

Half Shekels – For Census or Tabernacle?

Introduction

CONTEXT OR CATALYST?

Near the end of the transmission of the blueprints for the construction of the Mishkan (Shemot 25-31), Hashem issues a command that the nation should give half-shekels of silver. These were to be collected during a census in order to prevent a plague from occurring ("וְלֹא יְהִי בְּהֶם נֶגֶף בְּפִקֹּד אֲתֶם"), and they were also designated to be utilized for the purposes of the Tabernacle ("וְנָתַתָּ אֹתוֹ עַל עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד"). Both of these aspects are made explicit by the verses in Shemot 30, and their relationship will be the focus of our analysis:

EN/HE

(יא) וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. (יב) כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֹדֵיהֶם וְנָתַנוּ אִישׁ כֶּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ לַה' בְּפִקֹּד אֲתֶם וְלֹא יְהִי בְּהֶם נֶגֶף בְּפִקֹּד אֲתֶם. (יג) זֶה יִתְּנוּ כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקָדִים מִחֻצֵי הַשָּׂקָל בְּשָׂקָל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הַשָּׂקָל מִחֻצֵי הַשָּׂקָל תְּרוּמָה לַה'. (יד) כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקָדִים מִבְּנֵי עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה יִתְּנוּ תְּרוּמַת ה'. (טו) הָעֹשִׂיר לֹא יִרְבֶּה וְהַדָּל לֹא יִמְעִיט מִמִּחֻצֵי הַשָּׂקָל לְתַת אֶת תְּרוּמַת ה' לְכַפֵּר עַל נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם. (טז) וְלִקְחֹתָ אֶת כֶּסֶף הַכֹּפָרִים מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָתַתָּ אֹתוֹ עַל עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהָיָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְזָכְרוֹן לִפְנֵי ה' לְכַפֵּר עַל נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם.

What was the main motivation for these instructions to give the half-shekels, and why do they appear in the middle of the Mishkan unit? Was there a sudden need for a census and the Mishkan merely happened to be the beneficiary of this event? Or was the primary objective to insure full national participation in the Mishkan's capital campaign, and the census was only the means through which this was accomplished?

FUTURE GENERATIONS?

The verses above do not explicitly state whether the collecting of the half-shekels was a one-time directive only for the first year in the wilderness,^[1] or if it applies also to all future generations. If the latter is true, one must further consider: Is the donation required only in the event of a subsequent census, or is it a continuous (and perhaps even annual) obligation to provide for the ongoing maintenance of the Mishkan/Mikdash?^[2] Examining other Biblical cases of censuses and Mikdash contributions may help illuminate this issue.

ADDITIONAL CENSUS TAKING

While the Children of Israel are counted in various other places in Tanakh,^[3] in none of these cases do we find a collecting of half-shekels. However, there are two countings which may nevertheless be relevant. The first of these is in [Shemuel I 15:4](#) where Shaul polls the people "בַּטְלָאִים". If this word is rendered "using lambs", it may indicate that a straight headcount was prohibited. The second case is in [Shemuel II 24](#).^[4]

EN/HE

(א) ויִסַּף אֶף ה' לַחֲרוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסַּת אֶת דָּוִד בָּהֶם לֵאמֹר לֵךְ מִנָּה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת יְהוּדָה. (ב)
 וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל יוֹאָב שֶׁר הַחֵיִל אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ שׁוֹט נָא בְּכָל שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִדָּן וְעַד בָּאָר שֶׁבַע
 וּפְקֻדוֹ אֶת הָעָם וַיִּדְעֵתִי אֶת מִסְפַּר הָעָם...
 (י) וַיֵּךְ לֵב דָּוִד אֹתוֹ אַחֲרֵי כֵן סָפַר אֶת הָעָם וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל ה' חָטָאתִי מְאֹד אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי וְעַתָּה
 ה' הִעֲבֵר נָא אֶת עֹן עַבְדְּךָ כִּי נִסְכַּלְתִּי מְאֹד...
 (טו) וַיִּתֵּן ה' דְּבַר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מִהַבְּקָר וְעַד עֵת מוֹעֵד וַיָּמָת מִן הָעָם מִדָּן וְעַד בָּאָר שֶׁבַע שְׁבָעִים אֶלֶף
 אִישׁ. (טז) וַיִּשְׁלַח יְדוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם לְשַׁחֲתָהּ וַיִּנְחָם ה' אֶל הָרַעָה וַיֹּאמֶר לְמַלְאָךְ הַמְשַׁחֵת
 בָּעָם רַב עֲתָה הֲרֹף יִדָּךְ וּמַלְאָךְ ה' הִיָּה עִם גֵּרֹ [הָאֲרוֹנָה] (הָאֲרוֹנָה) הַיְבֹסִי. (יז) וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל
 ה' בְּרָאתוֹ אֶת הַמֶּלֶךְ הַמְכָּה בָּעָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי חָטָאתִי וְאֲנֹכִי הָעוֹיֵתִי וְאֵלֶּה הַצֹּאֵן מִן
 עֲשׂוֹ תְהִי נָא יָדְךָ בִּי וּבְבֵית אָבִי.

