

The Custom of *Machatzis Hashekel* Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher

What is the origin of the custom to give three half-dollars before Purim?

Who is obligated to give this money?

There is a mitzvah in the Torah that a *machatzis hashekel* (half-shekel) be given by the Jewish People. These half-shekel coins were used to purchase the public offerings brought in the *Bais Hamikdash*. Although today we do not merit a *Bais Hamikdash* and the offerings that were brought therein, there is a custom to give money annually as a commemoration of that half-shekel. This money is customarily given around Purim time and used for charitable purposes¹, and this article will examine the origins of this custom, who is included and other details.

The original *machatzis hashekel* obligation: In Parshas Ki Sisa (Shemos 30:12-14), Hashem tells Moshe to tell the Jewish People that they must give a *machatzis hashekel*. The Gemara (Shekalim 2b) notes that the word *terumah* appears three times in the section, referring to three different donations: The half-shekel given on a one-time basis to provide silver for the creation of the sockets into which the pillars of the Mishkan walls were inserted; one for the half-shekel given annually for the purchase of animals for communal offerings; and one for the voluntary donation of materials needed for the creation of the Mishkan. Rashi (Shemos 30:15 s.v. *lichaper*) cites this passage.

The Mishna (Shekalim 3b) states that beginning from the 15th day of Adar, those who had failed to give their obligatory half-shekel would have their assets seized for its payment. The Mishna lists which demographics were subjected to this seizure: *Levi'im*, *Yisraelim*, converts, and freed Canaanite slaves. However, women, Canaanite slaves and *ketanim* (minors) were not subject to this seizure. Nonetheless, if a member of one of these groups wished to give a half-shekel, it was accepted.

There is a dispute cited in the Mishna (ibid.) whether Kohanim are obligated to give or are exempt; the halacha follows the opinion that they are obligated. The Mishna states, however, that we do not seize their assets. The Gemara (ibid.) explains that Kohanim require a greater degree of respect, and seizing their assets would be unbecoming.

The Gemara (ibid.) states that although we do not seize assets from a *katan*, we may demand that a *katan* give the half-shekel. The Gemara qualifies this statement as referring to a person who has reached puberty and is thus regarded as a *gadol* (adult), but is under the age of twenty².

The question of the obligation for a *gadol* under age twenty is discussed by the Rishonim. Rashi (ibid.), when citing the aforementioned Gemara that discusses the three different donations, states that this half-shekel was actually given later by the counting discussed at the start of Sefer Bamidbar. That count was for males over the age of twenty, and so it emerges that Rashi's opinion is that only this demographic must give the annual *machatzis hashekel*.

The Ramban (Shemos 30:12) disagrees, and cites several proofs that the counting of the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar could not have been the annual half-shekel. One of those proofs is that the half-shekel obligation applied to those over the age of thirteen, as well, not merely those under twenty, as indicated by the aforementioned Mishna in Shekalim. However, the Tiklin Chadtin (Shekalim 3b s.v. *ulimashken*) understands that a *gadol* under the age of twenty is only Rabbinically obligated (and this is why assets are not seized); this approach resolves the Ramban's proof against Rashi.

¹ See Sha'arei Teshuva 694:2 for discussion of what the money can be used for.

² It is rather odd that a person who has reached puberty and is regarded as a *gadol* in halacha would be referred to as a *katan*. It is possible that in the context of giving half-shekel, where twenty is often mentioned by the Torah as the age to be counted, a person under twenty has not yet reached the level of full maturity. Indeed, in other areas of halacha, particularly financial matters, there are distinctions between an adult under twenty and one over twenty.

The Mishna (ibid.) further teaches that if a father began to give on his son's behalf, he may not cease doing so in the future. The Bartenura (ad loc. s.v. *shuv*) understands this to mean that if the father died, the son must still give a half-shekel even though he is still a *katan*. The Tosafos Yom Tov (ad loc. s.v. *shuv*) notes that the Rambam does not understand the Mishna this way, as the Rambam (Hilchos Shekalim 1:7) rules that the father must continue giving a half-shekel until the son is an adult. The Tosafos Yom Tov also wonders how a father's action could obligate his son (see there for full discussion).

To synopsise the different rulings, we will cite the words of the Rambam (ibid.): All are obligated to give a half-shekel: Kohanim, Levi'im, Yisraelim, converts, and freed Canaanite slaves. However, not women, Canaanite slaves or minors. If they gave, we accept from them. But non-Jews who give a half-shekel – we do not accept from them. A minor whose father began to give on his behalf – he may not cease, but must give for him every year until he becomes an adult and gives for himself.

The origins of the custom to give *machatzis hashekel* today: Because we do not merit to bring offerings in the *Bais Hamikdash* today, there would seem to be no reason to give a half-shekel. Indeed, the Gemara (Shekalim 22a) cites a dispute whether one even has the ability to consecrate a half-shekel; all seem to agree that even if it is possible, it should not be done, as it cannot be used to purchase animals, and may end up posing a problem due to its consecrated status.

