

# PARASHAT VAYAKHEL-PEKUDE

*Exodus 35:1–40:38*

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*Vayakhel-Pekude* is one of seven designated Torah portions that, depending upon the number of Sabbaths in a year, is either read as two separate portions or combined to assure the reading of the entire Torah. While this volume will combine them, it will present an interpretation on each of their most important themes.

*Parashat Vayakhel* repeats the commandment to observe the Sabbath, emphasizing that no work is to be done on that day. It continues with Moses asking the Israelites to donate gifts of gold, silver, copper, precious stones, fine linen, wood, oil, or spices to be used for building the *mishkan*, or “sanctuary.” Moses appoints Bezalel and Oholiab, skilled craftsmen, to oversee the construction of the sanctuary, and they report to Moses that the people are giving more gifts than are needed. So Moses tells the people to stop bringing their donations. Under the direction of Bezalel and Oholiab, skilled craftsmen work on the cloths, planks, bars, curtains, screens, lampstands, altars, and priestly garments of the sanctuary.

*Parashat Pekude* describes the records kept of all the work and materials used in the construction of the *mishkan*, as well as of all the donations given by the Israelites. When the *mishkan* is completed, Moses and the Israelites celebrate by anointing it. God’s Presence fills the sanctuary and leads the people throughout their journeys.

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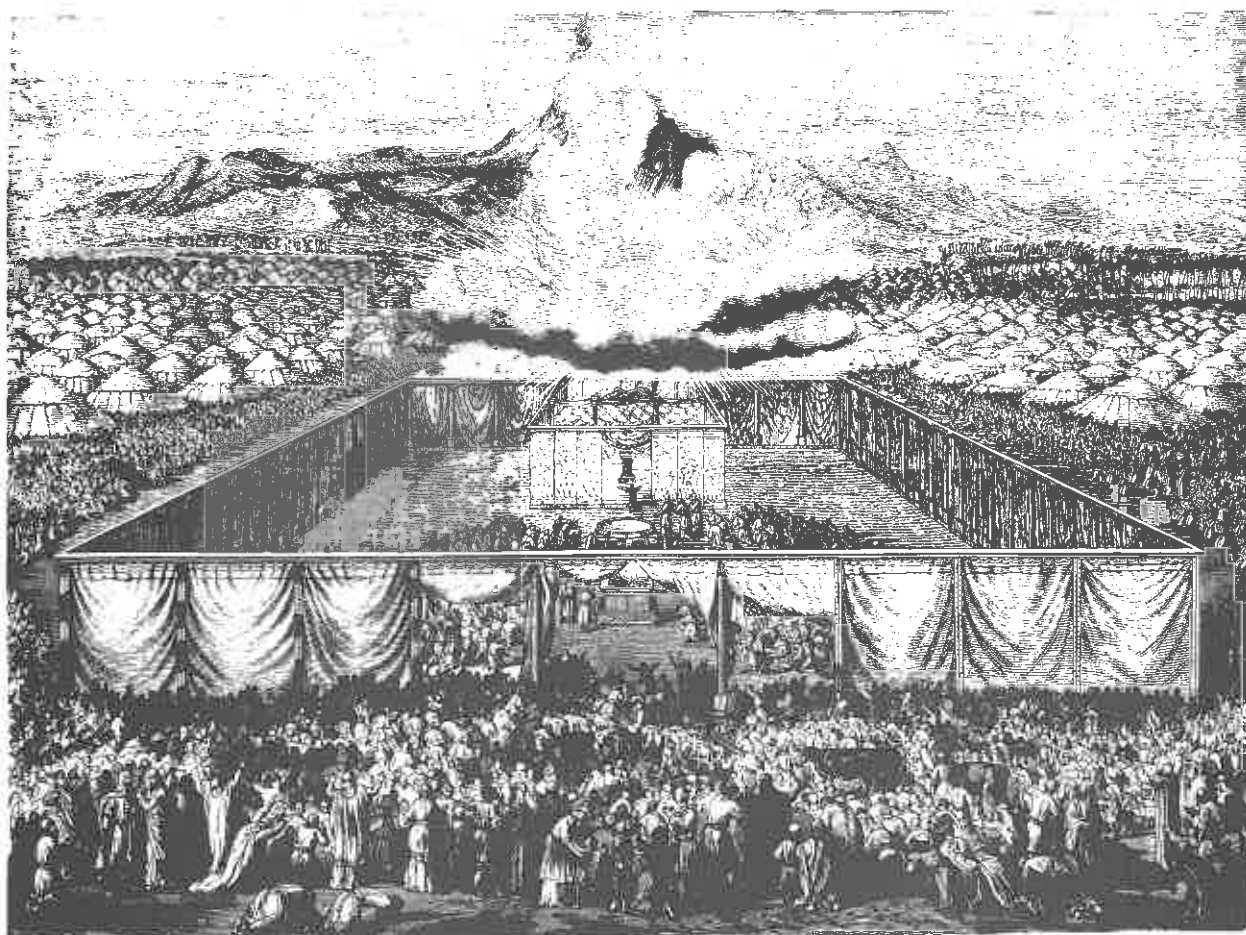
## OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

