

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [313]

“And you shall be guiltless before the Lord and before Israel.”

Insights into Mishna Shekalim Chapter 3:2 & 3



Background to Our Story

Exodus 30:11

11 Then the Lord said to Moses, 12 “When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the Lord a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them. 13 Each one who crosses over to those already counted is to give a half shekel, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. This half shekel is an offering to the Lord. 14 All who cross over, those twenty years old or more, are to give an offering to the Lord. 15 The rich are not to give more than a half shekel and the poor are not to give less when you make the offering to the Lord to atone for your lives. 16 Receive the atonement money from the Israelites and use it for the service of the tent of meeting. It will be a memorial for the Israelites before the Lord, making atonement for your lives.”

Tractate Shekalim

Shekalim is the fourth tractate in the order of Moed in the Mishnah. Its main subject is half-shekel tax that ancient Jews paid every year to make possible the maintenance and proper functioning of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Introduction to Chapter 4 of Tractate Shekalim: The Remains of the Chamber.



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Shekalim. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page

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This chapter deals primarily with the ceremony of the collection of the chamber. In this ceremony, through which the shekels collected were allocated for use in the Temple, a priest entered the chamber in which the shekels were stored and set aside a portion of them by collecting them in baskets. The money in the baskets was used for the needs of the Temple, particularly for the purchase of communal sacrifices. The Gemara discusses some of the

practical issues involved. It details the occasions during the year when this ceremony was performed, the size and number of the baskets, and the specific baskets from which money was subsequently withdrawn. Additionally, there is a discussion of the halakhot that governs the behavior of the priest who actually performs the ceremony and puts the shekels into the baskets. As the ceremony was performed by a solitary individual, precautions had to be taken to ensure that his integrity not come under suspicion.

Rabban Gamliel



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 7.

Nasi of the Sanhedrin and one of the most important *tanna'im* in the period following the destruction of the Second Temple. Rabban Gamliel's father, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel (the Elder), had also been *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin, as well as one of the leaders of the nation during the rebellion against Rome.

Rabban Gamliel was taken to Yavne by Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai after the destruction of the Temple, so that he became known as Rabban Gamliel of Yavne. After Rabban Yoĥanan ben Zakkai's death, Rabban Gamliel presided over the Sanhedrin. Under Rabban Gamliel's leadership, Yavne became an important spiritual center. The greatest of the Sages gathered around him, including Rabbi Eliezer (Rabban Gamliel's brother-in-law), Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya.

Rabban Gamliel sought to create a spiritual center for the Jews that would unite the entire people, a role filled by the Temple until its destruction. Therefore, he strove to enhance the prominence and central authority of the Sanhedrin and its *Nasi*. His strict and vigorous leadership eventually led his colleagues to remove him from his post for a brief period, replacing him with Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya. However, since everyone realized that his motives and actions were for the good of the people and were not based on personal ambition, they soon restored him to his position.

We do not possess many halakhic rulings explicitly in the name of Rabban Gamliel. However, in his time, and under his influence, some of the most important decisions in the history of Jewish spiritual life were made. These included the decision to follow Beit Hillel, the rejection of the halakhic system of Rabbi Eliezer, and the establishment of fixed formulas for prayers. In those halakhic decisions attributed to Rabban Gamliel, we find an uncompromising approach to the *halakha*; in reaching his conclusions, he was faithful to his principles. We know that two of his sons were Sages: Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who served as *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin after him, and Rabbi Hanina ben Gamliel.

The Text: Mishna Shekalim Chapter 3:2 & 3

בְּשֵׁלֶשׁ קָפוֹת שֶׁל שְׁלֹשׁ שָׁלֹשׁ סְאִין תּוֹרְמִין אֶת הַלְשָׁפָה, וְכָתוּב בְּהֵן אֶל'ף בִּי'ת גִּמְל'ל. רַבִּי יִשְׁמַעְאֵל אוֹמֵר, יוֹנִית כְּתוּב בְּהֵן אֶלֶף'א בִּי'ת'א גִּמְל'א. אֵין הַתּוֹרֵם נִכְנָס לֹא בְּפֶרֶגוֹד חֲפוֹת, וְלֹא בְּמִנְעָל, וְלֹא בְּסַנְדָּל, וְלֹא בְּתַפְלִין, וְלֹא בְּקַמִּיעַ, שְׂמָא יַעֲנִי, וְיִאמְרוּ מֵעוֹן הַלְשָׁפָה הָעֲנִי, אוֹ שְׂמָא יַעֲשִׂיר, וְיִאמְרוּ מִתְרוּמַת הַלְשָׁפָה הָעֲשִׂיר. לְפִי שְׂאָדָם צָרִיף לְצֵאת יָדֵי הַבְּרִיּוֹת כְּדָרְף שְׂצָרִיף לְצֵאת יָדֵי הַמְּקוֹם, שְׂנֹאֲמַר (בַּמַּדְבָּר לֵב) וְהֵייתֶם נִקְיִים מִיַּי וּמִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, וְאוֹמֵר (מִשְׁלִי ג) וּמִצָּא חֵן וְשָׁכַל טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי אֱלֹהִים וְאָדָם:.

שֶׁל בֵּית רַבִּן גַּמְלִיאֵל (הִנֵּה) נִכְנָס וְשָׁקְלוּ בֵּין אֲצַבְעוֹתָיו, וְזוֹרְקוּ לְפָנֵי הַתּוֹרֵם, וְהַתּוֹרֵם מְתַפּוֹן וְדוֹחֵקוּ לְקַפָּה. אֵין הַתּוֹרֵם תּוֹרֵם עַד שְׂיִאמַר לְהֵם, אֶתְרַם. וְהֵן אוֹמְרִים לוֹ, תְּרַם, תְּרַם, תְּרַם, שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים

The funds are collected from the Temple treasury chamber with three baskets, each measuring three se'á. On the baskets is written, respectively, alef, beit, gimmel, based on the order in which the baskets are filled, to indicate from which basket coins should be taken to buy sacrifices. The coins were used in the order of their collection.

