



Being Accountable

Dena Weiss – weiss@hadar.org

Parashat Pekudei

Parashat Pekudei opens with a list of exact amounts of material used for the *mishkan*, perhaps more appropriate for a spreadsheet than a narrative. While at first it seems that this list is exhaustive, in fact, the only items for which a precise amount is recorded are the precious metals: gold, silver, and copper.¹ Although this gold, silver, and copper were used as construction materials in the *mishkan*, generally precious metals are used on a smaller scale for adornments and jewelry, and, of course, coins and currency. The treatment of these metals can stand in for how we relate to money and its collection. The strict accounting of the money that was used to build the *mishkan* highlights an important lesson in what it means to be transparent and accountable and to always hold ourselves to the highest standard.

Perhaps the most important role that money plays in an ethically-based society is that it is used for charitable contributions and donations. Although the origins of the Jewish laws of *tzedakah* are primarily agricultural, leaving the edge of one's field for the poor,² a special tithe for the needy every third year,³ the laws of charitable giving developed throughout the mishnaic and post-mishnaic period to include a complex network of charitable institutions like soup kitchens, which needed honest and competent administrators to run them. These trustees are called *gabba'im*⁴ and the 14th century code of R. Ya'akov ben Asher, the Arba'ah Turim, provides the details for how these trustees were to treat the money they collected:

¹ Shemot 38:21-31. Although the fabrics, skins, and stones were also expensive and critical to the construction of the tent and the clothing of the *kohanim* who served within its curtained walls, the text did not deem it necessary to detail their exact amount.

² *Pe'ah*.

³ *Ma'aser ani*.

⁴ Lit. collectors.



טור⁵ יורה דעה סימן רנז

גבאי צדקה אין רשאים לפרוש זה מזה לגבות - אלא בכדי שיראה זה את זה. מצא מעות בשוק או שפרעו לו חובו בשוק לא יתנם לתוך כיס משום חשד אלא יתנם לכיס של צדקה - וכשיבא לביתו יחזור ויטלם. אין מונין מעות של צדקה ב' ב' שלא יחשדוהו שנוטל אחד מכל מנין אלא מונין אותו אחד אחד. לא היו להם עניים לחלק וצריכים להחליף הפרוטות או למוכרן אין מוכרים ואין מחליפין לעצמן אלא לאחרים. וכן אם צריכים למכור מה שגבו מהתמחוי ימכרו לאחרים משום חשד. גבאי צדקה הכשרים אין מדקדקין אחריהם - ומ"מ כדי שיהיו נקיים מהשם ומישראל טוב להם שיתן חשבון.

Tur, Yoreh De'ah 257

Tzedakah collectors, *gabba'im*, may not separate from one another to collect independently, unless they can be seen by one another. If [a collector] finds money in the market⁶ or if someone pays back a personal debt in the market, he should not put [the money] in his pocket since this will look suspicious. Instead, he should put them in the *tzedakah* pouch and then take [the money that is his] out of it when he gets home. They do not count the coins of *tzedakah* two by two, so that they will not be suspected of taking one of every count and instead they count them one by one. If they did not have any poor people to distribute to and they need to change the coins or sell them, they can't sell them to themselves or change them for themselves, but they may do so for others. Similarly, if they need to sell [perishable food] that they collected from the food collection they should sell it to others out of concern for suspicion. We do not closely supervise trustworthy collectors, but nevertheless they should provide an accounting so that they will be clean before God and Israel.⁷

The original source for the practice of collecting *tzedakah* with the oversight of a team of two or three collectors, not pocketing money found in the market, and the prohibition on counting coins in pairs, comes from a Tannaitic teaching in the Talmud Bavli, a *baraita*, on Bava Batra 8b. The strictures around making change with the *tzedakah* coins and the *gabba'im* buying back the money or food themselves comes from a different Tannaitic teaching on Pesachim 13a. However, the notion of giving a strict accounting of how much they have collected, despite being honest and scrupulous people is not found in the earlier sources. R. Yoel Sirkis⁸ known as the Ba"ḥ after his commentary to the Tur, notes this lack of a clear pedigree for this idea and, interestingly, he sources the recommendation in Moshe's behavior in our *parashah*:

⁵ The Arba'ah Turim is often called "the Tur."

⁶ Technically, money that has no distinguishing marks is exempt from the laws of returning lost objects, so this collector should be able to pocket any money that he happens to find lying on the ground.

⁷ Cf BeMidbar 32:22.

⁸ Author of the Bayit Hadash (Ba"ḥ) commentary to the Tur, 1561-1640.

בית חדש על יורה דעה סימן רנז

(א) ... ומ"ש ומכל מקום... כדי שיהיו נקיים מהשם וכו'. זה לא נמצא בפוסקים ואולי למדו ממשה רבינו ע"ה שנתן חשבון בנדבות המשכן כי מי כמוהו נאמן ביתו⁹ ונתן חשבון כדי שיהא נקי מהשם ומישראל.