**M**oses gathers the community together, reminding them that, on the Sabbath, they are to do no work or light any fires. It is to be a day of complete rest.

• 2 •

He also asks them to bring donations of gold, silver, copper, fine yarns, linen, goats’ hair, skins, acacia wood, oil, spices, and precious stones for the construction of the *mishkan*, or “sanctuary.” “Let the Israelites contribute whatever their hearts move them to give,” Moses tells the people.



He invites all skilled artisans to donate their efforts in building and decorating the sanctuary. Both men and women come forward to help. Bezalel and Oholiab are appointed to receive all gifts from the Israelites and to organize the construction. Shortly afterwards, they inform Moses that the people are bringing more than is required. In response, Moses issues a proclamation: “Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!”

• 3 •

The Israelites construct the *mishkan*, working on curtains and decorations, planks, sockets, bars and rings, the screens, ark, table, utensils, lampstand (seven-branched *menorah*), and altars.

Records of each object are kept, noting how much gold, silver, copper, and half-shekels are

offered. Details of the materials and how they are used in making the priestly clothing, including the breastplate of the High Priest, his robe, and *ephod*, are all described.

After the building of the sanctuary is complete, Moses is told to arrange for its dedication on the first day of the first month of the year, Nisan. The ark, table, and *menorah*, along with all the other furniture and special utensils for the sacrifices, are placed within the *mishkan*. Aaron and his sons are anointed as priests. Moses lights the *menorah* and offers special sacrifices to God.

A cloud hovers over the sanctuary, indicating that God now dwells inside. When the cloud lifts, the Israelites follow it as a sign that God is with them throughout their journeys in the wilderness.

So ends the second book of the Torah, Exodus.

## THEMES

*Parashat Vayakhel-Pekude* contains three important themes:

1. The Sabbath as a day of *no work*.
2. The obligation of giving charity, *tzedakah*.
3. Accountability of public officials.

### PEREK ALEF: *The Sabbath Is for Celebration, for Rest, Not Work!*

The commandment to celebrate the Sabbath is mentioned several times in the Torah. We are told that, after laboring for six days to create the heavens and earth, God rests on the seventh day and calls it *Shabbat*, "day of rest." (Genesis 2:1-3) The Ten Commandments include the directive "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy," along with the statement "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work. . . ." (Exodus 20:8-9) Once again, the commandment is repeated at the beginning of the Torah portion *Vayakhel*. (See Exodus 35:1-3.)

