

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This haftara series is dedicated in memory
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzhak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.**

PARASHAT SHEKALIM

An Egalitarian Obligatory Contribution

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THE PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE *MISHKAN*

The *parashiyot* dealing with the *Mishkan* dedicate considerable space not only to the finished product, but also to the entire process of building the *Mishkan* and collecting the resources necessary for its construction. Thus, for example, *Parashat Teruma* does not open with the command of "And you shall make Me a sanctuary," but rather it takes the commandment of "And they shall make Me an offering," as its point of departure. The centrality of the act of free giving and of the readiness to

participate in the construction of the *Mishkan* is most striking in the opening verse of the *parasha*, which serves as the opening verse of all the *parashiyot* dealing with the *Mishkan*:

"And they shall bring Me an **offering**, of every man whose heart prompts him to give you shall take My **offering**. And this is the **offering** which you shall take of them. (*Shemot* 25:2)

We see then that the Torah deemed important not only the result of the resting of God's *Shekhina*, but also the involvement of the people in the process. From a spiritual perspective, it was important to allow the people to participate in the process and to establish a *Mishkan* in whose construction they were partners. This would be true at all times, and it was certainly true for the people of that generation who until that point had been entirely passive. They left Egypt by way of a process of Divine redemption in which they had not been involved, the sea parted for them to save them from the hands of the Egyptians, they were forced to receive the Torah, and even their food arrived on their doorsteps by way of a miracle.

Indeed, their spirit of voluntarism was so strong that Moshe was forced to bring their offerings to a halt, because "the people were bringing much more than is enough." The utopian dream of every director of an institution to end a fundraising project, because of excessive contributions, came true at the time of the construction of the *Mishkan*. It is important to emphasize once again – the achievement was not only utilitarian, that in this manner they were able to obtain all the materials required for the construction of the *Mishkan* and its vessels, but also spiritual. The offerings and voluntarism were expressions of the people's feeling of partnership in the *Mishkan*.

ROUTINE

The advantages in this system are clear, both from the spiritual perspective regarding the involvement of the people, and from the practical perspective that it was possible to raise great stores of money by turning to the generosity of the community.

Basing a project on voluntarism, however, also has considerable disadvantages. Let us consider only the two main problems: 1) routine and 2) inequality.

Following the tempering of the initial burst of excitement and enthusiasm sparked by the challenge of the building, the system was still in need of resources for its upkeep. But the day-to-day need to maintain the *Mikdash* and the sacrificial order would remain forever. To take an analogous situation in our world, anybody involved in fundraising knows that it is a hundred times harder to find donors for ongoing operation than for buildings. Erecting a building is a one-time and impressive project, whereas the expenditures for water, electricity, and the like are continuous needs, lacking luster. It seems that this is one way to understand the well-known midrash at the beginning of *Parashat Beha'alotekha* regarding the relative value of Aharon's offering and that of the tribal princes. Aharon is told that "yours is greater than theirs," because he will be involved in the constant, daily service of lighting the menorah every morning and every evening, whereas the tribal princes brought offerings that were very impressive, but one-time.

This is also the way to understand another strange phenomenon found in the same *parasha*, namely, the offering of the covered wagons, as described by the Torah between the establishment of the *Mishkan* and the offerings of the tribal princes. Why did the princes bring the covered wagons (= the trucks of their day) at that time? They apparently understood that the festive establishment of the *Mishkan* would not suffice, and that they had to worry about means of transport and infrastructure further down the road.

INEQUALITY

A second disadvantage of relying on personal voluntarism lies in its inequality. If everybody gives in accordance with his means and understanding, then certainly the rich man and the poor man will not give in the same manner. The rich man's share in the project will be greater, with all that follows from that regarding the sense of identifying with and involvement in the *Mishkan*, as well the relations between the different sectors of society.

THE HALF-SHEKEL

In light of this, the Torah saw fit to balance the message of voluntarism in *Parashat Teruma* with the message of egalitarianism and obligation in *Parashat Shekalim*. The half-shekel as a uniform obligation cast upon every individual is meant to emphasize the equal share that every member of Israel has in the *Mikdash*. From a utilitarian perspective, it is undoubtedly far easier to raise a thousand shekels from one person than one shekel from a thousand people, but from the perspective of involvement and partnership in the project, it is preferable that a thousand people share the burden. So too, the creation for future generations of the mechanism of the half-shekel for the sacrifices, allowed for both the full partnership of the people in the sacrificial order, and an annual income for the ongoing expenses relating to the sacrifices.

FROM THE MISHKAN TO THE MIKDASH

These questions which engaged the Torah at the time of the construction of the *Mishkan* continued to be of great importance in the *Mikdash*, both at the time of its construction and later as well. The *haftarot* of *Vayakhel* and *Pekudei* relate to these issues in the framework of Shelomo's construction of the *Mikdash* (though this year we will not read them because of *Parashat Ha-chodesh*), and our *haftara* deals with them in the framework of the work of Yehoash.