However, the Darkei Moshe (Orach Chaim 694:1) cites the Mordechai (gloss to Megillah 797) that says that there is a custom to give three halves of the common coin of the locale for Purim. This custom, says the Mordechai, is because the term "*machatzis hashekel*" appears three times in the beginning of Parshas Ki Sisa. The Darkei Moshe says that one should give three halves of the "largest coin" of the locale, not of the smaller type of coinage.

The Chofetz Chaim (Kol Kisvei Chofetz Chaim Michtavim Uma'amarim 2:10) states that the custom to give three half coins is meant as a *zecher* (commemoration) of the *machatzis hashekel* of Bais Hamikdash times, as there is an obligation to create such commemorations of the mitzvos of the time of the Bais Hamikdash (see Sukkah 41a).

The reasoning of giving a half of the local coin instead of a half-shekel (or sum equal to its value) is unclear. It may simply be that since this is a custom, and ascertaining the value of a half-shekel is difficult, the custom became to simply use half of the local currency. We can add to this that the Mishna (Shekalim 6a) states that in fact, one needn't give specifically a half of a shekel, but may give a half of some other coin, as well, so long as everyone is giving the same amount³. This halacha is also mentioned in the aforementioned Gemara (Shekalim 2b) that sees an allusion to the half-shekel in the verses at the beginning of Parshas Ki Sisa⁴.

³ One would have thought that the custom is based on the three times the words "*terumas Hashem*" appear in the section, as stated by the aforementioned Gemara (Shekalim 2b) as an allusion to three different donations necessary during that time. It is unclear why the Mordechai opts for a different allusion.

⁴ It must be noted that the Mishna states that when people began giving a half of the common coin whose value was too small, the Sages of the time did not allow them to do so. The Ramban (Shemos 30:12) explains that the value of the coin cannot fall below the value of the currency used in the time of Moshe. That being the case, perhaps one may give a half of the local currency only if it has significant value. However, because this is a custom that evolved into an obligation, it is likely that the custom was to give a half of the local currency regardless of its value. See, however, Bi'ur Halacha 694:1 s.v. *viyesh*, where he discusses whether one may give a half of a *grusch*, which was a Polish coin with minimal value, as opposed to giving half of a more valuable coin common at that time.

⁵ This is true according to the text of the Gra and Tiklin Chadtin in the Gemara. There

The Darkei Moshe cites the Mahari Brin that even expectant women should give these three halves on behalf of the unborn child. However, he also cites the Maharil (Hilchos Purim 4) that only those who are twenty years of age and up should give this “half-*shekel*.” The Darkei Moshe says that although the Maharil limits the obligation to those twenty and above, the Sefer Minhagim says while the Maharil’s ruling is logical, the custom is that even children give, and one should not change the custom.

When should the *machatzis hashekel* be given?: The Darkei Moshe cites several customs as to when these half coins were given: The Maharil says they were customarily given at *mincha* on Ta’anis Esther, while the Chiddushei Agudah cites the Maseches Sofrim that they should be given before Parshas Zachor is read⁶.

The Rema (Orach Chaim 694:1), which is the codification of the Darkei Moshe, says that the money should be given before *mincha* on Ta’anis Esther⁷. The Magen Avraham (ad loc.:2) says the custom in his locale was to give the money Purim morning before the Megillah was read. The Pri Megadim (ad loc. Aishel Avraham 2) rules it should be given on Purim night; the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (141:5) says the money should be given in the evening before the Megillah is read. Siddur Ya’avetz (Dinei Hamegillah, Seder Hayom Vehalaila 4) says the money is given after *mincha*. The Mishna Berura says that the custom is to give the money before *mincha*. This is the common custom today, as well. Practically speaking, however, one can give the *machatzis hashekel* at any of these times (Kovetz Halachos Hilchos Purim 3:13). One should attempt to give the money before the reading of the Megillah, however, as the Gemara (Megillah 13b) teaches that Hashem arranged that *shekalim* of the Jewish People would precede the money Haman offered Achashveirosh in exchange for permission to annihilate the Jewish People, a merit that would help thwart his nefarious plans. Although, as mentioned, the Magen Avraham says the custom is to give before the morning Megillah reading, this is because the morning reading is regarded as the primary reading of the Megillah (Kovetz Halachos *ibid.* with fn. 14).

If one did not give the half coins at any of these times, they may still be given until Rosh Chodesh Nissan, since the main collection time for the half-*shekel* coins during the time of the *Bais Hamikdash* was during the entire month of Adar (Kovetz Halachos *ibid.*:14 with fn. 15).

Who is obligated?: The Rema (*ibid.*) says that only those age twenty and above are obligated. The Magen Avraham (*ibid.*:3) cites the aforementioned *machlokes* between the Bartenura and the Tosafos Yom Tov regarding the obligation of a *gadol* between the ages of 13 and 20, indicating that he would apply their dispute regarding the original half-*shekel* obligation to the customary three half-coins, as well. The Magen Avraham does not give a conclusive ruling between the two sides, however. The Mishna Berura cites this *machlokes*, as well, but he adds that the Elya Rabba says that this discussion is only regarding the actual obligation, but it is customary to give even on behalf of one’s small children, and for an expectant woman to give on behalf of her unborn child.

