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A Sale both Sacred and Sinful

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1.

SELLING YOSEF

Regarding Yosef's brothers selling him for "twenty pieces of silver,"¹ the *Jerusalem Talmud* says:²

Since they sold Rachel's firstborn for twenty pieces of silver, every man must redeem his firstborn son for twenty pieces of silver (5 shekels)... Since they sold Rachel's firstborn for twenty pieces of silver and each of them received a *tibah* (two pieces of silver — a half-shekel), every man must give a *tibah* for his shekel obligation.

In other words, because of Yosef's sale, the Jewish people³ became "obligated" to provide two types of payment — the redemption of the firstborn and the half-shekel.⁴

Commentators⁵ clarify the connection between these obligations and Yosef's sale:

The half-shekel serves as an "atonement for his soul."⁶ Based on the well-known teaching⁷ that the sinful sale of Yosef led to the punitive decree of generational exile, it turns out that Yosef's sale resulted in an "ongoing sin" requiring generational atonement. Such "atonement for his soul" necessitates every Jew to give the half-shekel.

Redeeming the firstborn — "Hashem killed the firstborn in the land of Egypt..., therefore I sacrifice to Hashem..., and I shall redeem all the firstborn of my sons"⁸ — is connected with Yosef's sale because, as a consequence of the sale (of Rachel's firstborn), the "firstborns of Israel" were also endangered. However, "Hashem performed a miracle for them," and therefore, in every generation, the firstborns need to be redeemed.⁹

This idea needs to be clarified further: Why did the sin of selling Yosef cause the Jewish people to be obligated to provide **two** (types of) payment¹⁰ — the redemption of the firstborn and the half-shekel?

¹ *Bereishis* 37:28.

² *Jerusalem Talmudi*, "Shekalim," end of 2:3; this is similarly stated in *Bereishis Rabbah* on *Bereishis* 37:28 (ch. 82, sec. 18).

³ {With the exception of Levites and kohanim.}

⁴ {In the original Hebrew, "*machatzis hashekel*"; the scripturally obligatory annual contribution required of each Jewish male during the Temple times (see *Shemos* 30:11-16). This half-shekel donation was used for communal offerings and the maintenance of the Temple.}

⁵ *Nezer HaKodesh (HaAruch)* on *Bereishis Rabbah* ch. 82, sec. 18.

⁶ *Shemos* 30:12.

⁷ *Zohar*, vol. 2 (*Tosafos*), 276a; *Zohar Chadash*, "Vayeishev," 29a.

⁸ *Shemos* 13:15.

⁹ Wording of *Nezer HaKodesh*.

¹⁰ The *Jerusalem Talmud*'s wording does not suggest a dispute {with two opposing opinions as to which payment it led to; rather, the opinions seem complementary}.

2.

THE HALF-SHEKEL AND REDEMPTION OF THE FIRSTBORN — THE CONNECTION

A further difficulty: The *Jerusalem Talmud* mentions both types of payment in the context of various reasons given for **the half-shekel**:

Because they sinned {with the Golden Calf} at מִקְצִית הַיּוֹם {noon, lit., “half of the day”}, they should give a half-shekel.... Because they transgressed the Ten Commandments..., ten *geirah*¹¹.... (Then it says,) because they sold Rachel’s firstborn..., {each and every father must} redeem his firstborn son.... Because they sold Rachel’s firstborn..., every man must give a *tibah* (half-shekel) for his shekel obligation.

This needs to be clarified. How does the clause, “Because they sold Rachel’s firstborn..., {every father must} **redeem his firstborn son**,” fit into the discussion of the half-shekel? Moreover, the *Jerusalem Talmud* introduces this idea (of redeeming firstborn sons) **before** presenting the idea that “every man must give a *tibah*” (a half-shekel) for his shekel obligation!

We must say that these are not two separate ideas but rather a seamless sequence. To grasp how Yosef’s sale serves as a reason for the half-shekel, one must first recognize that this sale serves as a reason for the redemption of the firstborn.

