

## Shekalim and Terumah: Two Modalities of Divine Service

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As we move from reading Parshat Shekalim last week to Parashat Terumah, we take note of two fundamentally distinct modes of contribution. Our communal reading of Parshat Shekalim commemorates the annual practice, which commenced on Rosh Chodesh Adar, of contributing precisely one half shekel to the Temple, whose fiscal year began on the first day of the month of Nissan. When it comes to the functioning of the Mikdash, such as the funds used to purchase the daily sacrifices, it was essential that no individual have greater representation than any other individual. As the Torah says, “let not the wealthy one increase [his donation], and let the indigent one not contribute any less.”

In contrast, this week’s *sedra*, Parashat Terumah, begins by mandating that each member of the Jewish people will bring donations to the Mishkan, in accordance with the desire of his or her own heart. The Torah proceeds to list fifteen different categories of possible donations, ranging from precious metals, to stones, to animal skins, to dyed wools and linens. No precise quantity is delineated. No one is assigned a specific donation. On the contrary, as that opening verse indicates, what is of significance is that the donation should be made with a full heart.

It seems to me that these two modalities of giving to the Mishkan represent two different, and complementary, elements of our spiritual lives. On the one hand, there are areas of religious life, such as the half shekel contribution to the functioning of the Temple, in which we are all called upon to perform precisely the same form of service, without deviation or individuation of any sort. These elements of our religious lives emphasize our shared identity as members of the Jewish people, and the responsibilities which we all share.

On the other hand, there are other areas of religious life where the point of emphasis is for each person to uniquely express his or her creative spark, the **צלם אלוקים**, within each and every one of us. As the Sages of the Talmud stated about religious life in general, **רחמנא ליבא בעי**, ‘the Merciful One desires our hearts’, our own personal, inimitable service of Him. The construction of the Mishkan required the full talents of different types of artisans, from architects to weavers to sculptors. For those who may not have been skilled artisans, the construction still required the raw materials with which these artisans would do their work. The construction of the Mishkan was the opportunity, *par excellence*, for each individual to bring his or her talent to bear on the betterment of the community.

This duality, the mode of contribution which is universal, such as the half-shekel, and the mode which is intrinsically personal, such as the method employed in the construction of the Mishkan, are both essential in the formation of a balanced religious persona. If the only type of Divine service available to us were generic areas, in which every person was required to do precisely the same

activity, religious life would be a dry and stifling affair. There would be no opportunity whatsoever for individuals to channel their own dynamic, life force towards their Creator.

Conversely, if the only typology of mitzvot were those in which individuals were empowered to serve in a method of their own choosing, the result would be a spiritual personality marked by arrogance and narcissism, as individuals would become intoxicated with their own creativity. A sense of boundaries would be eviscerated, as would a sense of allegiance to a broader community.

This is far from a theoretical concern; the perverse *ketoret* offering of Nadav and Avihu, which occurred on the very first day of the Mishkan's functioning, is the paradigm of personalized spiritual service run amok. The Torah's description of this offering as both זרה, foreign, or even idolatrous, along with the explication, **אשר לא צוה אותם**, that God did not command, highlights the degree to which these individuals had inverted the fundamental equation involved in the construction of the Mishkan: instead of worshiping God through their own creativity, they were now using God's chosen sacrifice in an act of worship to their own creativity.

Only through synthesizing these two modes of **עבודת ה'**, Divine service, those which permit creative, individual expression, along with those which conform to a rigorous and precise model which is universally required, can the proper spiritual balance be achieved. If, indeed, this duality is introduced in the context of the Mishkan, it certainly is not limited to that context.

As the Torah says, **ושכנתי בתוכם**, ultimately, the Divine presence dwells not in a building, but, providing that we perfect ourselves in accordance with the Torah's vision, within each and every one of us.