

Behar-Bechukotai

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The last part of this double sedra deals with the tradition of "valuations". In Temple times, people often dedicated an object or an animal or even themselves to the Temple. This was another aspect of the sacrificial system. We can see from the story of Samuel how it was possible for a parent to "give" a child to the Temple service. There is no hint of this in the Torah. There the priesthood provided all the manpower that was needed. Perhaps the Levites might have offered additional assistance beyond simply singing. But nothing is explicit. What is made clear is the tradition of erchaot, valuations.

In Chapter 27, people who "gave themselves" to the Temple did not actually give themselves over to be servants, but agreed to pay a contribution. This contribution was laid down in advance. It was not a matter of each person being assessed on his or her own merits, but rather on the basis of generalized tables of value.

Males from 20 to 60 had the highest value, 50 shekels. Females of this age were 30 shekels. From age five to 20, the values were 20 for males and 10 for females. From one month old to five years, it was five or three. And from age 60 upwards, it was fifteen or ten. Then the Torah goes on to lay down the law for valuing livestock and buildings, where the object would indeed go to the Temple treasury but a valuation was given to "redeem" the object back for everyday use.

One can find a great deal to be upset about in these valuations. One could be upset on the basis of sexism and one could be upset on the basis of ageism. If the criterion was "hard work", then how could one assess a one-month-old child? Was this a hangover from the slave system? Agreed, that was how most people have been valued for most of the past 5000 years. But the fact is that here no one is being forced into anything. No one has to offer up anybody.

Perhaps, like the sacrificial system itself, this was simply a way of channeling the contemporary devotional impulses into a less excessive expression than the actual human sacrifice practiced in pagan cultures. Like running along with a runaway horse and slowly bringing it under control, rather than standing in front and trying to stop it dead in its tracks. Some pagan religious practices were indeed banned altogether, like self laceration and prostitution. But others were adapted, modified, and channeled.