**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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# SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat SHEKALIM**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

**The Jewish People and Torah Study**

Translated by David Strauss

### Communal Offerings – the Pharisees and the Sadducees

The passage read for *Parashat Shekalim* opens with the obligation upon every member of Israel to bring a half-shekel to the Temple:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: When you take the sum of the children of Israel, according to their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul to the Lord, when you number them, that there be no plague among them, when you number them. This they shall give, every one that passes among them that are numbered: half a shekel after the shekel of the sanctuary – the shekel is twenty gera – half a shekel for an offering to the Lord. Every one that passes among them that are numbered, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the offering of the Lord. The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than the half shekel, when they give the offering of the Lord, to make atonement for your souls. And you shall take the atonement money from the children of Israel, and you shall appoint it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the children of Israel before the Lord, to make atonement for your souls. (*Shemot* 30:11-16)

There is no discussion of this issue in the Babylonian Talmud, but the *Yerushalmi* in Tractate *Shekalim* notes that this obligation is intended to anchor the communal offerings brought over the course of the year on new money that belongs to the Temple treasury, when every year anew, in the month of Nisan, Israel is required to bring new money.

For it was taught: "This is the burnt-offering of every new moon throughout the months of the year" (*Bamidbar* 28:14). You might say that he can set aside funds each month. Therefore, the verse states: "Every new moon throughout the months [of the year]” – in one month he sets aside for all the months of the year. You might say he can do this any month that he wants. It says here "months of" and it says below "months of"; just as the "months of" below are counted only from Nisan, so too the "months of" here are counted only from Nisan. (*Yerushalmi* *Shekalim* 1:1)

In other words, the half-shekels were collected in the month of Nisan to pay for the communal offerings that were to be brought over the course of the coming year.

Although this is clear to us, it was the subject of a significant dispute between the Sadducees and the Pharisees at the end of the Second Temple period. We read in *Megillat Ta'anit*:

From the beginning of the month of Nisan until the eighth of the month, **the daily-offering was established,** and there are no eulogies.

And in the scholia, the "Gemara" on *Megilat Ta'anit*, it is explained:

These are the days on which one must not fast, and on some of them one may not deliver a eulogy. From the beginning of the month of Nisan until the eighth of the month, thedaily-offering was established, and there are no eulogies.

For the Boethusians said that the daily-offerings may be brought by an individual. This one brings one week, that one brings two weeks, and the other one brings thirty days. How did they expound the verse? They said: "The one lamb shall you [singular] offer in the morning" (*Bamidbar* 28:4) – **implying that an individual** [can bring it].

The Sages said to them: You are not permitted to do so, for the [daily] offering is brought only from [the money of] all of Israel… "You [plural] shall observe to offer to Me in its due season" (*Bamidbar* 28:2) – that they should all come from the Temple treasury…

When they overcame them and defeated them, they enacted that the people should give their shekels and leave it in the Temple treasury, **and the daily-offerings would be offered from [the money of] the community.** And all those days on which they argued about the matter, they made into festival days.

Who were the Boethusians? They were the Sadducees (*Tzedukim*), whose lineage traces back to the priestly families who were descendants of Tzadok, about whom it is related in the book of *Yechezkel*:

But the priests the Levites, the sons of Tzadok, who kept the charge of My sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from Me, they shall come near to Me to minister unto Me and they shall stand before Me to offer to Me the fat and the blood, says the Lord God. They shall enter into My sanctuary, and they shall come near to My table to minister to Me, and they shall keep My charge. (*Yechezkel* 44:15-16) 

These priests, who generally were also men of property and status and lived together in Jerusalem, controlled the Temple, primarily by appointing a High Priest of their liking, and in this way they implemented their Halakhic rulings. These priests were of the opinion that the Temple belonged to individuals, and thus they were interested in allowing individuals to bring the daily-offering.

The Temple – or the *Mishkan*, as it appears in the *parashat ha-shavua*, *Parashat Vayakhel* – stands at the heart of a dispute between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Pharisees disagreed with the Sadducees based on the assumption that **the Temple belongs to all of Israel** and the priests are merely "our agents" (*Kiddushin* 23b).[[2]](#footnote-2) The *halakha* was decided in accordance with the position of the Pharisees – presumably in the wake of the High Priesthood being returned to a Pharisee priest, rather than a Sadducee – and in this way the Sages succeeded in institutionalizing the need to offer the daily-offering from communal funds.

### The *Mishkan*: a national goal

What is the significance of this action? *Chazal* certainly did not enact that eulogies may not be delivered on every day that a halakhic decision was reached. There are far more such decisions than days of the year!

In order to explain the full depth of the dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, we must understand the significance of the Temple.

