

# The Machatzit HaShekel and Selfless Giving

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The Rama (*Orach Chaim* 694:1), in his discussion of the custom to give three Half-Shekel coins prior to Purim, surprises us with his assertion that only males twenty and older participate in this custom. As this custom serves to remind us of the yearly Biblical mitzvah to contribute a *Machatzit HaShekel*, Half Shekel, to the *Mishkan* (and later the *Beit HaMikdash*), the Rama bases himself upon the Torah's presentation of the command to donate: "Everyone who passes through the census, *from twenty years of age and up*, shall give the portion of Hashem" (Shemot 30:14).<sup>184</sup> While the Sefer HaChinuch (mitzvah 105) and the Bartenura (*Mishna Shekalim* 1:3) agree with this position of the Rama, the Magen Avraham (694:3) disputes this ruling and states that a youth's involvement in this custom begins at age thirteen. He follows the opinion of the Rambam (*Hilchot Shekalim* 1:7) and Ramban (Shemot 30:12) that the Biblical mitzvah to contribute a Half Shekel to the *Beit HaMikdash* applies to all males who have reached the age of Bar Mitzvah. According to the Rambam and Ramban, the verse cited above limits only the one-time donation for the silver sockets of the *Mishkan*, not the yearly obligation.

The consequences of this dispute would seem to be rather minor. Yet, based upon the Rama's exclusion of males under twenty from this custom, numerous halakhic authorities have proposed – we will explain why – that male teens (from thirteen to nineteen) should be exempt from davening Mussaf. They further question whether men under twenty may even serve as the Shaliach Tzibbur.<sup>185</sup> Similarly, they contend that women, who are also exempt from the Biblical mitzvah and subsequent custom of giving the Half Shekel, should also be exempt from the Mussaf prayer<sup>186</sup> and debate whether women may even daven Mussaf on Shabbat and Yom Tov if they wish to.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Although the Biblical mitzvah is to give one Half Shekel, the custom developed to give three such coins, as the word *Terumah*, donation, appears three times in the Torah's presentation of this mitzvah (see Shemot 30:11-16).

<sup>185</sup> See Torah Temimah Shemot 30, note 22; Responsa Tzitz Eliezer 11:1

<sup>186</sup> See Responsa Rabbi Akiva Eiger 1:9 and Responsa Maharam Shick siman 90; Tzlach, Brachot ch. 4

<sup>187</sup> Responsa Maharam Shick *ibid.*; Kehillat Yaakov Zavachim, siman 4. See Mishna Berurah 106:4 who cites a dispute about this matter.

What is the rationale for their rulings? Is there room to provide an alternative approach which would welcome women and teenagers back into our shuls for Mussaf?

There are three assumptions underpinning these positions. First, these poskim assume that one who does not contribute the Half Shekel funds to the *Beit HaMikdash* – which were primarily used to purchase animals for the upcoming year’s communal *korbanot*, sacrificial offerings – are not considered co-owners of those *korbanot*. Therefore, men under twenty and women, who are both not obligated to contribute to the *korbanot*, are not participants in them either. Second, they assume that the Mussaf prayer is unique among all the prayers in that it serves exclusively as a replacement for the additional communal *korbanot* which were brought in the *Beit HaMikdash* on Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh and Yom Tov. Finally, they contend that only individuals who are included in the communal *korbanot* are included in the prayer which serves as its substitute. Merging all these assumptions together yields an exemption for men under twenty and women.

The second assumption – identifying Mussaf as totally *korban* dependant – certainly has a strong basis. First of all, we only mention the day’s *korbanot* during Mussaf, not during any other prayer. Furthermore, Tosfot (gemara Brachot 26a, cited in Shulchan Aruch, *Orach Chaim* 108:6) concludes that there is no *tefillat tashlumin*, makeup prayer, for a missed Mussaf prayer come nightfall because it’s just too late – the appropriate time for the *korban* has passed. Additionally, the Rama (*Orach Chaim* 268:2) writes that if one accidentally begins reciting the *bracha* of *atta chonein* during Mussaf on Shabbat, one immediately stops without finishing the *bracha*, unlike the ruling by other prayers on Shabbat. The reason is that there is no place for such a petitionary prayer in Mussaf, which functions exclusively as a replacement for *korbanot*.