The *haftara* that is read according to the Sefardi rite (II *Melakhim* 11:17-12:17) begins with the covenant that Yehoyada made between God and the people and the king, "that they should be God's people," and with the purification of the city of the worship of *Ba'al*. The *haftara* read according to the Ashkenazi rite starts at the beginning of the next chapter (12:1) and limits itself to a description of the actions performed by Yehoash on behalf of the *Mikdash*. Expanding the *haftara* with the four verses dealing with the making of the covenant fits the reality of Yehoash's period into a framework familiar to us from the *Mishkan*, and allows us to see his endeavors as sort of rededication of the *Mikdash*.^[1] Just as in the book of *Shemot*, the covenant

of the basins is adjacent to the establishment of the *Mishkan*, so too in the *haftara*, the creation of a covenant precedes the repairs of the *Mikdash*.

A STRANGE FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENT

We come now to very heart of the *haftara* which involves the arrangement made for raising money for the *Mikdash*. Yehoash, according to Rashi and other commentators, proposes an exceedingly surprising plan for dealing with the Temple funds. Instead of giving the money collected in the *Mikdash* to the treasurers for Temple use, Yehoash proposes that all the money that is collected should be given to the *kohanim* for their own personal use, and in exchange they will undertake to repair the *Mikdash* whenever that becomes necessary. Anyone who reads Yehoash's proposal cannot but raise his eyebrows over its contents, not to mention what devotees of proper administrative practice would say about this. What then could have brought him to initiate such an arrangement?

THE APPROACH OF PARASHAT *TERUMA*

We shall propose two possible explanations, and leave it to the reader to decide between them. Let us start with the first one:

Yehoash is very excited about repairing the *Mikdash* which was in sore need of renovation, and it is certainly possible that he also feels a special connection to the place owing to the years that he spent there while hiding from his mother. He senses, however, that the people do not share his excitement, nor do they feel sufficiently connected to the place. After years of neglecting the *Mikdash*, and building temples and altars to idols, the bond between the people and the *Mikdash* weakened. This is especially true about the priests who are expected to be particularly identified with the *Mikdash*, but did not invest in its development and upkeep. In light of this, Yehoash feels that the scales must be tipped in favor of personal involvement and participation, and this at the cost of equality and routine. He, therefore, presents the priests with an incentive along with responsibility in order to involve them in the

upkeep of the Temple. By directly involving the *kohanim* in the fundraising process and making them responsible for the maintenance of the *Mikdash*, the king thought that he could bring them to greater involvement and concern. And indeed, in the chapter that parallels our *haftara* in *Divrei Ha-yamim* (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 24), it says that Yehoash obligated the *kohanim* and the Levites to actively raise donations for the *Mikdash*. The *kohanim* are expected to make their rounds of all the cities of Yehuda, and raise money:

Go out to the cities of Yehuda, and collect money of all Israel to repair the house of your God. (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 24:5)

The *haftara* also emphasizes the principle of personal involvement: "Let the priests take it to them, every man from his acquaintance" (II *Melakhim* 12:6). Similar to the parallel practice in our days, the idea is that every person should turn to his friends and relatives and collect donations that are based on personal relationships. It should be noted that even if we do not accept Rashi's understanding that the priests would take the money for themselves, we are still dealing with an attempt to involve them in the active raising of resources by sending them out to make a circuit of the cities and turn to their acquaintances. As stated above, Yehoash adopted this policy because he felt that it was important at the time to begin a process that would strengthen the involvement of the people in general, and of the priesthood in particular, in the upkeep and operation of the Temple. In consideration of the gloomy and abandoned state of the *Mikdash* after the period of Atalya, we are talking about a process of serious renovation which could also bring the people to a feeling of doing and elation. If we summarize this idea in terms taken from the book of *Shemot*, Yehoash sees this as a time that is appropriate for the approach of *Parashat Teruma*.

A FUNDRAISING BUSINESS

Another way to understand Yehoash's course of action focuses on the Temple's need to collect money. According to this understanding, the ordinary fundraising system was inadequate for the needs of the *Mikdash*. It is important to remember that the verses in *Divrei Ha-yamim* describe a Temple in ruins:

For the sons of Atalyahu, that wicked woman, had broken up the house of God; and they had also bestowed all the dedicated things of the house of the Lord upon the *Be'alim*. (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 24:7)

Yehoash felt that it was necessary to embark upon a massive renovation campaign in order to restore the *Mikdash* to its former glory. For these objectives, the routine way of raising funds would not suffice and there was a need to conduct a wide-scope collection campaign. For that purpose, he offered the priests incentives and even instructed them to go out and make their rounds of the cities in order to achieve the objectives of the campaign. According to this understanding, he relied on the *kohanim* not because he wished to involve them in the process, but rather because he felt that this was part of their responsibilities as keepers of the *Mikdash*. He was guided by the goal of strengthening the *Mikdash*, and therefore he was ready to offer the collected money to the *kohanim* if that would lead to the repair and renovation of the *Mikdash*. From his perspective, it was more efficient – and therefore, more correct – to execute this arrangement, for in that way he could ensure that the *Mikdash* would be properly maintained. Like a modern institution that employs a fundraiser in exchange for a percentage of the contributions on account of the efficiency of such an arrangement, so did Yehoash act in his arrangement with the *kohanim*. They would make the rounds and approach their acquaintances and increase thereby the income, and in that way the *Mikdash's* upkeep would be ensured.

