

This week's question:

For *machatzis hashekel*, is it necessary to use 'half' coin denominations? If silver coins are available, should they be used?



The issues:

A) *Machatzis hashekel*, giving three half-shekels to *tzedakah*

B) What type of coins should be used?

A) *Machatzis hashekel*

There is a Scriptural *mitzvah* to give a half-shekel each year towards the communal offerings in the temple. This specific *mitzvah* does not apply nowadays. In fact, one must take care when he designates the money for the practice that he does not actually call it the real thing. *Hekdesh*, consecration, can still be effected nowadays. This means that the item may not be used, and must be treated with extreme care. Therefore, one should not do this at all. In memory of the *mitzvah*, we read *Parshas Shekalim*.

The practice to donate *machatzis hashekel* on *Taanis Esther* is also a memorial to this *mitzvah*. The poskim actually debate whether one may call this *minhag* by the same name as the Scriptural *mitzvah*, based on the aforementioned concern. We rely on those who say that it is obvious what we really mean. The reason this takes place in *Adar* is that in temple times the *mitzvah* took place then. The communal chest was renewed each year. *Rosh Chodesh Nissan* was the first day of the new year for these purposes. It was filled beforehand, during *Adar*. On the first of *Adar*, the announcement would be made to remind people to give their *shekalim*.

The communal needs had various levels of sanctity. The holiest would be the *korbanos tzibur*, all offerings made on behalf of the entire people. This could not be offered by private individuals. The money donated would not be considered a private donation in partnership with all other donors. It would turn into 'communal' property. Nobody could add private money for this. Therefore, it was important that all money donated could be considered public money. This would be by virtue of it having the status of the *mitzvah* of *machatzis hashekel*. As we shall discuss, this meant that one could not contribute voluntarily, unless his contribution could be converted to count as fulfillment of the *mitzvah*.

The money to be used for the communal offerings was separated from the rest in a ceremony called *terumas halishka*, the tithing of the chamber, as the money was all placed in a chamber in the temple. The remainder was used for the next level of public needs. What remained at the end of the year was used towards communal needs of the following year on the next level down.

Since all the money became one large communal chest, individual donations would not be attributed to the donors. Thus, if a person's coin did not get into the *terumah*, it did not matter. The *terumah* represented the entire chest. If people missed the first collection, their coins would also have missed the *terumah*. Nonetheless, the *terumah* would work for coins on the way. For those who had not designated their coins in time, the remainder after the first *terumah* was covered. The chamber stayed open, and more coins could be left there. The *terumah* would be taken again, twice more in the year.

In the Torah, *terumah* is mentioned three times in the *parsha* dealing with *machatzis hashekel*. Only one *shekel* was given each year. There are many interpretations on the three mentions of the coins. In part due to this, and in part due to the three different *terumos halishkah*, the practice nowadays is to give three half-coins. [In addition, the Talmud and the *Yerushalmi* cite a different source, that one should 'third' or 'triple' his *shekalim*. One interpretation of this dictum is that one should give three coins at some point each year. Another is that one must give a minimum of this for *tzedakah* each year. The consensus is that the absolute minimum to fulfill one's *tzedakah* obligation is a third of a shekel each year. However, some correlate the two.] Another view is that one should give a half-shekel at three different occasions during the year. The prevailing practice is to give three on *Taanis Esther*. One reason for this is that the protection against the decree of Haman is attributed to the *mitzvah* of *machatzis hashekel*. Some poskim maintain that the real *mitzvah* is to give one coin. The additional coins are a commendable *minhag*.

Some state explicitly before giving the half-coin that it is in memory of the *mitzvah*. Then certain other *tefilos* and some *Mishnayos Shekalim* are recited. However, there is actually some question about the true origin of the *minhag*. While it seems to correlate to *shekalim*, it was clearly established to take place on *Taanis Ester*, or even on *Purim* morning. This indicates that it could have to do with two other obligations. The Talmud says that the activity that is most rewarded on a *Taanis* is the giving of *tzedakah* to the poor. Some connect this to the *minhag*. There was also concern that the poor would not celebrate *Purim* properly, despite the *mitzvah* of *matanos la'evyonim*. Therefore, it seems that this *minhag* arose, to compel the entire community to give some money for the poor.

Some communities made two collections. The *Taanis Ester* collection was used to support those who had settled in Eretz Yisroel. They were considered the closest cause to that of the Scriptural *mitzvah*. A *Purim* collection was distributed to the poor. In some communities, the money went to the upkeep of the *shul*, as the closest substitute for the temple. Some communities gave the money to the *chazan*, *gabai*, or the *megillah* reader. According to this *minhag*, it was not seen as *tzedakah*, but a type of 'membership dues'. Thus, different reasons for the *mitzvah* dictate different ways to fulfill it. While we do not follow the other customs, some details could affect our *minhag*. [See *Shekalim* 1 (8:4) etc., *Yerushalmi*. *Megillah* 13b 29a-30a *Baba Basra* 9a, *Poskim*. *Tur Sh Ar OC* 685:1 694:1 *YD* 249:2, commentaries. *Nitei Gavriel*, *purim* 26. *Mekadesh Yisroel*, *Purim*, 50.]

B) The coins

The coins given are a half of the largest available silver coin. We do not give an exact replica of the coins used in the temple. The money is not being consecrated. Our *mitzvah* is to give this money to support poor scholars. It should be money they can use. We could use original *shekalim* and redeem them. Many people redeem nowadays anyhow, using modern-day coins provided by the *shul*. However, this is a recent introduction, because the half-coins in many currencies are not used very much. In a currency that does not have a silver coin, we use the most valuable coin that has a half denomination. In a currency that has no half denomination, one may give half of a complete coin. Presumably, this means getting change, letting the *tzedakah* or the recipient keep the change, or

giving a whole on behalf of two people.

