



Half-Measures

R. David Kasher – kasher@hadar.org

Parashat VaYakhel 5784

Is there meaning in a measurement? Two great masters of midrashically-styled Torah commentary—both writing in 14th century Spain—will offer two very different interpretations of a particular form of measurement that appears frequently in this week's Torah reading: the half.

In Parashat VaYakhel, as we witness Bezalel begin to build from the blueprint that Moshe received, we read through all of the measurements of the *mishkan* (tabernacle) for the second time. Curtain lengths, plank lengths; how many sockets, how many hooks. One's eyes could be forgiven for starting to glaze over as all the details pass by.

But when we come to the Ark, a unique feature of its dimensions may catch our attention:

שמות לז:א

וַיַּעַשׂ בְּצִלְאֵל אֶת הָאָרֶן עֲצֵי שִׁטִּים אֲמָתַיִם וְחֹצֵי אַרְכּוֹ וְאַמָּה וְחֹצֵי רָחְבוֹ וְאַמָּה וְחֹצֵי קִמְתּוֹ.

Exodus 37:1

Bezalel made the Ark out of acacia wood, two **and a half** cubits long, a cubit **and a half** wide, and a cubit **and a half** tall.



The measurements of the Ark (first given in Exodus 25) **all** contain half-units: 2.5 x 1.5 x 1.5 *amot*. That is not so for any other vessel in the *mishkan*, nor any other cubit-measured item in the Torah.¹ If the measurements of the central and holiest object in the *mishkan* are distinct from all the others in this way, there must be some significance to the deviation.

The Ba'al ha-Turim² finds that significance in the fractured nature of the half-unit, and describes it with an almost tragic language:

בעל הטורים שמות לז:א

כל מדותיו היו שבורות בחצאי אמות ללמד שכל מי שלומד תורה צריך לשבר ולהשפיל עצמו.

Ba'al ha-Turim on Exodus 37:1

All of [the Ark's] measurements were **broken** into half-cubits to teach that one who learns Torah must **break** and lower themselves.

The half-measurements of the Ark, he says, are “broken (*shevurot*)”—that is, broken-off from a full measure—in order to send a message to all who approach the Torah within the Ark that we, too, must be “halved” in order to acquire it; our egos must be diminished. The “lowered” measurement before us reminds us to humble ourselves.

More than that, though—and he repeats this language for emphasis—we must **break** ourselves. We are imperfect containers for Torah, and so we have to break ourselves open—to

¹ The first cubit-measured object being Noah's ark (Genesis 6:15-16), and the last being Og's bed (Deuteronomy 3:11).

² R. Ya'akov ben Asher, 1270-1340. Referred to as the Ba'al ha-Turim (“the Master of the Columns”), because of his magnum opus, the great halakhic compendium, *Arba'ah Turim* (“the Four Columns”). Though his commentary (like Rashi's) is often made up of clipped citations from earlier midrashic sources, I believe the language of “brokenness” to describe the measurements of the *aron* is his own; I could not find an earlier source—even though Rabbeinu Behaye to Exodus 25:10 brings this same idea in the name of “our Rabbis of blessed memory,” which normally indicates a classical *midrash*.



smash our routines, assumptions, distractions—to essentially restructure our insides in order to make space for Torah.

The Ark’s half-measurements, in this rendering, become symbols testifying to the need for self-denial, and perhaps even a “measure” of self-affliction, in the pursuit of Torah.³

The sides of the Ark, however, are not the only notable half-measurements we read about this week. On the Shabbat before (or on) Rosh Hodesh Adar,⁴ we add a reading known as Parashat Shekalim (taken from the first verses of Parashat Ki Tissa), which outlines the contribution that every fighting-age Israelite would donate to the service of the *mishkan* (and eventually, the Temple) to maintain its upkeep. They would all donate the same amount so that everyone was equally represented. And what was the amount that they all gave?

שמות ל:יג-טו

זֶה יִתְּנוּ כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקָדִים מִחֻצֵּי הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֶּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל מִחֻצֵּי הַשֶּׁקֶל תְּרוּמָה
לֵה'. כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקָדִים מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה יִתֵּן תְּרוּמַת ה'. הָעֹשִׂיר לֹא יִרְבֶּה וְהַדֵּל לֹא יִמְעִיט
מִמִּחֻצֵּי הַשֶּׁקֶל לִתֵּת אֶת תְּרוּמַת ה' לְכַפֵּר עַל נַפְשֵׁיכֶם.

Exodus 30:13-15

This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a **half-shekel** by the sanctuary weight—20 *gerahs* to the *shekel*—a **half-shekel** as a **donation to the Eternal**.
Everyone who is entered in the records, from the age of 20 years up, shall give the

³ The Ba'al ha-Turim's interpretation may sound harsh, but he has good Rabbinic sources behind him. One is the description from the sixth, additional chapter of Pirkei Avot (referred to as Perek Kinyan ha-Torah, the Chapter of Acquiring Torah): “This is the way of Torah: Eat bread with salt, drink rationed water, sleep on the ground, live a life of pain—and you labor away in Torah!”

⁴ During a Jewish leap year (like the one we are in), Parashat Shekalim is read on the Shabbat before Adar Sheini. That means that, while it is usually read as an addition to Parashat Mishpatim or Terumah, this year it falls out on Parashat VaYakhel.



Eternal's donation. The rich shall pay no more and the poor shall pay no less than a **half-shekel** when giving this **donation to the Eternal**, to atone for you.

