

PARASHAT BECHUKOTAI

The Value of Man Rav Amnon Bazak

A. Introduction

The *parasha* of "*arakhin*" (estimated values, for the purposes of a vow made to God) (*Vayikra* 27) concludes *Sefer Vayikra* and deals with the estimated values of a man, an impure animal, a house, a field of possession one's portion of the land of Israel), and a field that is purchased. In most cases, the value is estimated in accordance with the specifications of the object that is sanctified to God. In certain cases it is determined at the discretion of a *kohen*. Concerning an impure animal, we read: "The *kohen* shall assess it, whether it is good or bad; as the *kohen* values it so shall it be" (verse 12), and similarly concerning a house: "The *kohen* shall assess it, whether it is good or bad; as the *kohen* values it so shall it stand" (verse 14). A field is assessed on the basis of objective considerations: the amount of seed that can be sown in it and the number of years remaining until the *Yovel* (Jubilee): "Its value shall be according to the seed required to sow it: a *chomer* of barley shall be valued at fifty shekels of silver. If he dedicates his field from the Jubilee year, it shall stand according to the estimation. But if he dedicates his field after the Jubilee, then the *kohen* shall calculate the money according to the years remaining until the Jubilee, and deduct that from the estimation" (verses 16-18).

In light of all the above, there is a noticeable deviation in the manner of calculation when it comes to the value of a person. Here there are no subjective considerations; only the age and sex are relevant. For instance, every man aged anywhere between twenty and sixty years has the same value. This fact alone indicates the uniqueness of the system of estimation for a person. In this *shiur* we shall briefly discuss this phenomenon.

B. The king's decree

Let us begin by drawing up a table of the estimated values found in verses 3-7:

Age	Male	Female
From the age of twenty until the age of sixty	Fifty shekels of silver, in the currency of the Sanctuary	Thirty shekels
If [the person] is between five years and twenty years old	Twenty shekels	Ten shekels
If [the person is] a month and five years	Five shekels of silver	Three shekels of silver

If [the person is] sixty years or older	Fifteen shekels	And for a female – ten shekels
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This table illustrates two fundamental principles regarding the rating of a person's value:

- i. In each of the four stages of a person's life, the estimated value of a male is higher than that of a female.
- ii. A person's value is estimated in accordance with his stage of life. The highest value is attached to the period during which he is "at his peak"; the next highest level corresponds to the years preceding this period, from the age of five until the age of twenty; following this is the period of old age; and the lowest value is given to the years of infancy and early childhood.

At first glance it would seem that the person's value is estimated according to his ability to work. Based on a realistic assumption, especially during biblical times, a higher monetary value is attached to a male than to a female, and the value of each is determined in accordance with his/her age and productive capacity.^[2]

However, this assumption raises a number of questions:

1. We must question the affirmation that a person's best years are up to the age of sixty. The Torah would seem to indicate that the age for labor is up until fifty, as we read concerning the *Levi'im*: "From the age of fifty he shall return from the ranks of Divine service, and he shall serve no more" (*Bamidbar* 8:25).
2. It is also surprising that the worth of a person during his most productive years is calculated at fifty shekels, which is much higher than the actual value of a slave: "If the ox gores a slave or a maidservant, he shall give the sum of THIRTY SHEKELS to the master" (*Shemot* 21:32).
3. During two stages of life the ratio between the value of a male and that of a female is 5:3 - between the ages of twenty and sixty and from one month until five years. Why, then, is this ratio not maintained between the ages of five and twenty, and, more importantly, why is the value of a man over the age of sixty (15 shekels) lower than his value between the ages of five and twenty (20 shekels), while in the case of a female there is no difference between these two stages of life, and in both cases the value is 10 shekels? Rashi addresses this problem and comments (in line with *Massekhet Arakhin* 19a): "Upon reaching old age, a woman is closer in value to a man; therefore a man loses more than one-third of his value in his old age, while a woman loses only one-third of her value. As people say: 'An old man in the house is like an obstacle in the house; an old woman in the house is a good sign in the house.'" This is a charming teaching in and of itself, but it does not provide an altogether satisfying answer to our question. Is it really true that in the case of a woman there is no difference between the stages of 5-20 years and 60 years plus, while when it comes to a man such a difference does exist?