The Rambam lists three *mitzvot* that Israel was commanded to fulfill when they entered the land:

The People of Israel was commanded to fulfill three *mitzvot* upon entering the Promised Land: a) To choose a king, as it is stated: "Appoint a king over yourselves" (*Devarim* 17:15); b) To wipe out the descendants of Amalek, as it is stated: "Erase the memory of Amalek" (*Devarim* 25:19); c) To build God's Chosen House, as it is stated: "Seek out His Presence and go there" (*Devarim* 12:5). (Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:1)

It is clear to us that the appointment of the king and the wiping out of Amalek's descendants have no independent significance; they are both merely stages on the road to establishing the Temple.[[3]](#footnote-3)

### The *Mishkan* and the Temple are only a condition

Even the Temple, however, is not the ultimate goal. We might speak of a higher and more amorphous goal, such as: "In that day shall the Lord be one, and His name one" (*Zecharya* 14:9). But we can also focus on a more concrete goal: to bring Israel closer to their Father in Heaven.

At the end of the First Temple period, there is great criticism among the prophets of those who relate to the Temple as an independent entity:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust you not in lying words, saying: The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these. Nay, but if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if you thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbor; if you oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt – then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, forever and ever. Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and offer to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you have not known, and come and stand before Me in this house, whereupon My name is called, and say: We are delivered! that you may do all these abominations? Is this house, whereupon My name is called, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it, says the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 7:3-11)

Yirmeyahu speaks out strongly against the idea sinning – "Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and offer to Baal" – while relying on standing “before Me in this house, whereupon My name is called, and say: We are delivered." It is inconceivable that a person should sin and rely on the Temple service to save him. Similar sentiments were sounded by Yeshayahu.

One might possibly argue that this rebuke applies specifically to the final days of the First Temple. But this is not so. God says this explicitly to King Shelomo when he builds the Temple:

The Lord appeared to Shelomo the second time… But if you shall turn away from following Me, you or your children, and not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, but shall go and serve other gods and worship them; then will I cut off Israel out of the land which I have given them; and this house, which I have hallowed for My name, will I cast out of My sight; and Israel shall be a proverb and a by word among all peoples.

And this house which is so high [shall become desolate], and everyone that passes by it shall be astonished, and shall hiss; and when they shall say: Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house? They shall be answered: Because they forsook the Lord their God, who brought forth their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and they laid hold on other gods, and worshipped them, and served them; therefore has the Lord brought all this evil upon them. (I *Melakhim* 9:2-9)

God explicitly tells Shelomo that the Temple can and will be destroyed if its standing whole is not backed up by observance of the *mitzvot.*

### "and they were every day slain about the altar"

The emphasis on the Temple as an end in and of itself eventually reached the absurdity described by Josephus:

But as soon as [Pompeius](http://www.attalus.org/names/p/pompeius.html" \l "22) had filled up the valley, he erected high towers upon the bank, and brought those engines which they had fetched from [Tyre](http://www.attalus.org/names/t/tyre.html" \l "1) near to the wall, and tried to batter it down; and the slingers of stones beat off those that stood above them and drove them away; but the towers on this side of the city made very great resistance, and were indeed extraordinary both for largeness and magnificence.

Now here it was that, upon the many hardships which the Romans underwent, Pompeius could not but admire not only at the other instances of the Jews' fortitude, but especially that they did not at all intermit their religious services, even when they were encompassed with darts on all sides; for, as if the city were in full peace, their daily sacrifices and purifications, and every branch of their religious worship, was still performed to [God](http://www.attalus.org/names/g/god.html#1) with the utmost exactness. Nor indeed when the Temple was actually taken, **and they were every day slain about the altar,** did they leave off the instances of their Divine worship that were appointed by their law.

And now did many of the priests, even when they saw their enemies assailing them with swords in their hands, without any disturbance, go on with their Divine worship, and were slain while they were offering their drink-offerings, and burning their incense, as preferring the duties about their worship to God before their own preservation. The greatest part of them were slain by their own countrymen, of the adverse faction, and an innumerable multitude threw themselves down precipices; nay, some there were who were so distracted among the insuperable difficulties they were under, that they set fire to the buildings that were near to the wall, and were burnt together with them. Now of the Jews were slain twelve thousand; but of the Romans very few were slain, but a greater number was wounded. (*The Jewish War*, book I, chapter 7)

The priests were standing in the Temple, but instead of saving their lives, they continued with the sacrificial service until they were killed! We have no prophets from this stage of the Second Temple period, but Josephus suffices to demonstrate to what extent this phenomenon was not a one-time event.

This devotion is portrayed many times in the book. We will suffice with what happened when Gaius, Emperor Caligula, ordered his emissary Petronius to place a statue in his image in the Temple:

And when they insisted on their law, and the custom of their country, and how it was not only not permitted them to make either an image of God, or indeed of a man, and to put it in any despicable part of their country, much less in the Temple itself, Petronius replied: And am not I also, said he, bound to keep the law of my own lord? For if I transgress it and spare you, it is but just that I perish, while he that sent me, and not I, will commence a war against you; for I am under command as well as you.

Hereupon the whole multitude cried out that they were ready to suffer for their law. Petronius then quieted them and said to them: Will you then make war against Caesar? The Jews said: We offer sacrifice twice every day for Caesar and for the Roman people; but that if he would place the images among them, he must first sacrifice the whole Jewish nation; and that they were ready to expose themselves, together with their children and wives, to be slain.