This course, however, had its dangers as well. First, there was the danger of routine mentioned above. The initial momentum and the challenge of rehabilitating the ruined Temple that spurred the *kohanim* at the outset would soon be followed by weariness and the lack of desire to go from city to city and nag acquaintances. This system could, therefore, not continue for the long term, and the daily operation of the *Mikdash* could not rely on the arrangement that Yehoash had reached with the *kohanim*. Indeed, the verse testifies that with the passage of time, desire waned and the system ceased to function: "But it happened in the twenty third year of king Yehoash, that the priests had not repaired the breaches of the house" (II *Melakhim* 12:7).

Second, there was also a second problem with Yehoash's proposal, namely, that by drawing the *kohanim* nearer and/or creating a more efficient system, the

danger arose of distancing the rest of the people. The feeling that their contributions were not going to the *Mikdash*, but into the *kohanim's* pockets would certainly cause them to contribute only half-heartedly. To the extent that a person knows that his money is reaching the *Mikdash* itself, he will contribute with desire, but if the money will end up in the pockets of the *kohanim*, his desire to contribute and his feeling of partnership in the *Mikdash* will certainly greatly decrease. Even if the system is more efficient, it exacts the price of diminishing popular identification with the *Mikdash* project. If we examine our own experiences, most of us have difficulty contributing to fundraisers who take a certain percentage, even if their work makes the system more efficient and helps the charitable organizations from a utilitarian perspective. The donor wants to see his money reaching the poor or cancer research, and not the bank account of the fundraiser.

THE TRANSITION TO A NEW SYSTEM OF FUNDRAISING

Therefore, when the initial policy of having the *kohanim* collaborate as active partners in the collection process exhausted itself, Yehoash switches systems and moves to one that better corresponds to equality and routine, and in a way that gives the people the feeling of partnership. The people themselves bring the money to the *Mikdash* and hand it over directly to the *Mikdash* treasury. Nobody is approached by the *kohanim*, and there is no distinction between rich and poor, for each person's donation is put straight into a chest where it gets mixed up with all the other money. Thus, a system similar to that of the half-shekel comes into being, and this is what is able to withstand the test of time. It is for this reason that this is the *haftara* for *Parashat Shekalim*, because the *haftara* points to the need for a transition from the first system which is similar to the voluntarism of *Parashat Teruma*, to the second system which, over the long term, is preferable to it.

THE ELEVATING ANONYMOUS CONTRIBUTION

What is more, the first system had been based on the *kohanim* collecting money, "every man from his acquaintance." As stated above, this course made it easier to raise money, because of the social pressure and feelings of friendship upon which it relied, but it was also responsible for the fact that the donors felt that they

were contributing, not for the sake of the *Mikdash*, but out a sense of personal obligation to their acquaintances. This may have caused them to more, but it did not create a feeling of elevated spirit, but rather one of a social tax.

In the wake of this, Yehoash came up with the system of the chest with the hole. In this manner, the contribution would be anonymous and void of social pressure. The giver would feel that he is giving to the *Mikdash*, and nothing else; he had no social gains and he was not subject to any pressure from family and friends. It is possible that this system was more awkward or that it brought in less revenue, but it gave the donors the feeling of an unmediated donation to the *Mikdash*, and in this lies its strength.

THE SPIRIT OF VOLUNTARISM AND PARTICIPATION

Before concluding, it is important to pay attention to what is stated at the end of the *haftara* regarding those who are involved in the repair work of the *Mikdash*:

Moreover they did not keep accounts with the men, into whose hands they delivered the money to pay out to the workmen: for they dealt in good faith (*emuna*). (II *Melakhim* 12:16)

According to the plain sense of the text, there was no reason to suspect the recipients of the money of embezzlement, for they were men of good faith (*emuna*). It seems, however, that we can add another level of explanation, namely, that those people believed (*ma'aminim*) in what they were doing. Despite the change in the system of raising money, the spirit of voluntarism and the feeling of participation were preserved, and those engaged in the actual work deeply identified with what they were doing. From their perspective, this was not an additional mission instead of service, but rather a challenge to renew and elevate the *Mikdash*. The very spirit that Yehoash tried to plant among the people with respect to the *Mikdash* successfully took root and found expression in the work of those involved in its renovation.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] The Sefardi rite also lengthens the *haftara* with another four verses, and thus the *haftara* reaches twenty-one verses, the minimum length of a *haftara* according to talmudic law. We have already seen, however, that many *haftarot* are not particular about this requirement.