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## **Mishpatim ~ Shabbat Shekalim**

**By Robert Stone**

In Sedra Mishpatim, God commands Moses to set down a whole series of rules –exactly 100 verses – in a covenant document covering civil and criminal matters, humanitarian issues and the need to serve God faithfully. From now until Simchat Torah our weekly sedrot move, as the Etz Hayim Chumash puts it, from a mainly narrative Torah to a presentation of rules (mishpatim) with occasional narrative breaks.

Towards the end of the sedra the covenant is ratified by the first sacrifice made after the Exodus, and one made in a unique form. After Moses recounts God's words to the people, they say, "All the words that God has commanded, we will do," and then Moses writes the words down. A sacrifice is made and Moses takes half the blood (chatzi hadam) and sprinkles it on the altar. He then reads the whole covenant. The people, having heard the words yet again, say "All that God has spoken, we will do and we will hear." Then Moses tosses the other half of the sacrificial blood on the people, and says "Here is the blood of the covenant that God has cut with you by means of all these words."

In his commentary on the Five Books of Moses, Robert Alter points out that although splashing blood on the altar is standard procedure, this is the only time in Torah that blood is thrown on the people. He adds, however, that covenants being confirmed by dipping hands in blood or smearing blood is common in many cultures, and that this incident is the climax of various occurrences of blood, from the Bridegroom of Blood episode – where the blood was that of the circumcision that deflected the threat of death to Moses and his child (Exodus 4:24-31) – to the blood of the lamb that warded off the Destroyer in Egypt.

Rashi tells us that it was an angel who ensured that the blood was divided exactly into two – half for the altar and half for the people. But why was an angel needed? Traditionally, chatzi doesn't mean exactly half: a chatzi kaddish isn't exactly half a kaddish, nor is a chatzi Hallel exactly half of Hallel; it doesn't matter if the two "halves" of the Afikoman are of different sizes.

So why did it matter that the blood was divided exactly in half? At Limmud this year, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mervis taught that the Sages answered the question thus: some of us put God first and people second, and others do the opposite. The blood was divided exactly in half by an angel to teach that our duty to each was equally important: our duty to God (the blood on the altar) and our duty to our fellow human beings (the blood on the people).

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