The question is, if this is so, why use half-denominations to begin with? The simple answer is that our version of the *minhag* is indeed to commemorate the original *mitzvah*. This leads to various debates. First, it is considered a compulsory obligation in all communities who follow the *minhag*. In temple times, one could not donate this voluntarily, and the authorities enforced the payment. Yet there is no-one enforcing our 'tax'. The simple answer is that we do not have that kind of authority. Second, in the Scriptural *mitzvah*, there is some question as to who was obliged. Women are exempt, but men are obliged, even if they are poor. The question is whether they were obliged from age thirteen or twenty. Thus, this debate applies to our *minhag* as well.

In temple times they often changed the amount to meet the needs of the times. During the early period of the second temple, the donation was gold. As the population grew, it was reduced. However, there was always a minimum Scriptural amount, yet we do not require this! Furthermore, did they always use silver? This is debated, since there are references to one saving small copper coins toward his shekel. It is possible that he had to convert it to silver, as there are other references to a requirement to save the temple treasury from having to make change. Some say that since we try to commemorate the Scriptural *mitzvah*, we need to make it appear as close as possible to it. Therefore, nowadays, we should try to use silver, and we should use half-coins. Otherwise, it is not readily recognized as a copy of the original. [See refs to section A. Nitei Gavriel Purim 26:6, notes. Mekadesh Yisroel Purim, 50-54.]

In conclusion, it is ideal but not required to use silver, and/or half-denominations.

Question 2:

Does one fulfill his obligation of *mishloach manos* with a food that is eaten raw, but requires non-cooking preparation, such as a coconut in its shell or a canned food?

The Issues:

A) *Mishloach manos*

B) Ready-to-eat

A) *Mishloach Manos*

The poskim debate the purpose of *mishloach manos*. Clearly, the way it is described in the Megillah indicates that it was undertaken as an expression of the outpouring of love and joy at the time of the miracle. The question is, why was this particular practice undertaken? The main two views are that it is to increase love and friendship, and that it is to provide food for those who might not otherwise have it. Since the *mitzvah* to eat a *seuda* on Purim is central to its observance, even the poor should have a decent meal. A *manah* is a portion of food. Some suggest that while the Megillah mentions 'each man to his fellow' it does not specify a poor fellow. This is because if only the poor were given *mishloach manos*, it might embarrass the recipients. Therefore, it is given to everybody equally. Based on these views, there is debate on whether it is vital that the recipient accepts or declines the gift. If the friendship is the object, the gesture is enough. If the *seuda* is the goal, the recipient plays a more major role.

B) Food type

Some poskim maintain that one can fulfill his obligation by sending non-foods.

They are a token of friendship, and could also be exchanged for food. If the purpose is to provide the *seuda*, this opinion is difficult to reconcile. The Talmud itself discusses the type of foods sent. It appears that it is food fit for the *seuda*. Examples are wine or beer, meat, dates, sweet flour, ginger and pepper. The Talmud indicates by way of context that sweet desserts are preferred. Indeed, the one who sent ginger and pepper was criticized for sending sharp foods. Some explain this by connecting *manos* to *mann*, the miraculous food of the Wilderness. That had a flavor like dumplings in honey.

The poskim debate whether the *manos* should be ready to be eaten immediately. For example, may one send raw meat? In one view, in accordance with the opinion that it is to provide a *seuda*, the food must be readily usable for this, the other view maintains that as long as food is sent, it can be prepared by the recipient. The general term *manah* or *manos* is used throughout Scripture and Talmud for unprepared portions. In light of the two opinions, it is recommended to try to satisfy the stringent view.

Nonetheless, the Talmud clearly accepts the practice of sending spices and flour as valid, if not ideal. Furthermore, there is no clear indication that the food must be fully prepared. A leg of calf is probably raw, as are the other items. Some of them were given in quantities that could not be consumed right away. This indicates that while they should be fit for the *seuda*, they need not be intended for immediate consumption. Accordingly, sending something not fully prepared would be acceptable.

In our case, the issue is that the food cannot be consumed immediately, but not due to a lack of processing. It is ready to eat as is. Its lack of preparation relates to the packaging. This is more complicated than simple packed foods, and requires a tool and some work. However, in light of the opinions that raw food is also acceptable, combined with the fact that this is edible, it would seem that there is nothing wrong with sending such foods. [See Megilah 7a-b, [Sde Eliyahu] Poskim. Shiltos 67, Hamek Shaila. Tur Sh Ar OC 695:4 TZ MA [PMG] PrCh etc., commentaries. Nitei Gavriel Purim 57:5-7, notes.]

On the parsha ... and let it be for you as a mannah .. [29:26] Here the Torah uses *mannah* to mean a raw portion of meat [Haamek Shailah 67]. Perhaps the Torah means that the meat should be cooked and eaten as a portion! Mann is also a portion [Raiach Dudaim p. 30]. The Talmud says that the Torah calls the *mann* bread, unbaked cakes, or even first ground up. The righteous found their *mann* ready to eat. The average people needed to cook it, and the lowest type needed to grind it first [Yuma 75a]. For Moshe, a *tzadik*, it would be ready to eat! [Careful about the message you send in the type of mishloach manos! Freilichen Purim!]

Sponsored [by his friends], in memory of Aaron Halley, Aharon Simcha a”h ben Elchonon Tuviah haKohen,
 whose *yahrzeit* is **Shabbos**, the 13th of Adar. ה

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