



## Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

### The Preordained Power of the *Machatzis Hashekel*

Rochie Berkowitz

Long before we even sit down for *Krias Hamegillah*, we all know how the story ends. While there is not quite that “happily ever after” we imagined in our preschool days (after all, Esther HaMalkah is forever stuck in the palace), the forces of good ultimately defeat the forces of evil. Experiencing the annual joy and celebration over this ending, however, sometimes leaves us missing the fact that at the time of the Purim story there was a very real threat of annihilation looming over Klal Yisroel, r”l. In Esther Rabbah (7:14) we learn that there was a decree of total destruction written in the heavenly court. This decree had not only been written but was also sealed. The seal was a seal of clay rather than blood, implying there was a tiny shred of hope and a chance to change the future, but it was truly a severe threat.

“V’nahaphoch hu” implies that we literally changed reality.

How did this change occur? We did many things in an effort to break the decree against us. We fasted. We davened. We wore sackcloth and mourned in the streets. What was it that had the power to turn our mourning to joy?

Perhaps an answer can be found in the Yalkut Shimoni on Parshas Ki Sisa.

Reish Lakish said: It was revealed and known before Hashem that in the future, Haman *HaRasha* would weigh *shekalim* upon Yisroel; therefore, Hashem preempted his *shekalim* with their *shekalim*.

Which *shekalim* are “their *shekalim*”? This midrash is written in connection to the mitzvah of the *machatzis hashekel* that every Jew was obligated to donate to the Beis Hamikdosh on a yearly basis. Even today, while we are without a Beis Hamikdosh, the practice of publically announcing and of donating *machatzis hashekel* remains alive. Every year we *lein* about this mitzvah in a special *kriah* known as “Parshas Shekalim,” on the Shabbos either before or of Rosh Chodesh Adar.

One reason we are obligated to read about the *machatzis hashekel* at that time is to commemorate the public reminders that began on that date, in preparation for making this required donation on Rosh Chodesh Nissan. The Yalkut, however, offers a deeper link between the *machatzis hashekel* and the time of Purim: this mitzvah was preordained by Hashem as a means to counteract the *shekalim* Haman offered Achashverosh, as a way to sweeten the deal and convince him to allow genocide of the Jewish nation. Of course, Achashverosh needed no convincing, and told Haman to keep his money. Those are the *shekalim* Hashem prepared to counteract.

Although it sounds nice, “*shekalim* for *shekalim*,” what does that even mean? How does one shekel counteract another?

Understanding the deeper meaning behind the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel* allows us to make some important connections. Maseches Shekalim offers a number of answers to the famous question of why

the yearly donation requirement was a half *shekel* and not a full *shekel*. One answer is that it acted as a *kappara* for *mechiras Yosef*.

When Yosef was sold by his brothers, the sale totaled 20 *dinar*. There were 10 brothers involved in the sale of Yosef, so each brother profited two dinars each, which is equivalent in value to a half *shekel*. The *shevatim* may have had their reasons and justifications, but deep down, at the root of the sale, was the hatred they felt for him.

When we give half of a *shekel*, we are reminding ourselves that we are only halves of a whole. No Jew is complete without the other. This lesson of *machatzis hashekel* is what we needed in order to atone for the sale of a brother – and also to overcome the threat of Haman.

When we examine the conversation that took place between Haman and Achashverosh when he offered his money, many key details emerge. We have to keep in mind that this was a private conversation between two of the most powerful and evil men living at the time, and yet we have it recorded in Tanach. Mordechai was given *ruach hakodesh*, when writing the book of Esther, to know the specifics of what was said, perhaps because in those words we can find the clue to it all.

In describing the Jewish nation to Achashverosh, Haman specifies that “There is one nation, **spread out and scattered** between the nations, in all of the countries of your kingdom...” (Esther 3:8)

On a militaristic level, Haman believed the Jews’ lack of cohesion indicated they were vulnerable to attack. He looked for a tactical strategy to exploit their weakness. Haman was right: we were weak. We were vulnerable and susceptible to attack, because we were not united. But this lack of unity was not due to our physical dispersion, as Haman thought, but to a lack of *achdus* and *ahavas Yisroel*.

When the Yalkut Shimoni states that our *machatzis hashekel* counteracts the *shekalim* of Haman, it is teaching that the **lesson** of the *machatzis hashekel* has the power to counteract the weakness Haman was aiming to exploit.

The verb “*Vayikahalu*,” “and they came together,” is repeated noticeably throughout the many details of Klal Yisroel’s response to Haman’s decree. Perhaps it wasn’t only the fasting, or the mourning, or the davening, that saved us, but rather the fact that these things were done as one *kehila*, a united community.

Every year on Purim we offer *matanos l’evyonim* and *mishloach manos* to each other. We don’t often question *mitzvos* that come delivered to our door in creative and delicious baskets, but taking a step back, it can seem like a strange, almost random part of our celebration. Now, knowing the integral role *achdus* plays in our salvation, our gifts become an expression of community and express our desire to once again be united as one.