3.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

The following also needs to be clarified:

- a) To say that the half-shekel is given as payment for a grave sin (selling Yosef) makes sense, as the verse emphasizes that it is an “**atonement** for his soul.” In contrast, redeeming the firstborn seems to be an expression of **goodness and holiness**: “**Sanctify** to me every firstborn.”¹² A firstborn has sanctity and must, therefore, be redeemed. —

So how can selling “Rachel’s firstborn” be the impetus for an act connected with sanctity — “**Sanctify to me** every firstborn”?

¹¹ {Ten *geirah* is equivalent to half a shekel.}

¹² *Shemos* 13:2.

b) Regarding the reason for the half-shekel — “each of them received a *tibah*” (a half-shekel) — commentators ask: Seemingly, only **nine** of Yosef’s brothers participated in Yosef’s sale, as “Binyamin was not with them,”¹³ and at the time of the sale, Reuven was not present (as Scripture states).¹⁴ Thus, the *Jerusalem Talmud*’s calculation of a half-shekel (a **tenth** of “twenty pieces of silver”) is inaccurate.

This is resolved in two ways:

(a) Reuven was also counted since “even though Reuven was not with them then, he was nevertheless allocated a portion because the brothers believed he would not be opposed to their actions”¹⁵ [especially according to what *Pirkei DeRebbi Eliezer* says — that after Reuven was informed of Yosef’s sale, “Reuven heard... and remained silent”].¹⁶

(b) Yosef himself is considered as if he had taken part in his sale because he was the “cause (of the sale) by originally fomenting jealousy.”¹⁷

However, this does not fit smoothly: Every idea in the Torah is absolutely precise. Since this sale was **practically** carried out only by nine of Yosef’s brothers — **against** the will of Reuven (and obviously) Yosef — why would Reuven or Yosef’s weak association with the sale, mentioned above, be considered equivalent to the involvement of the other nine brothers to the extent that the twenty pieces of silver would be divided into ten **equal** portions?

4.

TWO PERSPECTIVES

Simply put, the difference between the two types of “payment” for the selling of Yosef — the redemption of the firstborn and the half-shekel — is as follows:

When it comes to the redemption of the firstborn, the payment amount corresponds to **Yosef**’s “value” (the amount of money for which **he** was purchased) — five shekels. In contrast, when it comes to the half-shekel, the payment amount corresponds to how much money each of Yosef’s **brothers** “received” from the sale — a half-shekel.

This demonstrates that these two types of payment are connected with two different aspects of Yosef’s sale: The half-shekel serves as “atonement for the soul” — atonement for the

¹³ Wording of *Korban HaEidah* on *Jerusalem Talmud*, “*Shekalim*” 2:3.

¹⁴ *Bereishis* 37:29, and Rashi, ad. loc.

¹⁵ *Yefei Toar, Pirush Marzi”v* on *Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 82, sec. 18.

¹⁶ *Pirkei DeRebbi Eliezer*, ch. 38.

¹⁷ *Takalin Chadatin* on *Jerusalem Talmud*, “*Shekalim* 2:3.”

blemish in the **Tribes** as a result of the sale (from the benefit they derived from Yosef's sale). Conversely, to pay for **Yosef's** trauma that resulted from the sale (he was sold as a slave), they had to redeem their firstborn sons.

This solves the question mentioned above — how did selling Yosef (Rachel's firstborn) lead to (something positive) the obligation for the Jewish people to redeem their firstborn? It is because, even though for Yosef's brothers, selling Yosef was a sin and a descent, for **Yosef himself**, it brought about an ascent. This ascent is expressed by the redemption of the firstborn, as explained below.

5.

THE DEEPER REASON

Regarding Yosef's sale, the *Zohar* says,¹⁸ “The Holy One brought all of this about to uphold His decree of the Covenant between the Pieces.”¹⁹ Hashem orchestrated Yosef's sale by his brothers to fulfill His decree of the Covenant between the Pieces, which required the Jewish people to enter the Egyptian exile.

