Parashah Sixty-Eight

Exodus 30:11–38; 2Kings 12:1–16; 2Corinthians 9:6–11

notes by Tim Hegg

The Half-Shekel, the Laver, the Anointing Oil, and the Incense

Our *parashah* combines instructions regarding taking a census of the people by counting a designated contribution given by the men who were 20 years old and up, with the commandments pertaining to the Laver, anointing oil, and incense. Why would God have given Moses the instructions regarding the census in the midst of the instructions regarding the construction of sacred articles of the Tabernacle? At first, the commands regarding the census seem out of place. But they are put here to remind us that while the people are represented by the priests in the whole matter of the divine service, they are not passive. They too are required to participate. Thus, the census was not done by merely counting the people, but by counting a contribution (תְּרוּמָה, *termumah*) given by the adult males as representatives of their respective families. (According to later rabbinic Judaism, 20 was the normal age for a man to be married, cf. *Avot* 5:21).

Moreover, the command regarding the contribution for counting states: "The rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to Adonai to make atonement for yourselves" (v. 15). In offering the contribution of counting, all Israelites were considered equal—all were of equal value and importance in terms of the makeup of the entire nation. Regardless of their lineage, economic status, or assigned duties, all were equally important for the success of the whole. The Sages note that it is important to understand how vital this principle is. The strength of Israel does not reside in the talents or acumen of a few individuals, but in the corporate solidarity of the nation as a whole. Each individual must see himself or herself as an essential part of the whole. This is likewise emphasized in the writings of the Apostles when they liken the people of God to the human body. Paul speaks of the "body of Messiah" as made up of many parts, but each is a necessary, essential part of the whole. Note Eph 4:14–16

> As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Messiah, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Thus, the blessing for Rosh Chodesh includes the phrase "all Israel are companions" (חֲבֵרִים כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל). At the renewal of every month, we are reminded that each of us has an important part to play in the *chavurah* of God's chosen people.

The command to number the people found in our *parashah* seems to be contrary to what the Tanach teaches elsewhere, namely, that God was angry when David took it upon himself to number the people. In 2Sam 24, when David numbers the people, he realizes that he has sinned and seeks God's forgiveness. Yet even though God does spare David's life, He sends a severe punishment upon the nation for the King's actions in which 70,000 were killed. How are we to reckon this apparent contradiction? The answer comes in the *way* the people were counted. While the nations around Israel numbered the people by simply counting them, no doubt in order to ascertain

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the strength of the adult men who would form the standing armies, God had decreed that a census in Israel should be conducted by counting their *contributions.* In other words, the *purpose* for the census in Israel was to demonstrate their corporate solidarity, not to offer a reliance upon their military strength. Israel's strength was to be seen in her willingness to contribute to the on-going maintenance of the Tabernacle or Temple, and the sacred service that was conducted there. This, the worship of God and service to Him, was the real source of their might. Thus, Israel's strength was in God's willingness to be her protection, symbolized in the abiding *Shekinah* and in the priestly service of sacrifice and intercession, something that the contribution for counting (census) emphasized.

The exact value of a half-shekel is disputed. Modern scholars usually consider a shekel to be 8.26 grams. Our text indicates that a shekel is equal to 20 *gerahs,* but the exact weight of a *gerah* is also disputed. The rabbinic literature puts the weight of 1 *gerah* at 1.14 grams. This would make the shekel 22.8 grams. A troy ounce (used to calculate the value of silver in our day) is equal to 31.1 grams, making the shekel .73 troy ounces. Given these calculation, and the average value of silver as $21.24 per troy ounce (as of Feb., 2014), the value of a shekel of silver would be approximately $15.50, and a half-shekel $7.75.

