

Mishpatim By Allan Myers

Less than two weeks ago was Tu B'Shvat, the 15th of Shevat. That was fourteen days ago so today is the 29th day of Shevat. Shevat has thirty days, so tomorrow is the last day of Shevat and is the first day of Rosh Chodesh Adar.

In the time of the building of the Temple, the Jewish poll tax was collected during Adar. It was originally a way of counting the people. Later, it was called kessef kipurim (atonement silver).

It was half a shekel's weight in silver per person and had to be collected by the end of the following month (Nissan).

This year, the last day of Adar is on Monday 15 March, the day when Council Tax bills will be going out all over the country to collect the British poll tax.

To mark the start of the Jewish poll tax month, on this Shabbat we read a special maftir and haphtarach about the first time the poll tax was levied in order to build the Mishkan, the sanctuary in the wilderness.

In today's maftir, we read that the contribution is an anonymous, uniform contribution. Everybody, rich and poor, has to contribute the same amount. The money is used to buy public sacrifices which atone for the people as a whole and the silver donated is used to make the hooks and screws of the tabernacle – not the most decorative parts but the ones which hold it together. Without this contribution, it would collapse.

How is the half shekel linked to atonement? Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik says that the scapegoat, used in the Yom Kippur ritual, is one of the sacrifices bought with the half shekel levy. Karen Koenig Schochet, writing in JOFA, the orthodox feminists' journal, takes this further. Noting that the half shekel is gathered as people pass by a collecting box, she compares it to Rosh Hashanah, when, as we read in the Unataneh Tokef prayer, "All mankind passes before God like a flock of sheep".

Although everyone is judged individually, the act of passing before God like a flock of sheep means that no one is judged too harshly. Through contributing something anonymous and partial (only half a shekel) each individual joins the community, becoming part of a whole. As part of the community, which, as a whole, is deserving of life, the individual attains atonement.

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