Bayit Hadash, Yoreh De'ah 257

And that which [the Tur] wrote, "but nevertheless they should provide an accounting so that they will be clean before God etc." is not [explicitly] found in the verses,¹⁰ but perhaps he learned it from Moshe Rabbeinu who gave an accounting of all of the contributions to the *mishkan*. For who is like Moshe, the trusted one of His house?! And nevertheless Moshe gave an accounting in order to be clean before God and Israel.

According to the Ba"r^h, when Moshe presented an exact tally of all of the precious metal and money in the *mishkan*, he was setting a positive example to all *tzedakah* collectors to come. No one was more worthy of being given autonomy, no one is as trustworthy and trusted by God than Moshe, but nevertheless Moshe was scrupulous. Moshe made sure that not an ounce of copper or gold came in to the treasury without being noted and marked down correctly so that an exact accounting could be presented to the people and he would be above suspicion.

The Ba"r^h's insight about Moshe is true of all *tzedakah* professionals or other people in similar positions of holy responsibility. The *gabba'im* are people who have chosen to dedicate their time and efforts to feeding and clothing the poor. The *gabba'im* are people who have gained the trust of the community and have been entrusted with the community's hard-earned money. These *gabba'im* have been selected and appointed. And though they may be if not on Moshe's level, then close to it, they must operate completely above board. They can never rest on their laurels and think of themselves as above suspicion.

The lesson to be drawn from this care is not only about treating the community and their money with respect, it is also fundamentally about what it means to develop and maintain a good reputation and it shows us that having a good reputation can be dangerous. Therefore we need to be careful not to exploit our good name. This is the lesson that R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz,¹¹ author of the Keli Yakar, derives from a different set of monetary laws. In Devarim, we are instructed not to have false weights and measures:

⁹ Cf. BeMidbar 12:7.

¹⁰ Although we noted earlier that the sources for these ideas are Tannaitic in nature, the Ba"r^h is using this term loosely.

¹¹ 1550-1619, Prague.

דברים כה:יג-טז

לא יהיה לך בכיסך אֶבֶן ואֶבֶן גדולה וקטנה: לא יהיה לך בביתך איפה ואיפה גדולה וקטנה: אֶבֶן שלמה וצֶדֶק יהיה לך איפה שלמה וצֶדֶק יהיה לך למען יֵאָרִיכוּ יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ: כִּי תִעָבֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּל עֹשֶׂה אֵלֶּה כָּל עֹשֶׂה עָוֹל:

Devarim 25:13-16

You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, large and small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, large and small. You shall have only a full and honest weight; you shall have only a full and honest measure, so that your days may be long in the land that HaShem your God is giving you. For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are abhorrent to HaShem your God.¹²

The Keli Yakar notices that these verses appear redundant. Once verse 15 tells us to have only honest weights and measures, then what purpose is there to verses 13 and 14 which tell you not to have two weights of different and therefore misleading sizes? He answers that it is to teach you that when you have two weights, one which is honest and one which is misleading, even the honest weight is problematic because it becomes itself a tool for deception:

כלי יקר דברים כה:יג

ביאור הדבר הוא כדרך שאמר שלמה, **אבן ואבן איפה ואיפה תועבת ה' גם שניהם** (משלי כ:י) אם שניהם שקרים מהו גם שניהם מהיכא תיתי לחלק ביניהם, ומהו לשון גם, אלא ודאי שמדבר באחד שקרי ואחד אמיתי והורה שגם הישר נקרא תועבה לפי שהאבן הישרה גורמת לו לשקול בשקרית, כי אם לא היה לו האבן הישרה היה מתירא לשקול לכל העולם בקטנה השקרית כי כל הקונים בבואם לביתם ימצאו משקלם חסר ותבא לבית דין עליו צעקת רבים לומר שלכלנו שקל בקטנה, מאי אית לך למימר שמא בביתכם נעשה חסר וכי לכולם נחסר בביתם דבר זה אינו שכיח. מה הוא עושה הולך? ושוקל לקצתם בקטנה החסירה ולקצתם בגדולה הישרה והיה אם יבואו לב"ד הבריות אשר להם שקל חסר, הוא יטעון בב"ד הרי מכרתי להרבה בריות וישאל אותם ששקל בישרה ויעידו שאינן חסרין כלום ויכחישו הטוענים ששקל חסר, וממילא יתרץ הדיין לומר שאצלכם נעשה חסר דאל"כ מה גבר מגוברין (סנהדרין סה:) ולמה אלו אינן חסרין כלום, וכשישלח הב"ד אחר משקלו ישלח הישרה ונמצא שאלמלא הישרה לא היה יכול למכור לכולם בקטנה והרי לכך הוא מחזיק הישרה כדי לאמת שקר שלו לכך גם הישרה תועבה.