These three verses keep emphasizing the “donation” (*terumah*) of the “half-shekel” (*maḥazit hashekel*) by mentioning them each three times.⁵ This is no side-detail; this is **the** designated amount that will come to represent a willingness to sacrifice to God. So why is it a **half-shekel**? Why not make it a *shekel*? It's true that the contribution had to be affordable, but then it could have been less than a half. Again, the half here was clearly chosen deliberately. So what does it mean?

Shall we import the symbolism of the Ba'al ha-Turim that halves represent brokenness? Are we to summon, here, too, a sense of our own brokenness before God? That last verse does speak of “atonement”—that's a fair opening for another severe reading.

But about 200 miles northeast, another of the great *darshanim* of the period, Rabbeinu Behaye,⁶ gives a very different interpretation of this half-measurement. Instead of focusing on the incompleteness of the half, he reminds us that every half implies another half that together make a whole:

⁵ In Shulḥan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayyim 694:1, in a section dealing with the *mitzvah* of giving gifts to the poor on Purim, the Rema writes: “Some say that before Purim, one should give half the amount of the local currency, in remembrance of the [biblical] half-shekel, which they would give in the month of Adar. And because *terumah* (donation) is written three times in Parashat Shekalim, one should give it in the form of three coins.”

⁶ R. Behaye ben Asher, 1255-1340, designated by the term of endearment, *Rabbeinu* (Our Rabbi) was a renowned preacher in his native Zaragoza, Spain. His Torah commentary is a masterpiece of the genre. It is made up of four parts, essentially four running commentaries at once, each with a different approach: “דרך הפשט, דרך הקבלה, דרך השכל, דרך המדרש - the Way of Peshat, the Way of Midrash, the Way of Intellect, and the Way of Kabbalah. On any given verse, then, Rabbeinu Behaye might be giving four interpretations at once. The piece we are looking at is taken from “The Way of the Intellect.” Note that he speaks “לכל משכיל” - to every intelligent person.”



רבינו בחיי שמות ל:יג

אבל בא לרמוז שראוי לכל משכיל שישקול מעשיו בשוה ושיסכים בעצמו לתת לגופו ולנפשו לכל אחד מהם חלקו וחוקו במשקל השלם, והנכון והראוי שימשיך את גופו אל עבודת השם יתעלה וילך בה אחר נפשו שהוא העקר ולעתים גם כן שימשוך נפשו אחר גופו בענינים ההכרחיים כגון אכילה והשתיה והמלבוש שאי אפשר לו שיחיה זולתם וכמו שאמרו רז"ל בענין יום טוב כתיב (דברים טז) עצרת לה' אלהיך וכתוב (במדבר ט) עצרת תהיה לכם רבי יהושע אמר חלקהו חציו לה' וחציו לכם.

Rabbeinu Behaye on Exodus 30:13

[The half *shekel*] comes to hint that every intelligent person should weigh their actions out evenly, and should agree to give both the body and the soul—each one of them—its own due attention, in order to come to a complete measure. It is good and proper to use one's body in the service of God, and to let the soul lead—for that is the essential thing.

Sometimes, however, one needs to pay attention also to one's physical needs such as eating, drinking, clothing—and it is impossible to survive without them. As Our Sages say (Talmud Bavli Pesachim 68b), “[The Torah says in one place:] ‘[the festival] is an assembly **for the Eternal your God**’ (Deuteronomy 16:8); [but in another:] ‘it shall be an assembly **for you**’ (Numbers 29:35). R. Yehoshua said: ‘Half of it for God and half of it for you!’”

Here is a very different message than the one we got from the Ba'al ha-Turim, in both content and tone. The half-measurement here is not a reminder to diminish ourselves, but to **attend** to ourselves. Rabbeinu Behaye sees in the half-*shekel* an acknowledgement of our divided nature. We are made up of body and soul, physical matter and spirit, each of which has its own needs. Which of those forces should we attend to? The answer is both; the soul cannot perform its work without the body, after all.

Be that as it may, it sounds at first as if Rabbeinu Behaye will make a more modest claim, a sort of concession. He is willing to grant the body only as much care as it needs to serve the soul in its service of God, “for that is the essential thing.” We may need to eat and drink to



survive, but beyond that, it is clear that our physical desires should take a back seat and most of our attention should be focused on spiritual matters.

But the Talmud that Rabbeinu Behaye quotes at the end pushes the claim to a bolder place. The Torah speaks in one place about “a festival for God,” and in another place about “a festival for you,” so we see our celebrations should include both the physical pleasures of eating and drinking as well as the divine service of Torah study: “Half of it for God and half of it for you!” The blunt formulation of R. Yehoshua’s summarizing phrase points beyond just celebrations to a way of looking at all of life as a delicate—but healthy—balance between self-nurturing and devotional service, inward-looking and outward-looking.

These two readings of the half-measurement seem to be preaching two very different philosophies of living. The Ba’al ha-Turim calls on us to break ourselves to make room for Torah, whereas Rabbeinu Behaye seems to allow us to spend half of our time indulging the soft animal of the body.

But perhaps those positions are not actually incompatible. Perhaps we must learn to do both, at different times. In the pursuit of Torah, the worship of God, or acts of service to others, we must push ourselves. We must be ready to sacrifice: to live on less, and to give more. To do any of that, we must learn to break ourselves of our selfish and self-centered impulses. That requires great, relentless effort.

But there is another “half” of our lives that is meant to be lived in a conscious and embodied experience of the self: one that is both physical—full of bodily appetites and sensory pleasures—as well as cognitive—aware of feelings and ideas, opinions and preferences. To maintain the health of our bodies and minds we must care for ourselves, nourish ourselves, even love ourselves.





Half of it for God, and half of it for you. Maintaining that balance is not an easy task. But we try our best to meet God somewhere in the middle.