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). 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. 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 and debate whether women may even daven Mussaf on Shabbat and Yom Tov if they wish to.

184 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).
185 See Torah Temimah Shemot 30, note 22; Responsa Tzitz Eliezer 11:1
186 See Responsa Rabbi Akiva Eiger 1:9 and Responsa Maharam Shick siman 90; Tzlach, Brachot ch. 4
187 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 accidently 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 teffilla 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?188

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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188 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. 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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189 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.