful servant. A crown of splendor You placed on his head when he stood before You on *Har Sinai*. He brought down two stone tablets in his hand, on which is inscribed the observance of the *Shabbat*. And so it is written in Your Torah (*Shmot* 31:16--in our *Parashah*), 'And *Bnei Yisrael* shall keep the *Shabbat* . . .'"

(From the *Shabbat* morning prayers)

What is the "crown of splendor" that Moshe received? Also, why do we single out that *Shabbat* is mentioned on the *Luchot*?

R' Chaim Menachem Yaakovson *shlita* (Bnei Brak, Israel) explains: Our Sages say that when *Bnei Yisrael* said, "*Na'aseh ve'nishma*" / "We will do and we will hear," angels placed two crowns on each person's head--one for "*Na'aseh*" and one for "*Nishma*." However, when the Jewish People made the Golden Calf, they were stripped of those crowns, as we read in our *Parashah* (33:6), "So *Bnei Yisrael* were stripped of their jewelry from Mount Chorev." (*Har Chorev* is another name for *Har Sinai*.) Along with those crowns, they also lost the first set of *Luchot*, which Moshe smashed when he came down from *Har Sinai*.

But Moshe, who had no role in that sin, remained on the level that *Bnei Yisrael* had attained before making the Golden Calf, R' Yaakovson writes in the name of R' Yitzchak Isaac Chaver z"l (1789-1852; rabbi of Suvalk, Lithuania). Thus, continues R' Yaakovson, the *Gemara* (*Sotah* 13b) says that Moshe never died. Like Adam Ha'rishon before his sin, *Bnei Yisrael* were freed from the decree of death when they said *Na'aseh ve'nishma*, and, also like Adam, death was decreed on them when they sinned. But not so Moshe; since his existence was entirely spiritual, it can be said homiletically that he never died, though his physical body did expire.

- Continued in box inside -

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(Avraham ben Yaakov Hakohen a"h)

“Hashem passed before him and proclaimed, ‘Hashem, Hashem, Kel, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to anger, and Abundant in kindness and truth, Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, Forgiver of iniquity, willful sin, and error, and Who Cleanses.’” (34:6-7)

R’ Nachman of Breslov z”l (1772-1810; Ukraine) teaches: Know that a person has bundles and bundles of sins, for one sin draws another sin in its wake (*Avot* 4:2). When a person sins, he is drawn to perform related sins, and when he commits a different sin, he is drawn to perform additional sins similar to that second sin.

R’ Nachman continues: From each bundle of sins, destructive angels are created (see *Avot* 4:13). These destructive forces cry out, so-to-speak, “Give us life! Give us sustenance!” Even though a person is thus pushed, in a sense, to continue sinning, he is held responsible because he should have followed this original sin with a *Mitzvah*, and that would have protected him.

How does a person break this cycle once and for all? The solution, says R’ Nachman, is to practice the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy listed in our verses. In this way, a person awakens the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy above, which, in turn, subdue the destructive angels the person created. One of the Thirteen Attributes, our Sages say, is that *Hashem* “wipes out the first sin.” When the first sin in a bundle of sins is erased, says R’ Nachman, the rest of the bundle falls apart, because all of the later sins were merely the result of the first sin. (*Sichot Ha’Ran* #89)

“He was there with Hashem forty days and forty nights . . .” (34:28)

R’ Shlomo Wolbe z”l (1914-2005) notes: The statement, “He was there with *Hashem*,” is not written about any person in history other than Moshe Rabbeinu. (*Shiurei Chumash*)

– Continued from back page –

In this light, explains R’ Yaakovson, we can understand the “crown of splendor” mentioned in our prayers as a reference to the crowns that the angels gave *Bnei Yisrael* when they accepted the Torah. When *Bnei Yisrael* lost their crowns, Moshe Rabbeinu received them all, says the *Gemara*.

R’ Yaakovson continues: The *Gemara*’s wording when it speaks about those crowns is that Moshe received “the crowns of all of Yisrael.” This description implies that the crowns still belong to all of the Jewish People in some sense. How so? Because there is one day a week when we can recapture the lofty spiritual level of the original Giving of the Torah and of the first set of *Luchot*. That day is *Shabbat*! And this, writes R’ Yaakovson is why we note in our prayers that *Shabbat* was inscribed on the *Luchot*. (*Mei Be’er: Nehora D’Shabta* p.121)

“You shall speak to *Bnei Yisrael*, saying, ‘This shall remain for Me oil of sacred anointment for your generations. It shall not be smeared on human flesh . . .’” (30:31-32)

R’ Chaim Vital z”l (1543-1620; Tzefat and Damascus) writes: The real person is the soul, not the body, as we read (*Iyov* 10:11), “You clothed me with skin and flesh; you covered me with bones and sinews.” This indicates that skin, flesh, bones, and sinews are merely the clothing, the covering, of the person, not the person himself. Likewise, our verse says that the anointing oil shall not wantonly be smeared on “human flesh”--a construct that indicates that the “flesh” is not the “human,” but rather that the flesh belongs to the human. The body is merely the garment of the intellectual soul, which is the true identity of the person.

(*Sha’arei Kedushah* 1:1)



“Hashem spoke to Moshe, ‘Go, ascend from here . . .’” (33:1)

R’ Mordechai HaKohen z”l (1523–1598; Tzefat, Eretz Yisrael; later, rabbi of Aleppo, Syria) writes: Before, *Hashem* said to Moshe (32:7), “Go, descend!” Now that Moshe sacrificed himself and prayed for them, *Hashem* said, “Go, ascend!” as if to say, “You have elevated yourself.”

(*Siftei Kohen*)

R’ Chaim Zaichyk z”l (1906-1989; *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Bet Yosef-Novardok in Buchach, Poland; later in Haifa, Israel) elaborates: Whenever the Jewish People stumble, the righteous become elevated through studying *Mussar*--i.e., paying attention to the causes of their brethren’s mistakes in order to avoid repeating them, by increasing their level of *Yir’ah* / reverence, by praying to *Hashem* to forgive the Jewish People, and by praying that they themselves not to be ensnared in the sins of the many.

Moshe Rabbeinu’s own elevation as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf was particularly noticeable, as we read (34:29), “The skin of his face had become radiant when He (*Hashem*) had spoken to him.” R’ Chaim ben Attar z”l (1696-1743; Morocco, Italy and Eretz Yisrael; the *Ohr Ha’chaim Ha’kadosh*) comments that the other righteous people in that generation were disappointed with themselves that they had not similarly grown through this episode. This is the meaning of the next verse, which tells us, “Aharon and all *Bnei Yisrael* saw Moshe, and behold!--the skin of his face had become radiant; and they feared to approach him.”

Following the sin of the Spies, we read (*Bemidbar* 14:38), “Yehoshua bin Nun and Kalev ben Yefuneh lived from among those men who were going to spy out the Land.” Through witnessing their colleagues’ errors, Yehoshua and Kalev grew--they gained added “life.” (*Ohr Chadash*)