These verses seem to state that a plague was visited upon the nation as a result of David's census. Yet, while this epidemic could possibly be attributed to a failure to count with half-shekels, the text nowhere makes this explicit.

DONATIONS TO THE MIKDASH

There is one later Biblical story which may reference the commandment of giving the half shekels. [Divrei HaYamim II 24](#)^[5] describes how when Yoash decided to refurbish the Beit HaMikdash, he summoned the head priest to find out why "מִשְׁאֵת מִשֶּׁה עֶבֶד ה'" was not being collected from the nation:

EN/HE

(ד) וַיְהִי אַחֲרַי כֵּן הָיָה עִם לֵב יוֹאָשׁ לְחַדֵּשׁ אֶת בַּיִת ה'. (ה) וַיִּקְבֹּץ אֶת הַכֹּהֲנִים וְהַלְוִיִּם וַיֹּאמֶר
 לָהֶם צֵאוּ לְעָרֵי יְהוּדָה וּקְבְּצוּ מִכָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל כֶּסֶף לְחֹזֵק אֶת בַּיִת אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִדֵּי שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה וְאַתֶּם
 תִּמְהָרוּ לְדַבֵּר וְלֹא מִהָרוּ הַלְוִיִּם. (ו) וַיִּקְרָא הַמֶּלֶךְ לִיהוֹיָדָע הָרֹאשׁ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מִדּוּעַ לֹא דָרַשְׁתָּ עַל
 הַלְוִיִּם לְהַבִּיא מִיְהוּדָה וּמִירוּשָׁלַם אֶת מִשְׁאֵת מִשֶּׁה עֶבֶד ה' וְהִקְהַל לְיִשְׂרָאֵל לְאַהֲלֵה הַעֲדוֹת.

The subsequent verses then describe how a chest was constructed for donations and how the people then contributed "מִשְׁאֵת מִשֶּׁה עֶבֶד הָאֱלֹהִים עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּמִּדְבָּר". However, these verses specify neither that it was a half shekel that each person was required to donate, nor the exact circumstances which created this obligation. In contrast, in [Nechemyah 10:33-34](#) we read of an apparently voluntary agreement among the people themselves to annually donate a third of a shekel on an annual basis, to finance the sacrifices in the Mikdash:

EN/HE

(לג) וְהַעֲמַדְנוּ עָלֵינוּ מִצְוֹת לָתֵת עָלֵינוּ שְׁלֹשִׁית הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשָׁנָה לְעַבְדַת בַּיִת אֱלֹהֵינוּ. (לד) לְלֶחֶם
 הַמַּעֲרֶכֶת וּמִנְחַת הַתְּמִיד וְלַעוֹלֹת הַתְּמִיד הַשְּׁבֻתוֹת הַחֲדָשִׁים לְמוֹעֲדִים וְלִקְדָּשִׁים וְלַחֲטָאוֹת
 לְכַפֵּר עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכָל מְלֶאכֶת בַּיִת אֱלֹהֵינוּ.

What is the relationship between our verses in Shemot 30, and the stories of Divrei HaYamim II 24 and Nechemyah 10? Do these all speak of the same obligation, and if so, under what conditions did it apply?

[1] It is noteworthy that the Torah's instructions to donate the half-shekels make no mention of the obligation being "לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם". This is in stark contrast to the surrounding units (see Shemot 30:8,21,31).

[2] It is also possible that the obligation of giving half-shekels applies also for future generations, but only when there is a special building fund for constructing a new Mikdash or refurbishing an existing one.

[3] See [Bemidbar 1](#), [Bemidbar 26](#), Shofetim 20:15-17, [Shemuel I 11:8](#), Shemuel I 13:15, [Shemuel I 15:4](#), Shemuel II 18:1, [Shemuel II 24](#) (~[Divrei HaYamim I 21](#)), Melakhim I 20:27, Melakhim II 3:6, Ezra 2.

[4] A parallel account of this event is found in [Divrei HaYamim I 21](#).

[5] There is a parallel story in [Melakhim II 12:5-6](#), but it is missing the critical phrase which refers back to Moshe.