However, seemingly, to fulfill the terms of the Covenant, Yosef could have migrated to Egypt in a way that “his brothers' hand would not be involved.”²⁰

The *Zohar*²¹ clarifies that Yosef's descent to Egypt had to be triggered by being sold by **his brothers** because they thereby **subjugated** Yosef (by throwing him into a pit and selling him “like a master who sells his slave”)²² before he came to Egypt — he became “his brothers' slave.”²³

This preemptively ensured that when the Jewish people would later descend to Egypt, the Egyptians would not have complete authority over them (as they did over all their other slaves — “a slave could not escape Egypt”).²⁴ On the contrary, since the Egyptians were Yosef's slaves, and Yosef was “the slave of the children of Israel,”²⁵ it emerges that “{the Children of} Israel ruled over them {the Egyptians}.”

¹⁸ *Zohar*, “*Vayeishev*,” 184a; see also *Sotah* 11a; Rashi on *Bereishis* 37:14.

¹⁹ {In the original Hebrew, “בְּרִית בֵּין הַבְּתָרִים.”}

²⁰ Wording of *Or HaChamah*, *ibid*.

²¹ For the following, see *Or HaChamah* (and Rabbi Avraham Galanti cited there); *Mikdash Melech* on *Zohar*, “*Vayeishev*,” 184a.

²² Wording of *Or HaChamah*, *ibid*.

²³ Wording of *Mikdash Melech*, *ibid*.

²⁴ Rashi on *Shemos* 18:9.

²⁵ Wording of *Or HaChamah*.

6.

THE POSITIVE SIDE

Zohar's explanation brings a deeper understanding of Yosef's sale, which is emphasized in the verse. Namely, despite the unworthy intentions of Yosef's brothers, **ultimately, good** resulted: "I was sent to provide sustenance..., to ensure your survival in the land and to sustain you for a great deliverance."²⁶

Not only did the sale benefit the Jewish people (Yosef **later** became viceroy), but it **also** served as the means "to ensure your survival... for a great deliverance" — redemption from Egypt.

It turns out that Yosef's sale led to a paradoxical outcome. From the perspective of Yosef's brothers — who intended (by selling Yosef) to make Yosef a **slave** — the sale precipitated the Egyptian **exile**. However, from the perspective of "the Holy One {who} brought all of this about" — **Hashem's** intent and desire — the sale (perpetrated by Yosef's brothers) enabled **redemption**.

This is the connection between selling "Rachel's firstborn" and the redemption of the firstborn:

Yosef's sale led to circumstances by which Yosef was "acquired" {as a slave} by (the Tribes,) people who were obligated in mitzvos (circumcision and the like). Additionally, his masters resided in the Holy Land. Accordingly, the Egyptians could not rule over him,²⁷ and **all** the Jewish people remained untouchable by Egypt's subjugation.

This also brought about the idea of the "firstborn," that a firstborn is **Hashem's acquisition** — "he is Mine."²⁸ The dedication of "the first of his fruit... to his Creator's domain" reminds a Jew (in the words of *Sefer HaChinuch*)²⁹ "that **everything** is His." All of a Jew's possessions belong to Hashem.

²⁶ *Bereishis* 45:5-7.

²⁷ See *Gittin* 43b and the halachic authorities on that passage. {A slave owned by a master in the land of Israel cannot be sold to someone living outside of the land of Israel. This is because there are many mitzvos exclusive to the land of Israel that a slave must observe, which cannot be practiced outside of it. Therefore, if the slave is sold, our Sages decreed that the slave goes free. On this basis, once Yosef was "acquired" by his brothers in the land of Israel, he could not be truly acquired by any entity outside of the land of Israel.}

²⁸ *Shemos* 13:2; see Rashi there.

