



Rabbi David Silverberg  
Shabbath Shekalim  
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The Shabbat immediately preceding Rosh Chodesh Adar (or, in a leap year, Rosh Chodesh Adar Sheni) is known as *Shabbat Shekalim*, on which we conduct a special reading of the section of the Torah which introduces the obligation of *machatzit ha-shekel*. This term refers to the annual half-shekel tax that each member of *Benei Yisrael* would donate towards the maintenance of the *Mishkan* (and, later, the Temple) and the purchasing of animals for the public sacrifices. It was on Rosh Chodesh Adar that the annual collection began, and we commemorate this process through the reading of the "*shekalim*" section each year on the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh Adar.

Maimonides outlines the laws of the half-shekel tax in the *Hilkhot Shekalim* section of *Mishneh Torah*, and he begins by emphasizing that this obligation applies even to the poorest members of the nation. If necessary, Maimonides rules, one must even sell the shirt off his back in order to contribute the half-shekel to the Temple treasury. The *mitzva* of *machatzit ha-shekel* differs in this regard from most other affirmative commands. If, for example, a person cannot afford a pair of *tefillin*, or a set of four species for Sukkot, he is exempt from the obligation. When it comes to the half-shekel tax, however, no dispensation is made in consideration of financial hardship. Maimonides cites as the source of this provision a verse from the section of *shekalim*: "The rich man shall not give more, nor shall the impoverished man give less, than a half-shekel" (Shemot 30:15).

At first glance, Maimonides' inference from this verse seems difficult to understand. Seemingly, the Torah here speaks not of the circumstances under which the *machatzit ha-shekel* obligation applies, but rather of the required amount. It establishes that the value of this tax is constant and does not depend upon a person's financial status. How did Maimonides infer from this verse that *machatzit ha-shekel* differs from most other commands of the Torah, in that it requires a pauper to sell even his bare necessities for the sake of fulfilling this obligation?

Rav Meir Dan Platsky, in his work *Keli Chemda* (Parashat Vayakhel), explains that in Maimonides' view, it goes without saying that one cannot fulfill a Torah obligation – even partially – by performing less than the specified requirement. If the Torah requires paying a specific sum of money under certain circumstances, no further emphasis is needed to indicate that paying less than that amount does not satisfy the requirement. In the previous verse, the Torah stated very clearly that one is required to pay an annual half-shekel tax. If it then made a point of stressing that a pauper may not pay less, it must mean that this obligation applies under all circumstances of poverty, as it is not necessary to emphasize that this amount is not reduced in consideration of one's poverty.

To clarify this point made by the *Keli Chemda*, let us consider two different kinds of jobs for which a person may be hired. Some jobs are by nature unlimited; they require the employee to exert himself to produce as much as possible, without assigning any particular quantity. Other jobs, however, impose specific requirements to perform a given number of tasks each workday. As the job is defined by a particular quantity, it is understood that the employee is expected to produce no less than this amount.

The Torah imposes upon us both kinds of obligations. When it comes to values such as Torah study and *chesed*, generally speaking, there is no fixed amount; one must endeavor to perform as much as his time and resources allow. Many other *mitzvot*, however, are defined in terms of specific requirements. With regard to these commandments, we cannot speak of a "partial" fulfillment if one performs less than the specified quantity. Hence, if the Torah emphasized that a poor man may not pay less than the half-shekel, we must interpret this emphasis to mean that he must even sell the shirt off his back in order to fulfill this *mitzva*.

Why might the obligation of *machatzit ha-shekel* differ from other *mitzvot*, in that it applies to even the most indignant members of the nation?

This provision likely reflects the notion that a person must live a life of *avodat Hashem* regardless of his personal circumstances. The *Beit Ha-mikdash* is maintained and supported by each and every member of the nation – from the wealthiest to the poorest – because they all equally bear the responsibility of serving God, of living a life of Torah observance. One cannot excuse himself from the Torah's commands on the grounds of financial difficulties or other forms of hardships. The Torah addresses itself to all Jews of all backgrounds and situations, and thus one is bound to the *mitzvot* even under challenging circumstances.