The Magen Avraham (*ibid.*) quotes the Hagahus Minhagim that even women and children are obligated, but says he does not know of a source for such a ruling. However, the Maharsham (Da’as Torah 694:1 s.v. *miben*) cites the Shiyarei Korbam commentary to Tractate Shekalim (Shekalim 1:3) who understands that the aforementioned Gemara’s statement that we don’t seize assets but we may demand a half-*shekel* is not referring only to boys over age 13, but also to women and Canaanite slaves. This, then, would be a source to obligate women. However,

are other opinions regarding the correct text which make no mention of this halacha.

⁶ Obviously, this does not mean the money is given on Shabbos just before the reading of Parshas Zachor, but rather in the days leading up to the Shabbos when it is read.

⁷ The Rema, citing the Maharil, actually says, “It should be given on Purim night before they recite *mincha*.” *Mincha* is recited in the afternoon, not at night, and so it would seem he means Purim eve at *mincha*, which is what he quotes the Maharil as saying when citing him in Darkei Moshe.

Rabbi Shmuel Felder (Shiurei Halacha, Hilchos Purim 45 fn. 12) points out that the Rambam (cited earlier) clearly exempts women. The Shevet Halevi (7:183) cites these sources that obligate women, but concludes that women cannot be obligated to give, especially considering that the entire obligation today is based upon a custom, not the original half-*shekel* obligation.

Even if there is an obligation for women to give, this would not extend to minor girls. Nonetheless, there are those who give for this demographic as well (Rabbi Shmuel Felder, *ibid.* fn. 9).

Another approach to explain why women and children would give these three half coins is offered by the Kaf Hachaim (694:7). He says that since the Torah states (Shemos 30:15) that the half-*shekel* is given “to atone for your souls,” and these half coins are a commemoration for that obligation, everyone, including women and children, can use the “atonement” received through the giving of the *machatzis hashekel*.

Rabbi Shmuel Felder (*ibid.*:3) notes that the Mishna Berura makes no mention of an obligation for women, indicating that he agrees with the Magen Avraham that women are not obligated. Rabbi Felder concludes that if one does not have the custom for women to give, it is not necessary to do so.

Ultimately, one should follow his family custom. If one is unsure of his family custom, he may be lenient, since the entire obligation is customary in nature (Rabbi Shmuel Felder *ibid.* 3).

As stated by the Rema, if one begins to give on behalf of his children, he may not cease doing so in the future. The reasoning is that this has the status of a *neder*, a “vow” to perform a meritorious practice, and one is obligated to continue it. However, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (Mo’adei Yeshurun pg. 49) ruled that this is true only when one gave knowing that there is no obligation and that he is going beyond his basic obligation. If one began to give thinking that he must do so, he has not accepted this as an extra meritorious practice, and is not obligated to continue after discovering it was optional.

If one gave *machatzis hashekel* on behalf of his wife, he is not obligated to continue in the future. The distinction is that if one gives for his children, it is a fulfillment of the mitzvah of *chinuch*, and it is this meritorious deed that obligates him in the future. However, merely giving extra charity does not create a future obligation (Kovetz Halachos Hilchos Purim 3:10 with fn. 11)⁸.

Using *ma’aser* funds for *machatzis hashekel*: The Be’er Heitev (Orach Chaim 694:2) quotes the Shela (Maseches Megillah Ner Mitzvah 4) that one may not use *ma’aser* funds for *machatzis hashekel*, since one may not use *ma’aser* funds for any monetary obligation.

The question becomes whether one who gives *machatzis hashekel* on behalf of his wife or children may use *ma’aser* funds. Rabbi Felder (*ibid.* 4) says that he heard from Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg that one may not do so, since, as discussed earlier, once one begins to give for his children, he must continue to do so⁹. However, Kovetz Halachos (*ibid.*:15) says one may use *ma’aser* funds when giving for his children (see fn. 17 ad loc. for reasoning). Even according to Rabbi Scheinberg’s ruling, it seems possible that if one does not have a family custom to give *machatzis hashekel* on behalf of women and/or children, and he decides he wishes to do so, he may accept to do so on the condition that he may use *ma’aser* funds.

In conclusion, there is certainly a custom-based obligation to give three coins of the common currency around Purim time. There are numerous customs regarding exactly who must give. If one is unsure as to his obligation, a halachic authority should be consulted.

⁸ It is unclear whether this *chinuch* obligation would apply if one gave on behalf of his daughter, since, as discussed, the obligation for women is questionable.

⁹ See there for a discussion of other options, since giving \$1.50 on behalf of every family member can become pricey if one has a large family.

Points to Ponder

Can one be *matir neder* (annul the vow) of his family custom of giving for one’s children?

Must one give an actual half-dollar coin or does giving the equivalent value suffice?

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