Moses calls the people together in order to speak with them about building the sanctuary. He is about to ask them for donations of gold, silver, and copper and for their time and talents in the construction of their holy place. First, however, he reminds them that they are to work for six days and then observe a day "of complete rest." Nothing is to supersede celebrating the Sabbath, neither their work nor even the construction of the sanctuary. Working on the Sabbath carries a harsh penalty. Moses warns them that "whoever does any work on it shall be put to death." (Exodus 35:1-2)

Several centuries after Moses, the prophet Isaiah calls the Sabbath "a delight," and Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba, who taught in the third century, tells his followers that the Sabbath is a day "given only for pleasure." Most students of Jewish tradition agree with the evaluation of Rabbi Leo Baeck that "there is no Judaism without the Sabbath." (Isaiah 58:13; *Pesikta Rabbati* 23)

Yet, if the Sabbath is meant to be such a "delight" and "pleasure" and of such importance to the Jewish people, why does the Torah specifically forbid "work"? Furthermore, how does Jewish tradition define "work"? Might there not

be certain activities that one person calls "work" and another calls "pleasure"?

The Torah repeats the commandment not to work on the Sabbath twelve times and, specifically, forbids making a fire, baking and cooking, gathering wood, moving from one boundary to another, plowing and harvesting, carrying objects, engaging in business, and buying and selling. (Exodus 35:3; 16:23,29; 34:29; Numbers 15:32-36)

Despite the mention of such activities forbidden on the Sabbath, the Torah contains no definition of "work." It is the early rabbis who created such a definition. They identify thirty-nine different categories of work from their study of our Torah portion and its description of the construction of the sanctuary. Since the people were forbidden to work on the Sabbath, it was assumed by the rabbis that every kind of labor associated with building the sanctuary, or supporting the builders, was prohibited.

Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi, editor of the *Mishnah*, provides us with the thirty-nine categories. They include: sowing, plowing, reaping, sheaving, threshing, winnowing, cleansing crops, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing, blanching, carding, dyeing, spinning, weaving, making a minimum of two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying, untying, sewing a minimum of two stitches, ripping out stitches in order to replace them, hunting a gazelle, slaughtering it, flaying it, salting it, curing, scraping its hide, slicing its hide, writing a minimum of two characters, erasing in order to write them, building, wrecking, extinguishing, kindling, hammering, transporting. (*Shabbat* 7:2)

As one can see, Jewish tradition took seriously the prohibition of any labor on the Sabbath. Why? Why set aside the Sabbath as a day of *no work*? Several answers are suggested.

One suggestion is found within an imaginative dialogue, invented by the rabbis, between God

and the Torah. The rabbis say that, after God created the heavens and earth and placed the people of Israel in their land, the Torah came to God with a complaint. "O God," said the Torah, "what will become of me when the Israelites are busy every day of the week with their occupations?" God answered, "I am giving them the Sabbath, and they will devote themselves on that day of rest to studying Torah." (*Exodus Rabbah*)

In other words, for the ancient rabbis, the Sabbath is meant as a time for reviewing and examining important lessons of Torah. Studying each week's Torah portion exposes a person to questions of history, ethical challenges, and to the varying perspectives of great thinkers on some of the most perplexing issues facing human beings. Sabbath Torah study provides food for thought, time-tested insights, and experiences meant to enrich our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. One refrains from work on the Sabbath to benefit from the wisdom of Torah tradition.

Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, however, suggests that the Sabbath is more than a time for Torah study. He calls it "a pause in our brush-work" of life and compares its importance to the critical rest moments of an artist. "An artist," he observes, "cannot be continually wielding his brush. He must stop at times in his painting to freshen his vision of the object, the meaning of which he wishes to express on his canvas."