Rashi and Rambam calculate the shekel at 13.33 grams, however, making it equivalent to .43 troy ounces. Using the same average value of silver, this would make the half-shekel equal to $4.57. In the Second Temple period, the shekel was increased to 24 *gerahs.* If we accept that the *gerah* was 1.14 grams, this would put the shekel at .77 troy ounces, with a value of $16.35, and a half-shekel equal to $8.18. Thus, even though we cannot be sure of the precise weight of a shekel of silver, it is clear that the half-shekel would have been well within the means of everyone.

But this emphasizes another principle: even though the required payment for each family representative was relatively small, when combined together with the contribution from every family, it was a sizeable amount! The Sages emphasize this by noting that a *half*-shekel was the requirement, meaning that each person's contribution depended upon another's contribution to form the whole shekel. In seeking to accomplish the work God has given us, each of us needs one another to make up what we lack.

Another issue confronts us in this *parashah.* The giving of the half-shekel is said to effect atonement: "each one of them shall give a ransom for himself to Adonai" (v. 12); "when you give the contribution to Adonai to make atonement for yourselves" (v. 15); "You shall take the atonement money from the sons of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the LORD, to make atonement for yourselves" (v. 16). Does it not appear that the giving of a half-shekel effected atonement? But how is this possible? Was atonement effected by paying the yearly contribution?

The answer lies in understanding v. 16. There it becomes clear that the giving of the half-shekel was for the maintenance and support of the Tabernacle and the service that was carried on there by the priests on behalf of the people. Furthermore, the silver that was given by the people is said to function as a "memorial" (זִכָּרוֹן, *zikaron*) before Adonai. The Sages suggest that much of the silver was used to form the silver sockets in which the columns and boards of the Tabernacle and the surrounding fence of the courtyard were placed. So in giving the half-shekel, the people enabled the construction and maintenance of the Tabernacle where the service of atonement was carried on. In this way, they enabled the atoning work of sacrifice and intercession by the priests.

Furthermore, we should understand that atonement, as it is portrayed in the Tabernacle and

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Temple, had both a temporal as well as an eternal dimension. In terms of temporal atonement, the obedience of the people, and the service of the priests, was an on-going demonstration of their trust in God's promise to protect and keep them. Or to put it another way, as they obeyed God and walked in His statutes, they were "cleansed" (the basic meaning of "atonement") and thus received divine protection from their enemies. God promised His blessing for their obedience, and their willingness to build and maintain the Tabernacle as the central place of worship was an act of obedience to God. It was rewarded with God's giving them the temporal blessings He had promised. Through the sacrificial requirements, the people were able to be cleansed of ritual impurities, giving them access to the Tabernacle as the designated place of worship, which in turn strengthened their faith in God and their relationship with Him, both individual and corporate. In being obedient to His commands, they received the blessings He had promised in the covenant, one of which is His promise to save them from their enemies.

We often forget that even the word "saved" or "salvation" likewise carries a temporal sense at times. For instance, in James 5:15 we read that the prayer offered in faith will "restore" the one who is sick, but actually the word is "save" (σώζω, *sozo*) the sick. This does not mean salvation in an eternal sense, but in a temporal way. When God brings healing, it is part of what He does in terms of "saving" the one who is sick. In the same way, when Israel experiences "atonement," we should not automatically think that it involves eternal salvation, that is, the forgiveness of sins in a final and eternal dimension.

Yet the method by which God does effect eternal and lasting atonement, through the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of everlasting righteousness, was first demonstrated fully in the service of the Tabernacle and the Temple. Thus, when the Israelites brought the half-shekel as a contribution for counting, they were contributing to the Tabernacle as the very revelation by which eternal atonement would be made, that is, through the complete and final sacrifice of Yeshua to which the sacrificial service pointed.

