

Kehos Chumash

Chassidic Insights: Vayeshev, Chap. 37, Verse 28

28 The brothers...sold Joseph...for twenty pieces of silver: The Talmud understands these pieces to be coins valued at five gerah; twenty such coins thus equal 100 gerah, which is the equivalent of five shekels. Because the brothers sold Joseph, Rachel's firstborn, the Jewish people would in the future be commanded to redeem each of their firstborn.⁴⁶ And since they sold him for five shekels, their firstborn would have to be redeemed for the same price.⁴⁷

Additionally, says the Talmud, if we divide the 20 coins by the ten brothers involved in the sale, each brother contributed two coins, which is equal to ten gerah or half a shekel. The Jewish people were therefore required to donate a half shekel every year to the Temple⁴⁸ as atonement for the sale of Joseph.⁴⁹

(In fact, since Benjamin, Joseph, and Reuben did not participate in the sale, that leaves only nine brothers. However, Reuben can be counted as one of the participants even though he was not present, since the brothers assumed he would agree to the sale and therefore left him his share of two silver pieces⁵⁰—although he may very well not have taken them. Alternatively, Joseph can be considered the tenth party to the sale, since he provoked the brothers' hatred, which led them to sell him.⁵¹)

These two commandments—redemption of the firstborn and the half shekel—correspond to the twin effects of Joseph's sale, on him and on his brothers. Redeeming the firstborn commemorates what occurred to Joseph. It is therefore costs five shekels, corresponding to the five shekels for which he was sold. The commandment of the half shekel, in contrast, atones for the sin of the brothers. It therefore costs a half shekel, corresponding to the half shekel each of them received for the sale.

The sale's effect on Joseph was ultimately positive. As we have seen,⁵² becoming the "property" of his brothers in the Holy Land prevented him from becoming the "property" of Egypt, which in turn enabled all the Jews to spiritually transcend Egyptian sovereignty.

Corresponding to this aspect of the sale is the commandment to redeem our firstborn, who similarly "belong" to God until redeemed. The message of the commandment is that in fact everything we have belongs to God,⁵³ just as Joseph "belonged" to his brothers, to the realm of holiness.

In contrast, the sale's effect on the brothers was the spiritual blemish caused by their hatred and jealousy. To rectify this blemish we were given the commandment of the half shekel, which was used to pay for communal sacrifices, and therefore underscored the power of community.

The half shekel thereby rectifies the external narrative of Joseph's sale, a tale of sinful hate, by revealing its inner narrative, the tale of Joseph's integrity being preserved the power of community: As we have seen,⁵⁴ it was the power of "community"—the quorum of ten brothers during the sale—that imbued the sale with Godly transcendence, thereby enabling Joseph to remain transcendent from Egypt.

Additionally, the half shekel symbolized that individually we are all "half," i.e., incomplete, and that we can only become whole by uniting with others. This sentiment encourages unity and love among our people and therefore undoes the sin of selling Joseph, which was caused by hatred and jealousy.⁵⁵

46. Exodus 13:2.

47. Numbers 18:16.

48. See Exodus 30:11-16.

49. *Y. Shekalim* 2:3; *Bereishit Rabbah* 84:18, et al.

50. See *Yefeh Toar* on *Bereishit Rabbah* 84:18.

51. *Tekalin Chadatin* on *Y. Shekalim* 2:3.

52. Above, on v. 13.

53. See *Sefer HaChinuch*, *mitzvah* 18.

54. Above, on v. 13.

55. *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 20, pp. 185-190.