For Kaplan, the Sabbath is a time for pausing, for taking a fresh look at what we are trying to do with our lives. It is a weekly opportunity to scrutinize our goals, hopes, successes, and failures. Getting away from "work" allows us a chance to assess its worth and the value of what we are doing with our energies and talents. After celebrating the Sabbath, we are ready, Kaplan says, "to take ourselves to our painting with clarified vision and renewed energy." (*The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, Reconstructionist Press, New York, 1962)

*We are not machines*

*The Sabbath . . . prevents us from reducing our life to the level of a machine. The gathered experience of humanity that the break in the*

*routine of work one day in seven will heighten the value of the very work itself is not lightly to be put aside. The Sabbath is one of the glories of our humanity. (Claude G. Montefiore, 1858–1938)*

Not working on the Sabbath, however, is not only connected with gaining a fresh perspective on life. Jewish tradition also celebrates the Sabbath as a "day of liberation." Each Sabbath is welcomed with the singing of the *Kiddush*, the blessing over the wine, which makes reference to the Sabbath as a "remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt."

This connection of the Sabbath with the theme of freedom is also captured in the comments of modern psychologist and biblical commentator Erich Fromm. Fromm claims that "it is no exaggeration to say that the spiritual and moral survival of the Jews during two thousand years of persecution and humiliation would hardly have been possible without the one day in the week when even the poorest and most wretched Jew was transformed into a man of dignity and pride. . . ."

The power of the Sabbath, Fromm argues, "is the expression of the central idea of Judaism: the idea of freedom; the idea of complete harmony between humanity and nature. . . . By not working—that is to say, by not participating in the process of natural and social change—man is free from the chains of time, although only for one day a week." (*You Shall Be as Gods*, pp. 193–197)

For Fromm, the Sabbath celebrates the liberation of human beings from "the chains of time." It frees us from the obligations of meeting a schedule, of producing by a certain hour in the day, of dealing with all the stress and pressures that derive from imposed, and necessary, timetables, agendas, and calendars. The Sabbath liberates us from "slavery" to the clock.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel agrees with Fromm. "We have fallen victims," he comments, "to the work of our hands; it is as if the forces we had conquered have conquered us. . . . The Sabbath is the day on which we learn the act of surpassing civilization. . . . On the Sabbath we live, as it were independent of technical civilization."

Not working on the Sabbath allows a person

to enter what Heschel defines as a "realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord." Resting on the Sabbath, using it as a day for prayer and study and for sharing friendships and the love of family, is a way of ruling time rather than allowing time to rule us. By setting aside the Sabbath, argues Heschel, we seize control of the time of our lives. It becomes ours, and we become liberated. Celebrating the Sabbath is a declaration of our freedom. (*The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1951, pp. 1-10)



Peli

Pinchas Peli extends Heschel's views by pointing out that the purpose of the Sabbath is to remind us of what is really important in human life. For six days we work. We compete. We struggle to shape the world to fit our needs, desires, and expectations. Celebrating the Sabbath as a day of no work reminds us that "the real purpose of life is not to conquer nature but to conquer the self; not to fashion a city out of a forest but to fashion a soul out of a human being; not to build bridges but to build human kindness; not to learn to fly like a bird or swim like a fish but to walk on the earth like a human being; not to erect skyscrapers but to establish mercy and justice; not to manufacture an ingenious technical civilization but . . . to bend our will to God's will."

Yet, not working on the Sabbath, Peli points out, is a discipline. Celebrating the Sabbath is not a matter of occasionally rescuing oneself from exhaustion or of taking "time off" when it is convenient. In order for the Sabbath to make a difference, it must be set aside and welcomed each week. Rest must also be "scheduled" or "created." (*Shabbat Shalom*, B'nai B'rith Books, Washington, D.C., 1988, pp. 59-67)

By uplifting the Sabbath as a special day of no work, Jews reserve time for achieving a fresh perspective on life, for studying the wisdom of Torah, and for celebrating their freedom. Observing the Sabbath each week heightens sensitivity to the

essential questions and meanings of human existence.

### PEREK BET: *The Obligation of Giving Charity, Tzedakah*

This Torah portion contains a remarkable story about giving charity, or *tzedakah*.