Our *parashah* goes on to detail the construction and purpose of the Laver (כִּיּוֹר, *kiyyor*). It was to be made of bronze, with a base of bronze upon which it would sit. It is specifically stated to be for washing the hands and feet of the priests before they entered into their daily duties. It was not to make them ritually clean, since they could not enter into the courtyard until they were clean. Rather, it was to be a constant reminder that in their duties, they were to be set apart or sanctified from their common, daily work. The Targum translates "to wash" (לִרְחָצָה, *lirachtzah*) as "to sanctify" (לְקִדּוּשׁ, *l'qidush*) for this very reason. That the priests were to wash hands and feet emphasizes this aspect of being set apart, for the hands and feet are symbolic of one's common activities—one's daily walk and actions. Thus, in their washing, the priests were reminded that they were entering into a service that was set apart from their other, common activities. Moreover, since the laver was situated between the altar of sacrifice and the Mishkan proper, it was to symbolize that their priestly duties, both outside of the Tabernacle proper as well as within, were to be sanctified as holy to Adonai.

It is clear that the sanctification of the priests to do their duties was of utmost significance to Adonai. He prescribes the death penalty for those who would neglect this important ritual. Here, once again, we see the emphasis put upon the unique aspects of worship and service that God had prescribed for Israel. There was not to be any admixture of pagan practices within the sacrificial ceremonies of the Tabernacle. As the priests washed their hands and feet, they were to be reminded that God had given specific details regarding their service and the manner in which they were to

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offer the sacrifices and represent the people of Israel before the Holy One. They were not free to be creative, nor to incorporate other rituals and ceremonies from the pagan nations. In their being set apart to HaShem, they were likewise set apart to His way of worship.

Continuing with the emphasise upon the sanctification of the Mishkan and Aaron and his sons, our *parashah* details the manner in which the anointing oil was to be made. The Sages teach that this same oil was used to anoint the Kings during the days of the 1st Temple. The text opens with "And now you take for yourself" (וְאַתָּה קַח–לְךָ) which seems to indicate that this was to be done by Moses himself, or at least personally supervised by Moses. The anointing of the priests was therefore connected directly to Moses who alone entered the cloud on Mt. Sinai. In this way, the anointing was to be understood as coming directly from God Himself. In other words, it was to be understood that the sanctification of the Tabernacle and the priests came directly from God through Moses. God was the One who had set apart the Tabernacle and its ministry from that which was common—it gained its holiness by the very anointing of God. As the priests were anointed, it was to remind them of at least two aspects: 1) their service was primarily directed to God, Who is Himself holy, and 2) they were to serve with supreme devotion to Him. They were not to accomplish their duties for their own benefit.

All of the items of the Tabernacle that were anointed, as well as Aaron and his sons, were considered "most holy" (קֹדֶשׁ קָדָשִׁים) because of the anointing. They attained the same level of sanctity that the inner sanctuary had. Verse 29 seems to indicate that anything that touched the anointed vessels would likewise become holy: "You shall also consecrate them, that they may be most holy; whatever touches them shall be holy." However, the last phrase, כָּל–הַנֹּגֵעַ בָּהֶם יִקְדָּשׁ, "whatever touches them will be holy" could just as well be understood as "whatever touches them *must* be holy." In other words, the command is that only substances that were ceremonially clean could be put into the vessels or come in contact with the items that had been anointed. Like the *cohen gadol,* who alone could enter the Most Holy Place, only after he himself was fully consecrated, so only those things that were deemed ritually clean could come in contact with the anointed vessels. In this way, the sanctity of the vessels insured the sanctity of all other substances used in connection with them. What is emphasized by this is that one cannot approach God in service or worship in an unholy state. God is not Himself unclean, nor does He commune with that which is unclean. Without holiness (sanctification), "no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). This likewise emphasizes that only as we are clothed with the righteousness of the Messiah, are we able to draw near to God.

The fact that the anointing oil signified those who were set apart by God Himself to engage in priestly intercession also made it necessary that the anointing oil not be made into a common commodity. Therefore, it is strictly prohibited for anyone to duplicate this oil or to apply it to an "alien" (זָר, *zar*). The word *zar* most often denotes a foreigner who was an idolater. Once again, God reveals Himself as the One who divides between the holy and the profane. The holiness of God cannot be mixed together with the profane.