It is apparently these questions and others that lead Ibn Ezra to his unequivocal statement in this regard:

"The generally accepted view is that this is A DECREE OF THE KING – that (for a boy aged) from one month until five years he gives five shekels; if he is even one day over a month old he gives five shekels... the principle here is a DECREE OF THE TORAH, for if (the calculations) followed the principle of a male being worth more than a female, after the age of sixty one-third should be added, while from the age of five until twenty one-half should be added. And from the age of a month up until five years, and from twenty until sixty, one-tenth of the value should be added to that half."^[3]

At the same time, let us try to illuminate the meaning of this *parasha*, so far as we are able, and to answer the questions we have listed above.^[4]

C. Its value shall be according to its seed for sowing

It appears that there is indeed a difference in the scale of values for a male and a female. We questioned above why a person's "best years" are up until the age of sixty, rather than fifty, the "retirement age" for *Levi'im*. Interestingly, we find the age of sixty mentioned in *Tanakh* in a different context – not in relation to work capacity, but rather in relation to fertility:

"Yitzchak was sixty years old when they were born" (*Bereishit* 25:26);
"Then Chetzron came to the daughter of Makhir, the father of Gilad, and he married her – when he was sixty years old, and she bore him Siguv" (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 2:21).

The only two places in *Tanakh* where a person is mentioned as being sixty years old both deal with people who bore children in their later years. The verses emphasize the age in order to indicate the unusual nature of this phenomenon. Thus, it would seem that the age of sixty represents the end of the usual period of fertility, and our *parasha* conveys the same idea.

In light of this we can also explain the significance of the sum attached to a person at his peak - fifty shekels of silver. This sum is mentioned in the Torah in one other place:

"If a man finds a young virgin who has not been betrothed, and he takes hold of her and lies with her, and they are found, then the man who lay with her shall give the girl's father fifty pieces of silver, and she shall be his wife, since he mistreated her; he shall not send her away all the days of his life" (*Devarim* 22:28-29).

In several places (including *Ketuvot* 33a and elsewhere) the significance of paying fifty shekels is defined as the "benefit from lying [with her]." This act, representing the man's vigor and fertility, is therefore estimated as a benefit of fifty shekels, and symbolically this is then the value of a man at the peak of his fertile years.

Let us now try to understand why the second highest value is accorded to the stage between five and twenty years, rather than from sixty years upwards. At both stages a man is able to attain fertility, but the stage at which he is on the way to reaching his physical peak is not the same as the stage of becoming old.^[5] In a person's later years, sexual intercourse is no longer considered as having fertile potential, and for his reason the person's value drops. Interestingly, the sum of fifteen shekels is found elsewhere in the context of sexual relations that are not meant to lead to conception:

"God said to me: 'Go, further, and love a woman who is loved by someone else and commits adultery, like God's love for *Benei Yisrael* who have turned to other gods and who love raisin cakes. So I brought her to me for FIFTEEN PIECES OF SILVER, and a *chomer* of barley and a *letekh* of barley.'" (*Hoshea* 3:1-2)

Rav Hai Gaon notes this connection (as quoted by Rashi in his commentary *ad loc.*):

In the name of Rav Hai Gaon, I found the Gaon's explanation: "I brought her to me...' – I allotted a small sum of money in exchange for her. As the one who says, my own value [is obligated] upon me' – if [the person is] sixty years or older, the exchange is fifteen shekels."

In light of this, the value of a person between the ages of one month and five years clearly does not reflect any ability. This, then, must be the minimum value of any child from the age of one month - exactly the same as the value of a first-born. Once again, we may say that the fact that the child has any value at all arises from the potential inherent in him.

In the same way, we may address our original question: why the estimation of the male is determined only according to his age, rather than by his subjective worth. If indeed the scale according to which a person is valued is his fertile capacity, then in fact his work capacity is of no significance. All people during their most fertile years, regardless of their physical abilities, education, or occupation, are equal in this regard.^[6]

The idea of a person's value being determined in accordance with his fertility exists in the Oral Law, as well. Concerning the verse, with regard to a Hebrew servant, "Let it not be hard for you, when you send him away from you, free, for he has been worth double a hired servant to you for six years" (*Devarim* 15:18). Rashi comments, "From here [the Rabbis] taught: A Hebrew servant works both in the day and in the night; this is the sense in which he is worth double a hired servant. What is meant by 'work at night?' His master gives him a Canaanite maidservant, and their children belong to the master." The work of this Hebrew servant is considered "double the worth of a hired servant" because of his ability to sire children, who then belong to the master.

In fact, our thesis is hinted at further on in the chapter, concerning the estimated worth of a field:

"If a person dedicates part of a field of his possession to God, ITS ESTIMATION SHALL BE ACCORDING TO THE SEED REQUIRED TO SOW IT, a *chomer* of barley shall be worth fifty shekels of silver" (16).

