

"When a man explicitly vows to the Lord (to donate) the equivalent worth of a human being..." --- Lev. 27:2

There is no religious duty more meritorious than the ransoming of captives... --- Maimonides, Mishnah Torah, "Laws of Gifts to the Poor," 8:10

Captives may not be ransomed for more than their value, for the sake of **tikkun olam**, the welfare of the community. --- **Mishnah, Gittin 4:6**

What does the **Mishnah** mean by **tikkun olam**? Is it because of the burden which may be imposed upon the community, or because we may stimulate kidnappers to further activity? Come and hear: Levi ben Darga ransomed his daughter for the huge sum of thirteen thousand gold denarii. (Thus, he was not concerned about the second reason given here, and since he did this privately and not from community funds, it was acceptable.) Abaye said: Perhaps he acted against the will of the Sages. (And perhaps he should have been concerned for this.) --- Talmud, Gittin 45a

When a captive is in mortal danger, we are to offer ransom even more than his value. --- **Tosafot**, the "additional" commentators on the Talmud, on **Gittin 58a**.

Captives may not be ransomed for more than their value, for the sake of **tikkun olam**, so that the kidnappers will not be encouraged to kidnap others. But one may ransom himself using all possible means, and one may offer a large ransom for a Torah scholar, or even a sharp student with the potential for greatness. --- Rabbi Yosef Caro, Shulchan Arukh, **Yoreh Deah 252:4**

Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg (13th c. Germany) was imprisoned, and the official demanded a large ransom from the communities. They intended to ransom him, but he forbade them to do so...His view must have been that if he was ransomed, all Torah scholars would be in jeopardy...it is better to lose some of Torah wisdom than to lose Torah in its entirety. --- Rabbi Solomon Luria, 16th c.

This section on valuations follows the **tokhecha**, the series of curses and terrifying threats. After hearing them, one might become disheartened and deem oneself to

be totally worthless. Therefore, the Torah immediately reassures us that every person indeed does have some value! --- Rabbi Jacob Isaac Horowitz, the "Seer" of Lublin, 18th-19th c.)

How do we measure the value of a person? The world at large values rich people more than poor people, economically productive people more than less productive, fertile women more than childless women, clever and attractive people more than others. In God's temple, however, people are evaluated *by the sanctuary weight (b'shekel ha-kodesh)*. God views our worth differently than the world does. --- Rabbi Harold Kushner, **Humash Etz Hayim**, p. 753

A certain person came to Rabbah and said: The lord of my place (i.e. a local official) said to me, "Go kill so-and-so, and if you do not, I will kill you." Rabbah said to him: It is preferable that he should kill you and you should not kill. Who is to say that your blood is redder than that of the other? Perhaps that man's blood is not redder. --- Talmud, **Sanhedrin** 74a

As a rabbi in Florida, I spend too much time at cemeteries. Sometimes I wander around and read the stones: "beloved father, grandfather, husband, brother," "beloved mother, grandmother, wife, sister," "dearly departed son or daughter." Rarely do I see headstones that read, "doctor, lawyer, stockbroker, accountant, teacher, truck driver." Our ultimate value is not in the economic sphere but in the sphere of relationships.

But what of the person who is alone, who has no family, no friends, no loved ones. What worth does such a person have? The book of Psalms has the answer: "Though my father and my mother abandon me, the Lord will take me in." (Ps. 27:10) Even someone who feels alone and rejected among humanity has infinite worth in the eyes of God. --- Rabbi Michael Gold

Why are these laws found here and why is a person's worth based on his age? It seems strange that a 20-year old ignoramus is valued at more than a 120-year old Moshe Rabbenu.

The laws of **eirakhin** (valuation) follow the **tokhachah** (rebuke) because the Israelites were dispirited after hearing the rebuke. Therefore they were told that every Jew has value; do not let your spirits fall.

In addition, these laws (like all the laws of vows) teach the power of speech. Simply because a person says certain words (for example: I pledge my worth to the Temple), he becomes obligated to take certain actions. So, too, the power of speech is powerful enough to enable us to pray and repent and thereby avoid the punishments contained in the **tokhachah**.

And why is a person's worth determined by his age? To remind us of the value of time and that a person's true worth depends on how he uses his time. --- Rabbi Pinchas Menachem Alter, the Gerer Rebbe (d. 1996), **Pnei Menachem**