Our *parashah* ends with the details regarding the manufacture of the pure and holy incense, burnt upon the golden altar of incense which stood before the veil, just in front of the ark that contained the stone tablets of the Testimony or the covenant. Once again, the precise ingredients, and the amounts for each, is detailed, and it is strictly prohibited for anyone to duplicate this incense and use it in a common way. Thus, as sanctified for the specific use in the Tabernacle, it too is designated "most holy" (קֹדֶשׁ קָדָשִׁים, *kodesh kodeshim*). As we noted in the last *parashah,* the incense was symbolic of the priestly intercession on behalf of the people, and particularly of the ultimate

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work of intercession accomplished for His people by Messiah, Yeshua Himself. Like the anointing oil that sanctified the Tabernacle and Aaronic priesthood to their unique ministry on behalf of Israel, so the incense symbolized the unique ability of their intercession to effect acceptance before the Holy One of Israel. This comes from the idea of a "soothing aroma" (רֵיחַ נִחֹחַ) used often of the sacrifices. The incense, in a similar metaphor, filled the sacred space of the Tabernacle or Temple with an aroma bespeaking the very presence of the Almighty. Its fragrance reminded all who came in as well as all who came near, that God was pleased to dwell among His people.

Once again we see that the goal of these carefully defined regulations is the revelation of the Messiah. For He is Immanuel, "God with us," and "He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power" (Heb 1:3).

The *haftarah* that accompanies our Torah *parashah* has clear parallels. First, the fact that under the reign of Jehoash (יְהוֹאָשׁ), though he did right in the sight of Adonai, he failed to remove the high places (הַבָּמוֹת). As a result, the people were still sacrificing and burning incense at these pagan shrines. The subtlety of syncretism had remained, and the clear teaching of our Torah *parashah* against such syncretism is therefore highlighted.

Second, however, Jehoash was zealous for the repair of the Temple. As a result, he made a wooden chest in which the contributions for the Temple were to be placed. Apparently, the priests were taking the contribution money and keeping it for themselves. Jehoash put a stop to that, and the gathered funds were used to hire workers in wood and stone to make repairs to the Temple. Only the funds gathered in respect to the trespass offerings and the sin-offerings were given to the priests. But what were these? In the trespass offering, a fifth of the value (determined by the priests) was to be added to the offering (Lev 5:16, cf. Num 5:9), and apparently this was kept by the priest for his maintenance. No such law pertains to the sin offering, however. Most likely, it became a common thing for someone who was bringing a sin offering to make a voluntary contribution to the priest who offered the sacrifice, and it was this money that is spoken of in our *haftarah* passage.

Our Apostolic portion emphasizes the correct attitude or heart condition for anyone who gives to the work of the kingdom of God. Gratefulness to God was to be the over arching perspective whenever an offering was given, even those that were mandatory (as the half-shekel contribution in our Torah *parashah*). Obedience to HaShem is done out of a heart of thanksgiving for all that He has done for us. But Paul also applies another Torah principle: that of reaping and sowing. The one who sows sparingly, reaps sparingly, but the one who sows generously, also reaps generously. The point he is making is quite simple: since all we have comes from God ("He supplies seed to the sower and bread for food"), we need not fear when we are urged to contribute to the work He intends to accomplish. When we willingly give of our own substance, the One Who has supplied what we have in the first place will also make the seed we sow abound. This does not mean, as so many teach in our day, that giving to the work of the Lord is a kind of monetary investment: the more you give, the more you'll get back. Our motivation in giving is one of gratefulness to HaShem and a desire to see His work flourish resulting in the expansion of His kingdom.

Thus, as we give contributions to the work of the Lord, we may trust HaShem to continue to meet our needs, and we may also take much joy in knowing that as the seed is sown, it will bring forth a lasting harvest.

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