Concerning a field we are told explicitly that its value is estimated according to its fertility: "according to the seed to sow it." But, in contrast to a person, when it comes to a field the Torah does take into consideration the discrepancy in the fertile potential of different fields (on the basis of the quality of the ground, the size of the field, etc.). Therefore, the basic unit to measure the fertile capacity of the field is "a *chomer* of barley seed" which is worth "fifty shekels of silver," just like a person. But in the case of a field, this unit may be multiplied many times over, depending on its changing value.

D. Value of a woman

Let us now address the various estimated values of a woman. Obviously, the criterion for a woman is different than that for a man, since from the biblical perspective a woman has no "seed"; she is considered a passive participant in the process of conception.^[7] Therefore, we must explain the differences in the monetary estimations in a different way.

We have already mentioned above that the sum of thirty shekels, the maximum value of a woman at the strongest stage of her life, is noted in the Torah in a different context: "If the ox gores a servant or a maidservant, he shall pay the sum of THIRTY SHEKELS to the master" (*Shemot* 21:32). We may deduce from this that when it comes to a woman, her value is indeed determined in accordance with her capacity for work. We noted above that the "retirement age," as mentioned with regard to the *Levi'im*, is fifty; it is reasonable to posit that the division of ages was determined according to this criterion for men, and the Torah saw no reason to create a different division for women. Therefore age remains as the only factor, and for women, once again, there is no discussion of subjective categories of work capacity, etc.

We now have a satisfactory answer concerning the discrepancy in the ratio between the values of men and women at different stages of life. The entire problem proceeds from the assumption that the scale for both is the same. But if in fact there are two separate scales - fertility, in the case of men, and work capacity in the case of women - then it is indeed logical that the same ratio is not maintained at every stage of life. It is quite conceivable that work capacity does not diminish after the age of sixty in as drastic a fashion as fertility does.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] No scale of estimation is set for a pure animal (i.e., one which is fit for offering as a sacrifice), since the animal itself is sanctified to God: "If it is an animal that may be brought as a sacrifice to God – anything that a person gives of such to God shall be holy" (9).

[2] This assumption may find support in the biblical account of the sale of Yosef: "Some Midianite merchant people passed by, and they pulled and drew Yosef up out of the pit, and sold Yosef to the Yishme'elim FOR TWENTY PIECES OF SILVER, and these brought Yosef to Egypt" (*Bereishit* 36:28). Yosef, as we know, was seventeen years old, and his sale as a slave for the sum of twenty pieces of silver - representing the value of a person at this age - may serve to prove that the scale for determining a person's monetary worth is his ability to work.

[3] See the Gaon's original calculation, which Ibn Ezra rejects. Commentators on the Ibn Ezra have raised various possibilities for understanding the Gaon's approach; in any event, its very originality proves the difficulty in understanding the text on the literal level.

[4] For a completely different approach, see the commentary of Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch on this chapter.

[5] The only place in *Tanakh* where we find specific attention to the age of five is in the story of the maiming of Mefiboshet: "Yehonatan, the son of Shaul, had a son who was lame in his legs (he was five years old when the tidings of Shaul and Yehonatan came from Yizre'el; his nurse took him up and fled, and in her haste to flee he fell and became lame), and his name was Mefiboshet" (*Shmuel* II 4:4). The noting of Mefiboshet's age would seem to be indicating that at this age it was already difficult to carry him and run quickly, since at this stage of life a child already "stands on his own two legs."

[6] According to this approach we may perhaps suggest that a eunuch or sterile man would not have the same worth. But it seems that the status of such a person, according to this approach, is no different than the status of a person who is unable to work, according to the usual approach. The Gemara does raise the possibility that they would not have value, but goes on to reject it: "People, including the deformed and one afflicted with boils" (Rashi: "that a person may make a vow concerning his value.) Is it possible that anyone who has productive potential has an estimated value, while anyone who has no productive potential has no estimated value? [Surely not,] therefore the Torah teaches 'people.'" In other words, the value is determined categorically, with no regard for exceptional cases.

[7] For this reason we usually find childbirth described as an act that the woman performs for her husband: "Avraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sara had BORNE TO HIM, Yitzchak" (*Bereishit* 21:3); "It was told to Avraham, saying: Behold, Milka has also BORNE sons TO NACHOR, your brother" (*ibid.* 22:20); "Rachel saw that she HAD NOT BORNED TO YAAKOV" (*ibid.* 30:1), etc. Needless to say, with the changing reality – and the change in the patriarchal view of the family, changes have taken place in this view as well, as evidenced by *Chazal's* teachings in various contexts, such as, "Our Rabbis taught: there are three partners in [the creation of] a person: the Holy One, and his father, and his mother. When a person honors his father and mother, the Holy One says, I consider them as though I have dwelled among them, and they have honored Me" (*Kiddushin* 30b).