Parashat Ki Tissa: Spirit in Fire
Source Sheet by Rabbi Mira Rivera for Romemu Open Book

1. Exodus 30:11-13

(11) The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: (12) When you take a census of the Israelite people according to their enrollment, each shall pay the LORD a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled. (13) This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight—twenty gerahs to the shekel—a half-shekel as an offering to the LORD.

2. Rashi on Exodus 30:13:1

(1) THIS SHALL THEY GIVE — He (God) showed him (Moses) a kind of fiery coin the weight of which was half a shekel and said to him, “Like this shall they give” (Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 9).
3. Exodus 30:14-16

(14) Everyone who is entered in the records, from the age of twenty years up, shall give the LORD’s offering: (15) the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel when giving the LORD’s offering as expiation for your persons. (16) You shall take the expiation money from the Israelites and assign it to the service of the Tent of Meeting; it shall serve the Israelites as a reminder before the LORD, as expiation for your persons.

4. Kedushat Levi, Exodus, Ki Tisa 1

(1) Exodus 30,12. “when you take a census of the Children of Israel according to their numbers, each shall pay the Lord a ransom for his person when being counted.”

Seeing that G’d so loves the Jewish people that He feels personally oppressed by their troubles, He gives them advice on how to save their lives/souls from the attacks of the evil urge.
It is a fact that the “life”, i.e. continued existence of all phenomena in the universe, however exalted they may appear, is due only to the brightness that emanated from the Creator Who had to restrain Himself by garbing Himself in various veils of appropriate thickness in order to prevent His brightness from fatally harming the creatures He exposed to it, and He has to provide them with nourishment to enable them to remain alive.

We have an explicit Biblical verse in Nechemyah 9,6 spelling this out; we read there: ואתה всемי כלם את בק, “and You keep them all alive,” [by providing appropriate sustenance. Ed.] If this applies to the universe’s creatures generally, how much more so does it apply to G’d’s favorite nation, the Jewish people. (Compare psalms 135,4-“for the Lord has chosen Yaakov for Himself.” The Jewish people are a means through which G’d illuminates the universe, as we know from Isaiah 2,5: ית עקר לכל ונכל בק, “House of Yaakov, let us walk by the light of the Lord.”) From internalizing the meaning of
these verses we come to the conclusion that when we pass through a period of distress and troubles, one that has been brought about by G’d’s having to discipline us, He Himself is also experiencing part of this pain. We have already mentioned elsewhere that the root of evil befalling the Jewish people is actually one manner in which G’d reveals that He is –“G’d.” Our verse commencing with: כי תשא את ראשה בני ישראל לפקודתם, reminds us of the meaning of the root, as we find it in Numbers 31,49 לא נפקד ממון איש, ”not a single one of our number is missing.” [After the 12000 men who took part in the punitive campaign against Midian had returned. Ed.] G’d tells Moses that if he is interested in raising the status of the Jewish people from their depressed state, (after the sin of the golden calf), he is to see to it that each of the men between 20 and 60 pray to the Lord to redeem them from the attacks of the perennial antagonist, Satan who is always at work trying to seduce them into transgressing His commandments. [Contribution of a half shekel to the Temple
treasury is merely a symbolic gesture of atoning for the guilt stemming from their involvement in that sin. Ed.]