Moses gathers the people of Israel together and invites them to contribute to the building of their sanctuary. "Let all of those whose hearts move them bring forward their gifts of gold, silver and copper, precious linens, yarns, and goats' hair, along with spices, valuable skins, and precious stones." Apparently Moses was a persuasive fundraiser because, not long after he had invited the people to give, Bezalel and Oholiab, whom he had appointed to oversee the building of the sanctuary, came to him and told him: "The people are bringing more than is needed."

So Moses stops the building campaign! He tells the people, "You are giving more charity than can be used!" It's an amazing and surprising report.

In the process of interpreting its meaning, many commentators draw a very subtle distinction between support for public institutions and *tzedakah* for the needy. While the first biblical sanctuary seems to have been constructed from the generosity of those whose "hearts moved them," we are also informed that the sanctuary and later the Jerusalem Temple were maintained by a system of tithes, or obligatory taxes of 10 percent of one's property. These tithes were not a matter of freewill giving. Like our contemporary taxes, they were collected by community or government representatives and were distributed by the king or those in authority.

During the medieval period such communal taxes were allocated, not only to support local synagogues, but to maintain all other Jewish communal institutions, including schools, libraries, courts, jails, health facilities, ritual baths or *mikvaot*, shelters for the poor and hungry, cemeteries, and the supervision of *kashrut*, or "standards of food preparation for the community."

Giving charity beyond the "taxes" collected by the community to support the needy and maintain institutions, including synagogues, was always considered a mitzvah, an obligation and respon-

sibility of every Jew. The Torah instructs Jews to leave the corners of their fields for the strangers, the poor, the widows, and the orphans. Later the rabbis emphasize that providing for the poor brings one into the Presence of God and those who use their energies for helping others less fortunate than themselves shall be rewarded with "long life, prosperity, and honor." Indeed, giving aid to the poor was considered so important a commandment that Zutra, a leader of the Babylonian Jewish community at the beginning of the fifth century, teaches that "even a poor person must give to charity!" (*Baba Batra* 10a; *Proverbs* 21:21; *Gittin* 7b)

#### *How much should one give?*

*How much should one give to the poor? Whatever it is that the person might need. How is this to be understood? If he is hungry, he should be fed. If he needs clothes, he should be provided with clothes. If he has no household furniture or utensils, furniture and utensils should be provided. . . . If he needs to be spoon fed, then we must spoon feed him. (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 250:1)*

With the rise of contemporary Jewish communities, where Jews pay taxes to their governments and support such Jewish communal agencies as synagogues, schools, special family and childrens' services, and various Jewish civil rights organizations, all charitable giving by Jews has become voluntary. As with the first sanctuary, Jews give as their "hearts move them." No longer are they "taxed" by a Jewish authority unless they are living in Israel and paying taxes to the government.

Given this new circumstance, what are the obligations of *tzedakah* in Jewish tradition? Is giving charity simply a matter of making a donation when you are "moved by the cause," or does Jewish tradition "demand" *tzedakah* from each Jew?

The consensus of Jewish teachings through the ages makes giving charity to the needy and maintaining all the institutions of Jewish life a mitzvah, a required duty. Rabbi Assi of the third century teaches: "Tzedakah is equal to all the mitzvot, all the commandments!"

Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, one of the most important collections of Jewish law in the Middle Ages, writes: "Each person must contribute to charity according to his or her means." Regarding those who might themselves be considered needy, Karo comments: "Even if one can give only very little, yet he or she should not abstain from giving, for the little is equally worthy to the large contribution of the rich." (*Baba Batra* 8-9; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 34:2)

But how much is considered "a little," and what is a "large contribution"? How much is one obligated to give to charity? Does Jewish tradition suggest standards for giving?

The rabbis warn that, while a person should be generous in giving, one "should not give away all that he or she possesses." Others say that "one should not go beyond a fifth of one's property."

