



Silver and Gold

R. Tali Adler – adler@hadar.org

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Human beings love to make idols of our dead.

Desperate to keep our lost loved ones within reach, we create forms that we can cling to in their stead. We name buildings and mark park benches; install portraits and keep voicenotes on our phones. We believe, somewhere in our hearts, that if we can create the right form, capture the right image, wear the right talisman—his scarf, her watch—then they are not really gone.

Sometimes, unsatisfied with what the outside material world can give us—metal, wood, bricks—we begin to carve those idols out of our own flesh and blood. We try to transform ourselves or our children into those we have lost, hoping that by living as they did, raising our children to be like them, we can keep them alive. Human beings, though, cannot be multiple people at once. In attempting to embody our ancestors, we risk losing ourselves.

When we first learn about the half-*shekel* (*maḥatzit ha-shekel*) each person is commanded to donate to the *mishkan* (tabernacle), we might assume that the donation was designated for some central ritual object, one that would memorialize that first generation.



It is only when we reach the very end of Shemot that we find out what happened to the silver half-*shekel* Moshe commanded each person to offer to the *mishkan*:

שמות לח:כה-כח

וְכֹסֶף פְּקוּדֵי הָעֵדָה מֵאֵת כָּכָר וְאַלְף וְשִׁבְעֵי מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשָּׁה וְשִׁבְעִים שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ: ²⁶בָּקַע לְגִלְגָּלֶת מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ לְכָל הָעֹבֵר עַל הַפְּקָדִים מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְמַעְלָה לְשֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף וּשְׁלֹשָׁת אֲלָפִים וְחֲמִשָּׁה מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשִּׁים: ²⁷וַיְהִי מֵאֵת כָּכָר הַכֹּסֶף לְצֻקֹת אֶת אֲדֹנֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֵת אֲדֹנֵי הַפֶּרֶכֶת מֵאֵת אֲדֹנִים לְמֵאֵת הַכָּכָר כָּכָר לְאֶדָן: ²⁸וְאֵת הָאֶלֶף וְשִׁבְעֵי מֵאוֹת וְחֲמִשָּׁה וְשִׁבְעִים עֶשְׂרִים וְיָמִים לַעֲמֻדִים וְצִפָּה רָאשֵׁיהֶם וְחֲשֵׁק אֲתָם:

Shemot 38:25-28

²⁵The silver of those of the community who were recorded came to 100 talents and 1,775 *shekels* by the sanctuary weight: ²⁶a half-*shekel* a head, half a *shekel* by the sanctuary weight, for each one who was entered in the records, from the age of twenty years up, 603,550 men. ²⁷The 100 talents of silver were for casting the sockets of the sanctuary and the sockets for the curtain, 100 sockets to the 100 talents, a talent a socket. ²⁸And of the 1,775 *shekels* he made hooks for the posts, overlay for their tops, and bands around them.

The half-*shekels*, donated by each member of the people, become the skeleton of the *mishkan*: its sockets and hooks with which the curtains that make up the walls of the *mishkan* will be hung. It is a surprising choice: we might have expected the half-*shekel*, representative of each individual, being used to create one of the central ritual objects of the *mishkan*. Instead, its metal is used for a purpose that is almost invisible in its mundanity, used to create space rather than be featured within it.

Why is the people's donation used for something so seemingly utilitarian? The Talmud Yerushalmi makes a connection between the half-*shekel* brought by the people and the time of day this very same people sinned:

תלמוד ירושלמי שקלים ב:ג, דף מו טור ד
לפי שחטאו במחצית היום יתנו מחצית השקל.

Talmud Yerushalmi Shekalim 2:3, 46d

Because they sinned halfway through the day, they will give the half-*shekel*.

While the Yerushalmi's explicit link between the half-*shekel* and the Golden Calf seems like a simple play on words (*hatzot*, meaning midday, and *mahatzit*, meaning half), its mention of the timing of the sin brings us back to a moment of extreme anxiety:

שמות לב:א

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן הָהָר וַיִּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל אֶהֱרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ
לפנינו כי זה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הָעֵלְנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה הָיָה לוֹ:

Shemot 32:1

When the people saw that Moshe was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aharon and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that fellow Moshe—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him."

The people create the Calf, the *egel*, out of anxiety about their missing leader. Unsure when—or if—he will return, the people want to create something tangible that they can place at their head instead. The *egel* is a desperate wish to give form to a person they fear is lost forever. In Moshe's absence they try to create something that they can still see, still hold,

something that can never leave them. Like so many people do when they face loss, the people cling to Moshe by constructing an idol they can take with them, something that can fill the void Moshe leaves behind.

Like the *egel*, the half-*shekel* is also an attempt to use metal to represent human beings—a half-*shekel* from every person. As the first generation to live with the *mishkan*, the generation that donates the half-*shekel* are destined to be ancestors to all those who enter its walls. One day, like Moshe at the *egel*, they too will be desperately missed. They will be lost fathers and mothers, grandfathers, aunts, and uncles. They will be the lost ancestors human beings are so often tempted to make solid once again, whether through carving metal or our own hearts into their image.

By using the metal of the half-*shekel* to form the sockets of the walls, God warns us against this tendency. Unlike the *egel* that draws us around it, inviting us to pretend we can still physically see and touch the person it is meant to replace, the sockets exist simply to contain the boards and poles that will draw us in. They are space-creators, structures whose function is to hold. When they work best, they are everywhere and nowhere, almost invisibly creating the framework that allows us to enter into communion with God.

For the rest of the *mishkan*'s tenure, the descendants of the first generation that gave their half-*shekels* to build the *mishkan* will see their ancestors represented not by a central physical object, meant to allow them to cling to their predecessors, but by the space that the silver sockets create. It is a different way of relating to loss and memory: not one that fetishizes those we have lost, but one that allows us to enter into the space that they worked to create. The silver sockets invite us to be held by the space they created for us, to use their lives and memories as a sort of map towards the sacred whose geography we must traverse ourselves. As descendants we are not commanded to try to become or recreate our ancestors, but



instead, invited to be ourselves even as we are guided by the contours of the worlds they left behind.

The temptation to desperately cling to those we are afraid of losing—loved ones, living and dead, ephemeral moments, even God when we glimpse Him—is almost impossible to resist. But as Sefer Shemot closes, the sockets tell us: “You do not have to cling so hard. We are here, holding you, creating the very space you walk through, bringing you and God together, time and time again, to meet each other.”

And maybe it is exactly there, in that meeting, in that space, where we find those we love once again as well.