## Datan and Aviram: Were they really *Reshaim*?

Alan Schabes

Datan and Aviram. To young children, they are portrayed as classic *reshaim*. They are portrayed as long-standing antagonists against Moshe Rabbenu, the greatest of all *neviim* and the leader of *Klal Yisrael*. They are spoken of as if they have no redeeming qualities. When they meet their demise in *Parshat Korach*, we are quick to write it off as a classic example of what should happen to a *rasha*, especially one who would have the *chutzpa* to challenge Moshe Rabbenu. However, as we will see, Datan and Aviram were not one-dimensional *reshaim*, and to write them off as paradigmatic *reshaim* may not be a fair assessment.

The first time we encounter Datan and Aviram is in *Parshat Shemot*, after Moshe and Aharon asked Pharaoh to let Bnei Yisrael leave Mitzrayim for three days to offer sacrifices to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. In response, Pharaoh informed his *nogsim*, Egyptian task-masters, and the Jewish *shotrim*, that Bnei Yisrael would no longer be given the straw with which to make their quota of bricks. Rashi, in his commentary on 5:6, tells us that the *nogsim* were Egyptian and the *shotrim* were Jews who worked for and were subservient to the *nogsim*. After this decree was implemented and the Jews were unable to achieve their brick production quotas, the Torah tells us in *pasuk* 14 that the *shotrim* were punished by the Egyptians. Rashi, in his commentary on this *pasuk*, explains that the *shotrim* had compassion for their fellow Jews and did not push them to reach their brick production quotas. When the Jews failed to achieve those quotas, the Egyptian *nogsim* would beat the Jewish *shotrim*. As a reward for the compassion that these *shotrim* demonstrated, the *shotrim* would later become the first members of the *Sanhedrin* convened by Moshe after *Matan Torah*.

After this conflict over the quotas, the *shotrim* went to Pharaoh to plead their case and Pharaoh refused their entreaties. After leaving Pharaoh, in *pasuk* 20, the *shotrim* met Moshe and Aharon and criticized them for worsening their status by asking Pharaoh to allow Bnei Yisrael to leave Mitzrayim.

The Gemara in *Mesechet Nedarim* (64b) learns from the word "*nitzavim*," "standing," in *pasuk* 20 that these *shotrim*, who had such compassion for their fellow Jews and suffered for it, were none other than Datan and Aviram! ("אינן אלא" – "Any place that it is said "*nitzim*" or "*nitzavim*," it is none other than Datan and Aviram.) Therefore, we see from our first encounter with Datan and Aviram that, in fact, they had incredible compassion for the fellow Jew and were *moser nefesh* for them.

Let's then dial forward to *Parshat Beshalach*. At the beginning of *Beshalach*, the Jews left Mitzrayim. However, in 14:3, when Hashem

informs Moshe as to what Pharaoh will say **after** Bnei Yisrael leave Mitzrayim, the *pasuk* says

וַאֲמַר פַּרְעֹה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, נִבְכָּיִם הֵם בְּאֶרֶץ; סָגַר עֲלֵיהֶם, הַמִּדְבָּר.

And Pharaoh will say to *Bnei Yisrael*, "They are confused in the land; they are locked in the desert."

Now, wait! Something strange is going on here! To whom did Pharaoh speak? *Bnei Yisrael* had left Mitzrayim! Rashi comments on this seeming anomaly and says that, when the *pasuk* said that Pharaoh spoke "לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל," Pharaoh didn't speak to the Jews. After all, they left town! Rather, it means Pharaoh spoke "עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" about the Jews. This solves the problem, right? The Targum Yonatan, however, has a different explanation: "...וַיִּמַּר פַּרְעֹה לְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל..." The Targum Yonatan tells us that Pharaoh was speaking to Datan and Aviram! What were they doing there? To make the question even stronger: We **know** from *Parshat Korach* that they were with *Bnei Yisrael* in the *midbar*. How did that happen?

In *Parshat Beshalach*, there are two very similar, though not quite identical, *pesukim* that tell us that *Bnei Yisrael* crossed the sea. In 14:22, the Torah says

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם, בַּיַּבֵּשָׁה; וְהַיָּם לָהֶם חֹמָה, מִיְמִינֵם וּמִשְׂמָאלֵם.

*Bnei Yisrael* came into the sea, on dry land, and the waters formed walls for them to their right and to their left.

In 14:29, the Torah says

וַבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִלְכוּ בַיַּבֵּשָׁה, בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם; וְהַיָּם לָהֶם חֹמָה, מִיְמִינֵם וּמִשְׂמָאלֵם.

*Bnei Yisrael* went on the dry land in the midst of the sea, and the water formed walls for them to their right and to their left.

Many *mefarshim* address why there are two such similar *pesukim*. One of them is Rabbi Pinchas Friedman, who offers a remarkable explanation. In his book, *Shvilei Pinchas*, he explains that the first *pasuk* refers to the *Kriyat Yam Suf* with which we are familiar, the *Kriyat Yam Suf* in which *Bnei Yisrael* crossed the *Yam Suf*. The second *pasuk* refers to a second *Kriyat Yam Suf*. For whom? For Datan and Aviram!! The *Shvilei Pinchas* explains that because of the *mesirat nefesh* that Datan and Aviram gave to their fellow Jews, they were *zocheh* not only to survive *Makat Choshech*, during which four-fifths of *Bnei Yisrael* died (Rashi Shemos 13:18), but they were *zocheh* to have the *Yam Suf* split a second time just for them! This truly forces us to examine Datan and Aviram more closely before we simply write them off as paradigmatic *reshaim*, and to recognize that even they had good traits from which we can learn.

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