Rabbi Yishmael says: The letters written on them were in Greek, alfa, beta, gamma.

The one who collects the funds from the chamber must not enter while wearing a cuffed garment [ḥafut], and not with a shoe, and not with a sandal, and not with phylacteries, and not with an amulet, since all of these have places into which money can be inserted.

The concern is that perhaps the one collecting the funds will one day become poor, and people will say that it is because of the sin of stealing the shekels of the chamber that he became poor, as they will suspect that he stole money and hid it in those places. Or perhaps he will become rich and people will say that he became rich from stealing the funds of the chamber, even though he did not actually do so. Even though one should not suspect someone of stealing consecrated shekels, the one collecting the funds from the chamber must nevertheless take these precautions, as a person must appear justified before people just as he must appear justified before the Omnipresent [HaMakom], and it is stated: "And you shall be guiltless before the Lord and before Israel" (Numbers 32:22). From here it may be inferred that it is not enough to be innocent before God; one must also be innocent before the people as well. And the verse states: "So shall you find grace and good understanding in the sight of God and man" (Proverbs 3:4).

The members of the house of Rabban Gamliel desired that their shekels be the ones collected from the chamber and used for the purchase of the communal offerings. Each of them would therefore come to the Temple specifically on the day of the ceremony of the collection of the chamber, enter the chamber with his shekel between his fingers, and toss it in front of the one collecting the money so that he would see it and place it in the basket containing the money to be taken out of the chamber. Understanding what

was happening, the one collecting the money from the chamber would purposely push this shekel into the basket, so that it would later be used to buy communal offerings.

The one collecting the funds from the chamber may not begin to collect the money until he asks the Temple treasurers three times: Shall I collect the funds, and they say to him: Collect them, collect them, collect them, three times.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why were the baskets numbered?

? Why do you think were the baskets numbered with Greek letters according to Rabbi Yishmael?

? Why would the one in charge of collecting the funds from the chamber not be allowed to enter while wearing a cuffed garment, or a shoe, or a sandal, or phylacteries, or an amulet?

Bonus ? Why can we assume that the person in charge of collecting the funds from the chamber was an honest one?

Bonus ? If God knows the one in charge of collecting the funds from the chamber was honest, why were all the above precautions necessary?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why would the members of the house of Rabban Gamliel wait until the ceremony of the collection of the chamber to make their half shekel contributions?

? Why would the one in charge of collecting the funds from the chamber purposely push the shekel of the members of the house of Rabban Gamliel into the first basket?

? Why would the members of the house of Rabban Gamliel enter the chamber with their shekels between their fingers?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why would the one in charge of collecting the funds from the chamber not begin the collection until he asked three times "shall I collect"?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text

! *"And you shall be faultless before the Lord and before Israel" (Numbers 32:22),
"So shall you find grace and good understanding in the sight of God and man"
(Proverbs 3:4) – A good advice then, and a good advice now.*



How do you build trustworthiness for yourself and for the institutions you represent? This seems to be the question behind our short Mishnaic piece. The answer lies at the center of our story: only one strives to be faultless, both before God and Israel, finds grace and good understanding in the sight of God and man.

People in a position of power should lead with the example and be the first ones to be evaluated and audited, since full transparency and accountability of our actions protects those we serve, ourselves, and the institutions we represent.

Notes on the Story (thank you Gail Budiansky)

98765 The people who give shekalim don't have access to the chamber.

House of Rabban Gamliel have access because of their position. Tossed the shekel, so people would see they didn't take anything (Commentary).

The people who withdraw the funds are selected – *the gizbarim* (anonymous people who had the job as the treasures of the Temple)

Precautions taken:

1. Not only that they didn't take any shekels...
2. To make sure no one suspects them...
3. **And the verse states: "So shall you find grace and good understanding in the sight of God and man" (Proverbs 3:4).**
 - a. To be clean in front of God
 - b. To be clean in front of people as well. (your name and reputation intact)
4. The Rabbis have to protect the institution of the gizbarim from collapse if people think (erroneously/maliciously) that they did something wrong. That's why they ask 3 times – fulfilling all the regulations...

We live in a society where many people do not think they need to be accountable because they are honest people...

Double control – for the money and for the people

Control of the entire institution that needs to survive.

Ex. Synagogue

Transparency re: money

1. Protects the synagogue.
2. Protects the people who work in the synagogue (someone is checking what you do).
3. Protects the institution.

The Rabbis need to do the same. The upkeep of the Temple.

1. Begins when the money you give is used in a way that people will trust to give again next year...because it has to happen again next year.
2. Doesn't begin when you buy the animal.

Accountability: money, work, evaluation

1. HaShem knows you are an honest person
2. People need to know this as well.

Moishe Rabbeinu needs to give a report – how he used the money. (Pikudei)

1. He could say he used the gold the way God told him to use it.
2. Moishe gave a report of all the numbers... of how he used – the gold, silver and copper
3. God could vouch for Moishe.

4. If Moshe had to give a report of how he used the funds/the right use of funds... everybody has to do the same...be accountable.

If one of the treasurers lost the money, he had to pay it back from his own funds.

Excess money = a donation. The treasurer doesn't get to keep it.

Anyone who entered the chamber = needed to be above any suspicion – even if honest people