The final assumption is also compelling, at least with regard to a woman’s obligation. The gemara Brachot 20b explains that women are obligated to pray – despite it being a time-bound mitzvah – because *tefilla rachamei ninhu*, the function of prayer is to beseech Hashem for compassion, which applies to women as well as men. This explanation, however, may not cover the Mussaf prayer, as it was instituted solely to replace the unique *korbanot* of the day. Consequently, women would be exempt, as they are by other time-bound mitzvot. Still, this argument can be questioned: Need the reason for this prayer be the only consideration to determine who can recite it?<sup>188</sup>

However, the first assumption, while logical, is more speculative and debatable. Is it true that only those who donate the Half Shekel to the *Beit HaMikdash* are determined to be co-owners of the communal *korbanot*? It is true that such is the impression from the Sefer HaChinuch (ibid.) who writes that one who does not donate the requisite funds is not included in the atonement provided by the *korbanot*. However, does that mean that Kohanim and Leviim, who, according to one opinion in the Mishna (*Shekalim* 1:4), are also exempt from the Half Shekel donation, would not be included in any of the communal *korbanot*? The conclusion of such a position would be that Kohanim, Leviim, men under twenty and women do not share in the appeasement and atonement of these *korbanot*. Such a possibility seems untenable.

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<sup>188</sup> See Responsa Be’er Yitzchak *Orach Chaim* 20:3.

The Chazon Ish (*Zevachim* 1:2) presents us with an alternative approach. The gemara *Zevachim* 4a cites the halakha of *shinui baalim* by *korbanot*, that an individual's *korban* becomes invalidated if the Kohen had in mind the wrong owner during anyone of the essential actions of the *korban*. The gemara comments that this consideration is not relevant by communal *korbanot*. After all, even if the Kohen only had in mind a segment of the population, he did not have any incorrect thoughts, just limited mindfulness. This is not considered a *change* which invalidates the *korban*. The Chazon Ish is troubled by this sweeping statement of the gemara. Can one not envision a case of *shinui baalim* by communal *korbanot*? Surely, a Kohen should invalidate the *korban* if he sprinkles the blood on behalf of the Jewish women of the world? After all, they are not co-owners of the *korban*. The Chazon Ish answers that women do have an interest in these *korbanot*, as they too benefit from its atonement. Therefore, even a Kohen's intention to offer the *korban* for the women is not considered *shinui baalim*. They, too, can be considered co-owners of the *korban*. Based on this answer, we begin to notice that the pool of people sharing in the communal *korbanot* is significantly larger than the group who contributes the funds for their purchase.

Indeed, the Kehillat Yaakov (*ibid.*) suggests that an individual's financial contribution to the *Beit HaMikdash* does not even serve to purchase him a share in the communal *korbanot*. As he explains, the mitzvah is to donate a coin, not to procure a portion of the communal *korbanot*. What ends up happening with that money is not part of the definition of the mitzvah and does not directly relate back to the contributor. There is evidence for this notion in the Rambam. Most glaringly, the Rambam details the mitzvah to give the Half Shekel in chapter one of *Hilchot Shekalim*, but only describes what is to be done with those funds in chapter four.

If these Half Shekel donations do not purchase shares in the *korbanot* for the individual contributors, then who are the owners? Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in a different context, provides the answer. According to the Rav, the communal *korbanot* belong, not to any multitude of individuals, but to all of *Knesset Yisrael*, the community of Israel, as a single collective entity. The Jewish people as a whole – which includes men, women and children – lay claim to the *korbanot* and are its owners. The major proof for this idea is the fact that, while a regular *korban chatat*, sin offering, is left to die if one of its owners dies, there is no such provision by a communal *korban chatat*.<sup>189</sup> The Kohanim offer the communal *korbanot* regardless of whether members of *Knesset Yisrael* have passed away since the sanctification of the given *korbanot*. The reason provided by the gemara is that the community does not die, only individuals. The Rav explains this rationale as follows: since the true owner of every communal *korban* is the collective entity of the Jewish people, the *korban* can always be brought, despite the fact that any number of individuals within the community have perished. *Knesset Yisrael* is still alive.

In summary, the communal *korbanot* belong to all members of the Jewish people, even those who do not contribute the Half Shekel. If so, we can reaffirm the relevance of the Mussaf prayer to teenagers and women and conclude that they, too, can fully participate in the prayer.

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<sup>189</sup> See gemara Temurah 15b

This conclusion yields a profound understanding of the mitzvah of *Machatzit HaShekel*. As we established, the contributors of the Half Shekel provide the financial base for the communal *korbanot*, but those *korbanot* provide atonement for all Jews, regardless of their participation in raising the required funds. Indeed, the donor does not even purchase an individual share of the *korban* for himself. Simply put, he is involved in a selfless act of giving on behalf of everyone. In the end, it's not about himself. It's not about any one of us. Rather, it's about the community of Israel. We act, not merely to benefit our own service to Hashem, but to support the community's collective worship and strengthen all of its members in their desire to approach the Divine.