²⁹ *Sefer HaChinuch*, "Mitzvas Bechor" (mitzvah 18).

NINE OR TEN

In light of this, we can understand why, when our Sages discuss the atonement for Yosef, they are precise in saying that precisely ten of Yosef's brothers participated in the sale [even though Reuven (and surely Yosef) did not consent]. —

To achieve a **good** outcome and bring about the quality of redemption (such that the Egyptians would be unable to dominate him), Yosef's sale needed (specifically) the power of a **quorum**.³⁰

When ten Jews come together, “the *Shechinah* rests”³¹ there — the Divine light, which **transcends** the world (and even angels).³² As such, the power of a quorum empowered the Jews to remain aloof from Egypt {מִצְרַיִם} — the limitations and boundaries {גְּבוּלֵיהֶם} of exile.

For this reason (when “the Holy One brought all of this about”), nine people participating in the sale would have been inadequate. Instead, ten were essential — a tenth person needed to participate (whether Reuven or Yosef, as discussed above).

For this very reason, only nine brothers **openly** participated — for if all ten brothers had **openly** participated, the effect of “the *Shechinah* rests” would have also been revealed. Yosef would have never been “sold as a slave”³³ **in the first place**.

To ensure that Yosef would be sold as a slave (at least) overtly and outwardly,³⁴ only nine brothers actively joined. Yet, on the flip side, because ten covertly participated, this brought about that inwardly, and in truth, Yosef (and through him, all the Jewish people) remained beyond the reach of Egypt's subjugation.

³⁰ {In the original, “צִיבוּר,” this may also be used in the sense of “community.”}

³¹ *Sanhedrin* 39a.

³² *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaKodesh*,” ch. 23.

³³ *Tehillim* 105:17.

³⁴ As the verse {from *Tehillim*} continues (and clarifies) **that from the outset**, “Yosef was sold... (only) until the time that His word came to pass” {*Tehillim* 105: 17-19}.

8.

HALF OF A WHOLE

On this basis, the idea that the “atonement for a soul” for selling Yosef is through the half-shekel — from which **communal** sacrifices, and not **individual** sacrifices, are brought — can be better appreciated:

Atonement for selling Yosef is achieved by **revealing** the deeper dimension of the sale: the strength of **the community** drawn into it, which imbued it with the virtue of redemption (as mentioned above) — the opposite of enslavement and exile.

This is also one of the ideas hinted at in the term “**half-shekel**” (and not “ten *gerah*” or the like): A Jew realizes that as an individual, he is only **half**, a partial entity, and to become a complete (shekel) entity, he must unite with another Jew.³⁵

This sense of being a “**half-shekel**,” which leads to joining and unifying the Jewish people, and to the love of a fellow Jew, rectifies the sin of selling Yosef, which was prompted by the opposite of love — “They hated him....”³⁶

This also clarifies why the *Jerusalem Talmud*, before mentioning that Yosef’s sale brought about the half-shekel obligation, prefaces by saying that Yosef’s sale was the cause of the redemption of the firstborn. This preface — that selling “Rachel’s firstborn” introduced the concept of “the firstborn” among the Jewish people — helps us understand the second principle: the **half-shekel** (the collection from which communal sacrifices were bought) corrects the sin of selling Yosef.

9.

THE FIRST LESSON

As mentioned above (in Section 3), there are two ways to calculate the ten brothers (who participated in Yosef’s sale) — either with the participation of Reuven (because he “heard... and remained silent”) or with the participation of Yosef (because he provoked the sale).

Based on our explanation (in Section 7), namely, that their participation was needed to have a “quorum” {or “community”} (and consequently, cause “the *Shechinah* to dwell” in this

³⁵ The unity of a **community** is also symbolized by the half-shekel, as it is **ten geirah**.