At this Petronius was astonished, and pitied them on account of the inexpressible sense of religion the men were under, and that courage of theirs which made them ready to die for it; so they were dismissed without success. (*The Jewish War*, book II, chap. 10)

What lays at the foundation of this phenomenon is a confusion between the purpose and the means. Even the Temple is but a means for the *Shekhina* to rest among the people of Israel. The Temple service is not an end in itself!

### The Difference Between the *Mishkan* and Torah study

How does this apply to us? With the destruction of the Temple, the *mitzva* of Torah study replaced the sacrificial service, beginning with the recitation of texts relating to the sacrifices before *Pesukei De-Zimra*, after which some say: "When one concludes the passage dealing with a burnt-offering, he should say: May it be Your will that this be considered and accepted as if I had sacrificed a burnt-offering" (*Shulchan Arukh*, *Orach Chayim* 1:7).

In the course of the generations, and with the increased suffering of the Jewish People, there arose the light of the generations, the Gaon R. Eliyahu of Vilna and his disciples, who devoted their lives to the strengthening of Torah study. His disciple, R. Chayim of Volozhin, who wrote the book *Nefesh Ha-Chayim*, reestablished Torah study as the dominant and most significant factor in the Jewish experience. The book is divided into four parts, and the fourth part delves deeply into the issue of "Torah for its own sake." In the third chapter, he writes explicitly: "The truth is that 'for its own sake' means 'for the sake of the Torah." Later, in chapter 9, hewrites:

And similarly regarding the allowance to interrupt Torah study to contemplate a bit further **the fear of God,** which *Chazal* have likened to the allowance to mix a kav of humton in a kor of grain. From this we also learn that just as if he mixed into a kor of grain more than a kav of humton, which is not needed to preserve the grain, he is guilty of robbery and fraud, so too regarding the fear of God: **If a person spends on the fear of God more time** than is necessary to preserve the grain of the Torah, he steals the **extra time from the Torah that he should have studied** at that time. For a person is only permitted to contemplate and to acquire the fear of God in accordance with what he reasons with his mind, based on his nature and being, that at this moment it is absolutely necessary for him to deal with acquiring fear and discipline in order to preserve the grain of Torah.

In truth, a person who is fixed in the study of Torah for its own sake, as we have explained that term in chapter 3, need not toil and exert himself with books concerning the fear of God until he fixes His fear in his heart, as does one who is not fixed in Torah study. For the holy Torah by itself will clothe him in the fear of God in a short time and with little effort. For this is the way and special quality of the holy Torah, as they have said: Whoever deals with the Torah for its own sake… and it clothes him in modesty and fear.

What great importance did R. Chayyim of Volozhin attach to Torah study! Even the fear of God is secondary in relation to the importance of this *mitzva.* It is therefore stated in the next chapter:

While engaged in Torah study, a person certainly need not be concerned about cleaving to God, for with study alone he cleaves to God's will and word, He and His will and His word being one.

There is no need to think about cleaving to God while engaged in Torah study, because Torah study is an end in itself.

This intensification of the importance of Torah study continued across the generations. Even after the closing of the Volozhin Yeshiva, which resulted from an internal Jewish controversy, this understanding prevailed in the Yeshiva world.

It seems, however, that this position has recently become radicalized in certain sectors of the public, to the extent that the Torah has become the sole and exclusive goal, which also exacts a heavy price in the attitude toward the Jewish people. We must remember that beyond the enormous importance of learning as an end in itself, it ultimately serves the broader goal of **bringing the people of Israel closer to their Father in Heaven.**

We believe that the Torah is a good and empowering way to bring the Jewish People closer to God, but we must ensure that at the very least Torah study does not harm the rest of Israel. The Torah has replaced the Temple, and therefore we treat it as a clear and understandable goal, but this should be done only to a certain point.

Just as the prophet Yirmeyahu is not willing to accept a situation in which the Temple stands on its own detached from everything else, so too we must not ignore the Jewish People in the struggle over the Torah.

The struggle over the Torah can be fought in the form of prayer rallies, but it is also liable to lead to a desecration of God's name and harm the people of Israel. We cannot accept a situation in which the Torah harms the people of Israel, since the ultimate goal is to bring Israel closer to their Father in Heaven, and not only to further the development of the Torah.

1. \* This *sicha* was delivered at *seuda shelishit* on Shabbat *Parashat Pekudei-Shekalim*, 5774. It was summarized by Binyamin Frankel and edited by Elisha Oron. The *sicha* was not reviewed by HaRav Medan. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of course, the position that "the priests are the agents of God" is also brought by *Tanna’im* who are Pharisees. However, the controversy between the Sadducees and the Pharisees takes the matter to far greater extremes, and we have used this expression in a borrowed sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It may be noted that Shaul lost his power precisely when he erred in connection with these two factors. He thought that the eradication of Amalek has independent significance, which brought him not to wait for Divine intervention reflected in the presence of the prophet. Afterwards, he continued to stumble with regard to the goal of his appointment as king, relating to his kingdom as a goal in itself that was being frustrated by David. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)