



**In Memory  
of the pure soul of our beloved**

## **David Schwartz**

**who fell in battle sanctifying God's  
name on 27th day of the month of  
Tevet, 5784 (8 January 2024)**

David wrote thoughts on each of the weekly Torah readings taken from the core of the Torah that he studied in depth with his unique spirit. The Torah thoughts were originally published on the occasion of his marriage to Meital.

His Torah insights are shared now for the elevation of his pure soul and for the sanctification of his blessed memory

# Parshat Ki Tisa

From "*Le'David Barchi Nafshi*" ("Of David, Bless the Lord, O My Soul")

Words of Torah according to the weekly Torah reading by David Schwartz, z"l

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"When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment, each shall pay the Lord a ransom for himself ... This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight - twenty gerahs to the shekel - a half-shekel as an offering to the Lord. Everyone ... from the age of twenty years up, shall give the Lord's offering: the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel." (Exodus 30:11-14)

In this week's Torah reading, the people of Israel are commanded to contribute a half shekel coin. The wealthy person should not pay more than that amount and the poor person shall not pay less. Everyone must contribute exactly a half shekel, and one who does not do this mitzvah transgresses a negative biblical prohibition.

Let us try to understand what this half shekel coin represents. What specifically does the concept of a "half" symbolize? One would think that it would be more appropriate for every person to bring a full shekel, since that too would have been just a small amount of money. The importance of this mitzvah of giving specifically a "half" as an amount of money was such that it brought Maimonides to a unique explanation of the matter. Maimonides (1138-1204) notes on this mitzvah that a poor person should even sell his garment to pay this half shekel amount. As he writes in the Mishneh Torah, Laws of Shekalim: "Even a poor man who derives his livelihood from charity is obligated to make this donation. He should borrow from others or sell the clothes he is wearing so that he can give a half-shekel of silver." The Slonimer Rebbe (Shalom Berezovsky, 1911-2000) in his work the *Netivot Shalom* explains that the essence of the half shekel coin was to show that a man by himself is worth only a half. This is a reminder to man that on his own he is only able to amount to half of what he can accomplish in society. In order for a man to fulfill his role in society, he needs to move beyond himself and join in relationships with others, such as by participating in congregational prayers and by taking part in many other mitzvot that can be accomplished if one is a part of the community.

Another approach by a great Torah authority of our generation, Rabbi Asher Weiss, informs us that there is a powerful meaning hidden in the Hebrew word for "half." Rav Asher Weiss explains that the construction of the word machazit (מחצית) is made up of letters that symbolize the words for charity and life in Hebrew. (The letter tzadi "צ" in the middle of the word represents charity, while the letters chet and yud spell out life.) In other words, the mitzva of charity adds life. In contrast, the Hebrew letters at the far ends of the word are 'Mem' and 'Tet' which spell out death, indicating that refraining from charity results in death, God forbid.

A wonderful story about the mitzvah of charity appears in tractate Baba Batra (11a) illustrates this idea. The Talmud relates the following legend about a man called Binyamin the righteous, who was appointed as a supervisor of a charity fund. "Once, a woman came before him [Binyamin the righteous] during years of drought and said to him: My master, sustain me. He said to her: I swear by the Temple service that there is nothing left in the charity fund. She said to him: My master, if you do not sustain me, a woman and her seven sons will die. He arose and sustained her with his own funds. After some time, he fell deathly ill. The ministering angels said to the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, You said that anyone who preserves a single life in Israel is regarded as if he has preserved an entire world. Should then Binyamin the righteous, who saved a woman and her seven sons, die after these few years, still in his youth? They immediately tore up his sentence. A Sage taught: They added twenty-two years to his life."

This remarkable legend in the Talmud reminds us of the power of charity to sustain life in this world and appropriately concludes this reflection on the power of the half shekel.