³⁶ *Bereishis* 37:4.

debacle), there is a wondrous lesson to be gleaned from these two ways of calculation regarding the great importance of loving a fellow Jew:

The first calculation — that Reuven participated in the sale — teaches us that we must not distance even those whose conduct is **undesirable**. In fact, we must also unite together with them.

Reuven clearly disapproved of his brothers' conspiracy and wanted to rescue Yosef and restore him safely to his father. Yet, Reuven did not separate himself from his brothers after the fact. Instead, he “heard... and remained silent,” and subsequently, “then they took..., they dispatched,”³⁷ collectively.

This serves as a lesson for a Jew: Even when dealing with “your fellow” who is at the level of a “mere creation”³⁸ and is (according to the person’s [physical] perception) categorized as “distant from Hashem’s Torah and His service,”³⁹ a person must first and foremost “Love your fellow as yourself.”⁴⁰ He must not give up hope and abandon his fellow. Instead, he should seek the appropriate way to “bring them close to Torah.”⁴¹

10.

THE SECOND LESSON

Next, we come to an even greater novelty — the second understanding: Even when a person is dealing with someone who causes him as much pain as Yosef experienced when his brothers sold him, the person must feel love even for this Jew.⁴²

Not only will he not hold a grudge against him **after the fact**,⁴³ but also **during the act itself** {he will act following what} the Mishnah advises:⁴⁴ “Judge **every person** favorably.” Moreover, the Mishnah instructs us to “Be humble before every person,” and he should obviously not run away and forsake him (similar to Yosef, who is considered one of the participants **in the sale**). —

³⁷ {*Bereishis* 37:31, 32.}

³⁸ {I.e. people who do not possess any particular virtue other than being creations of Hashem.}

³⁹ *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 32.

⁴⁰ {*Vayikra* 19:18.}

⁴¹ *Avos* 1:12.

⁴² See *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 12.

⁴³ As we find that Yosef **repaid** his brothers with kindness (see *Midrash Tehillim*, ch. 80, par. 2; *Zohar*, vol. 1, 201a-b; *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 12); see also *Sefer Chassidim*, sec. 11.

⁴⁴ *Avos* 1:6; 4:10; see *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 30.

This idea is especially fitting when one contemplates the Alter Rebbe's explanation in *Tanya*⁴⁵ that every occurrence is a function of Divine providence. Although the other person has free will (and deserves punishment for any immoral choice), "Concerning the person harmed, this incident was already decreed in Heaven."

It follows that, in truth, a **person harmed** is responsible for the damage the other caused [similar to Yosef's episode — as understood by the commentators, as mentioned above — when he was the cause of his own sale]. —

Moreover, since "everything Hashem does is for good,"⁴⁶ harm has within it something **good**.⁴⁷ [As the *Zohar* clarifies regarding Yosef (as mentioned above), the act of selling Yosef himself led to the redemption.]

Therefore, a person should not be angry at his fellow {who harmed him}. On the contrary, in line with the mitzvah, he should act lovingly toward him — "Love your fellow as yourself." He thereby minimizes the harm to the extent that the harm is canceled.

[This is analogous to the above view that Yosef was considered a participant in his own sale along with his brothers, and the power of freedom was thereby drawn into **him**.]

By augmenting our love for our fellow Jew to the extent that it is unconditional, we will void the reason for exile — baseless hatred.⁴⁸ **Consequently**, the effect — exile itself — will be immediately repealed. In Rambam's words,⁴⁹ "**Immediately**, they will be redeemed,"

With the coming of our righteous Mashiach, speedily in our days, in actuality.

-From a talk delivered on *Yud Gimmel Nissan*, 5738 (1978), and *Shabbos parshas Vayeishev*, 5742 (1981)

⁴⁵ *Tanya*, "Iggeres HaKodesh," ch. 25 (138b).

⁴⁶ *Berachos* 60b.

⁴⁷ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 5, p. 247, fn. 48.

⁴⁸ *Yoma* 9b.

⁴⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, "Hilchos Teshuvah," ch. 7, par. 5.