Keli Yakar Devarim 25:13

The explanation of this matter is along the lines of what Shlomo¹³ said in Sefer Mishlei, **a weight and a weight, a measure and a measure are alike both detested by HaShem** (20:1). If they are both false, then why does the verse say “they are alike both detested” from where would it come to distinguish between them? What, then, is the function of the term “alike?” Rather it must be that the verse is speaking about one which is false and one which is true. And it indicates that even the honest one is called detested because it is the honest weight which causes him to weigh with the false one. For if he did not have the

¹² Trans. NRSV emended.

¹³ According to Rabbinic tradition, Shlomo HaMelekh, King Solomon, was the author of Mishlei, Kohelet, and Shir HaShirim.

honest weight he would be afraid to weigh for everyone with the small, false one—for when all of the customers get home they will find that they got a smaller amount and the cry of the many against him will come to the court saying, ‘He weighed out less for all of us!’ What could he say? Maybe it diminished in *your* homes?! Could it be that it will diminish in *all* of their homes? That is not realistic. So what does he do? He goes and he weighs out for some of them using the small, diminished weight and for some of them with the large, honest weight. And to those who were weighed out a diminished amount, he can claim in court, “I have sold to many people.” And he will ask those to whom he weighed out honestly and they will testify that they are not lacking anything and they will contradict those who claim that he weighed out less, and thereby the judge will resolve to say that it was diminished by you, the customers, for if this were not the case why would you differ from these others who are not lacking anything? And when the court sends for his measure, he will send the honest one. And it turns out that were it not for this honest weight he would not be able to sell to all of them with the diminished one. And behold this is why he holds on to the honest one—in order to validate his falsehood, therefore even the honest one is detested...

The Keli Yakar understands that the honest weight, the good reputation, can be used for nefarious means. Building up a good reputation as an honest business-person can be a critical component of defrauding one’s customers. Therefore even all of the honest transactions done with the accurate weights become tainted since they are used to build consumer confidence and cover for the sins of the dishonest person. This use of honesty to provide a cover for dishonesty, goodness as a mask for evil, is reflected elsewhere in the Keli Yakar’s commentary where he notices an oddity in the language of the laws of non-kosher animals:

כלי יקר ויקרא יא:ד
את הגמל כי מעלה גרה הוא. הוה ליה לומר **כי פרסה איננו מפריס** שזה עיקר טעם אל הטומאה... ולמה התחיל בכולם בסימן טהרה שלהם. וביאור ענין זה שסימן טהרה שבכולם מוסיף טומאה על טומאתן... שפושט את טלפיו להראות כאילו כשר ותוכו מלא תוך ומרמה וזה מורה על כל מי שאין תוכו כברו כמדת הצבועים המראים את עצמם כשרים והמה בלי ספק גרועים מן הרשע הגמור שתוכו וברו שוין לרעה.

Keli Yakar VaYikra 11:4

The camel because it chews its cud. It should have said, **because it doesn’t have split hooves** first because that is the reason for the impurity! Why does it begin with all of them by mentioning their sign of purity first? And the explanation of this idea is that the sign of purity in each of them adds impurity onto their impurity... he extends his hooves to show that he is basically kosher, but his insides are full of bile and deception. And this applies to anyone whose inside doesn’t match their outside like the character of the traitors who



show themselves off as kosher. And they are undoubtedly worse than the totally evil person whose inside and outside are equally bad.

The example of Moshe provides a strong lesson to people who are in power: they must always be careful to behave above board. A good reputation does not make one above suspicion and must always be carefully maintained in order to be deserved. The Keli Yakar's examples of the dishonest business person or the general traitor show that this concern applies to all of us, even people who are not considered to be leaders. And perhaps this lesson is even more important for those who aren't in acknowledged positions of power, since no one is monitoring them and the broader world is not having difficult conversations about the way that people who aren't in powerful positions can still abuse their good reputations.

Although we may not be consciously aware of it, we often use our good name as a type of currency that allows us to make allowances for ourselves or invites people to make allowances for us. Sometimes we do this explicitly, like when we get out of a speeding ticket on the basis of past safe driving, but more often we do this implicitly in softer forms of moral licensing. We allow ourselves to think of ourselves as good or honest people and thereby downplay the significance of any not-so-good or not-so-honest practices that we have. We are not wrong in thinking of ourselves as fundamentally upright and kosher and we should be proud of being good people. The danger is in allowing that deserved reputation to blind us from seeing the ways in which we are not perfect and the ways we could improve. We *are* good, but we could always be better.

Wishing you a Shabbat of goodness through and through.