Joseph Karo draws a distinction between "the acceptable and meritorious" ways of fulfilling the mitzvah of charity. It is acceptable to give a tithe, or 10 percent of annual profits over and above household expenses. It is meritorious to give a fifth, or 20 percent of one's annual profits over and above household expenses. He also adds to this standard that at the time of death it is appropriate to give as much as a third of one's estate to charity. (*Arachin* 28a; *Ketubot* 50a; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 34:4)

#### *Considering tzedakah*

*To the person who has the means and refuses the needy, God says, "Bear in mind that fortune is a wheel." (Nachman, Tanchuma, Mishpatim, 8)*



*Zugot*

*The more charity, the more peace. (Hillel, Avot 2:7)*

*Boasting about the charity you give another cancels the goodness of your deed. (Samuel Ha-Nagid, Ben Mishle 11c,8)*

What about deciding which cause is more important? Does Jewish tradition suggest any priorities for the obligation of *tzedakah*?

Feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked are all considered priorities of Jewish charity. So, too, are providing a funeral and burial for the poor, clothing for a needy bride, care for those who are sick, scholarships for poor students, and ransoming those who are held captive.

There is some disagreement about whether funds used to feed the poor may be diminished to pay ransom for a captive or marriage expenses for poor brides. All Jewish authorities are agreed, however, that, when it comes to providing relief for needy men and women, needy women take precedence over men. They also teach that no distinction is to be made between Jews and non-Jews.

Joseph Karo argues that, when it comes to aiding the poor, one must give preference to immediate family members, then to other relatives. After one's relatives, one is obligated to care for the poor servants of one's home, then the poor of one's town, then the needy of another town, then the needy of one's own land, and then beyond. In other words, the needs of the hungry, homeless, and poor who live closest to us have first claim on our charitable giving. (*Sotah* 14a; *Eruvin* 18a; *Shabbat* 127a-b; *Peah* 4:16; *Baba Batra* 8-9; *Tosefta Ketubot* 6,8; *Shulchan Aruch* 34:3,6)

Supporting the needy and maintaining the institutions of the Jewish community have always been considered a *mitzvah*, a religious responsibility for every Jew. The Torah's report about the Israelites' generous response to Moses' request concerning the building of the sanctuary is pointed to with pride. Their standard of giving immediately and unselfishly became a measure for all *tzedakah*. No excuses for *not* giving charity were acceptable. The rabbis taught that "whether we are rich or poor, we must take from what God has given us and share it with others." (*Tze'enuh u-Re'enuh, Vayakhel*)

## PEREK GIMEL: *Accountability of Public Officials*

The Torah portions *Vayakhel-Pekude* repeat descriptions of the sanctuary construction, including long, detailed lists of items donated by the Israelites.



*Abravanel*

Biblical interpreter Don Isaac Abravanel counts five repetitions of building plans and donation lists within the Torah. The matter is "puzzling," says Abravanel. "Why keep on recapitulating such details?"



*Ramban (Nachmanides)*

Commentator Ramban answers Abravanel by claiming that all the repetition "reflects the love with which the sanctuary was viewed by God. Such repetition is designed to underscore its importance in the hearts of the Israelites." On the other hand, modern commentator Umberto Casuto suggests that all the duplication is merely a matter of "style." Ancient Middle Eastern documents, he claims, all contain repetitions of details, especially plans describing sacred places of worship.

Early rabbinic commentators disagree with Casuto. They believe that the details and lists serve a very important function. Moses, they say, carefully records each charitable gift. Afterwards he reviews the contribution and checks his list against others made by Bezalel and Oholiab. Then he rechecks each entry, making sure that none has been overlooked or misplaced. All this repetition, attention to detail and recapitulation of what was given and how it was used, is a matter of "accountability." For Moses, the rabbis observe, accountability by public officials of what they collect and how they use it is a moral responsibility. Public officials must be beyond reproach.

