

Ma Nishma, Leffell School newsletter

After so many years of trying to connect to God, I'm no longer surprised when I notice some spiritual envy arising. All of a sudden, I'm in the middle of Tefilah, and I notice, out of the corner of my eye, someone near me who seems to "get it." Why don't I have that same level of *kavanah*, that same degree of focus and connectedness?

The good news is, the feeling doesn't worry me. One person's spiritual gifts have no impact on mine. Spirituality isn't a zero-sum game. On the contrary, when it comes to connecting to God, everyone has access to the same spiritual opportunities.

That's why I've always been drawn to the *machatzit hashekel*. In the special *maftir* for Shabbat Shekalim this week, we read of the equalizing donation that was collected as part of the census of our people. Each male 20 years or older had to give a *machatzit hashekel*, a half-shekel, a small, affordable donation that was ostensibly within the capacity of every Israelite.

The Torah refers to this donation as a "*kapparah*"-- an atonement-- teaching that everyone had to give the exact same amount.

הָעֶשִׂיר לֹא־יִרְבֶּה וְהַדֹּלֹל לֹא יִמְעוּט מִמַּחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל לְתֵת אֶת־תְּרוּמַת ה' לַכֹּפֶר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם:

The rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel when giving the LORD's offering as atonement (*kapparah*) for your persons. (Exodus 30:16)

The 13th century commentator Chizkuni ties the democratic aspect of the half-shekel to the atonement itself. If people were to give different amounts, he writes, "how could each of them attain the same level of atonement?" The *machatzit hashekel* was the ultimate equalizer for the Israelite men of age. In this census, each one counted equally. Rich or poor, the message went, everyone had equal access to atonement, and everyone had equal access to the Divine. All they had to do in order to be counted was *contribute*.

The same is true today. We all get equal access to the spiritual life. At different moments, we may feel spiritually "rich" or "poor," but the key is in the contribution. In order to be counted, in order to participate fully, we have to share a part of ourselves. As long as we make this "payment," atonement, or any kind of spiritual connection, can be available to us all.