Furthermore, rabbinic commentators teach that

at least two people are to be appointed to look after the finances of a community. They point out that, in the case of Moses, he was acting alone, and for this reason he insisted on having all the accounts he supervised publicly audited by the people. The repetition of the long lists of donations and how they were used, the rabbis maintain, was the actual public examination of Moses' records. (*Exodus Rabbah, Pekude, 1-3*)

Why did Moses insist on such accountability? Was he not the trusted leader of his people? Could anyone have thought that he was misusing public charity?

Apparently that is the impression the rabbis believe Moses wanted to avoid. There are gossips in every community, those who spread false rumors or question the integrity of public servants. Moses realized, say the rabbis, that there were those who pointed at him and said, "Look how well he is eating and drinking. He is living off our money. He is getting rich from our donations." In order to answer such false rumors and gossip, Moses insisted that his accounting books be public and open to all the Israelites. (*Tanchuma, Pekude, 7*)

The rabbis also claim that, when Moses realized the people were giving more than Bezalel and Oholiab required for the building of the sanctuary, he asked God, "What shall be done with the surplus gifts?" God instructed him to build a special chapel inside the sanctuary. When it was complete, Moses reported to the people: "We spent this amount on the sanctuary, and with the additional funds we built the chapel." Because he accounted for *all* the gifts, even the additional ones, Moses placed himself above suspicion. (*Exodus Rabbah, Pekude, 1-3*)

### **Stealing**

*It is better to eat a poor person's meal and be respected as honest than to eat the richest meal and be hated for swindling and cheating others. Stealing is the worst of all sins. (Tze'elah u-Re'elah, Pekude)*

### **Collecting and distributing charity**

*Collecting charity for the poor must be done by at least two people jointly. It is to be distributed*

*by a committee of three to assure just criteria and fairness. (Peah 8:7)*

*If collectors of charity must make change or invest surplus funds, they must do so with others present so that no one may suspect them of deriving personal benefit from their transactions. (Baba Batra 8b)*

Using Moses as an example, the teachers of the Talmud held that public officials should always be above suspicion. Their actions, and those of their families, should prove their honesty and integrity. The rabbis point out that, as models of behavior, those who prepared the special fine bread offering for the Temple never allowed their children to enjoy any of it. In this way no one could accuse them of profiting from their office. The same rule applied to members of the house of Avtinas, who were experts in preparing spices for the Temple incense. They never allowed their daughters to wear perfume, even as brides, because they did not want anyone to suspect that they prospered or took advantage of their service to the Temple. (*Yoma 38*)

For the teachers of Jewish tradition, the appearance of honesty was a critical factor in assuring public trust. They ruled, for instance, that officials of the Temple treasury, when taking an offering, were not permitted to wear clothing with pockets. Also they were not permitted to wear shoes or sandals. Why? "Because, if such officials become rich, others will assume that they have taken money from the Temple treasury for themselves." (*Shekalim 3:2*)

Jewish tradition maintains that public officials must be above suspicion. The community must have full confidence in the integrity and honesty of those chosen to serve. Handling the funds of others demands open and careful scrutiny. Just as Moses makes a detailed public accounting of his collection and expenditure of funds, so all public officials are to be held to such high ethical standards.



## QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Review Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi's categories of work. How, in our present society, would you define "work" that should not be done on the Sabbath? What are the benefits of *no work* on the Sabbath? Why, in Jewish tradition, can Sunday not serve as a substitute for the Sabbath?
2. How does Sabbath observance continue to benefit Jews?
3. The Talmud suggests that we give a minimum of 10 percent of our earnings above household expenses to charity and up to 20 percent if we are able. What would you suggest as appropriate standards for *tzedakah* today? Are some charities more deserving of our support than others?
4. Would you agree that standards of accountability for public officials ought to be higher than the standards of those they serve? Why?