



Parashat Bechukotai
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Parashat Bechukotai, the final portion in the Book of Vayikra, concludes with a presentation of numerous laws relevant to the area of *hekdesh* – the consecration of one's possessions to the Temple treasury or one's animal as a sacrifice. Among the *halakhot* introduced in this context is that of *temura*, the prohibition against attempting to "substitute" an animal consecrated as a sacrifice (27:10,33). The Torah establishes that if a person consecrates an animal, it is forbidden for him to subsequently declare that its consecrated status should be transferred onto a different animal. If he does make such a declaration, then he has transgressed a Torah prohibition and both animals are endowed with the status of *hekdesh*.

Maimonides elaborates on the details of this prohibition in the *Hilkhot Temura* section of *Mishneh Torah*, a section which he concludes by suggesting an insightful explanation as to the reason behind this law. He addresses in this context another *halakha* established in Parashat Behukotai, as well, namely, that if one seeks to "redeem" a consecrated object he must pay a 20% "surcharge" to the Temple treasury. Thus, if a person consecrates a certain item and then wishes to reclaim it from the ownership of the Temple treasury, he must pay the treasury the object's value plus an additional 20%. Maimonides views this provision and the prohibition of *temura* as geared towards the same purpose:

It seems to me that this which the verse stated, "then it and its substitute shall be sacred" is similar to that which is stated, "And if the one who consecrated [a home] shall redeem his home, then he must add to it one-fifth of the monetary value." The Torah penetrated to the depths of a person's thoughts and the extent of his evil inclination, that the nature of man is inclined towards increasing his possessions and being sparing with respect to his money. And thus even though he made a vow and consecrated, he might have a change of heart and regret [his vow], and he will redeem with less its value. The Torah [therefore] said that if he redeems [it] himself he must add one-fifth.

Similarly, if he consecrated an animal as intrinsically sacred [as a sacrifice], he might have a change of heart, and since he cannot redeem it, he might exchange it with a lower-quality [animal]. And if you grant him license to exchange a low-quality [animal] with a high-quality [animal], he might exchange [as well] a high-quality [animal] with a low-quality [animal] and say that it is good. The verse therefore blocked his way so that he cannot exchange, and imposed a fine upon him if he did exchange.

According to Maimonides, these two laws – the 20% surcharge when reclaiming consecrated property, and the *temura* prohibition – serve to protect against the widespread retraction of pledges. The Torah realized that after consecrating an item a

person might likely regret this decision upon reconsidering the expense entailed. It therefore penalized somebody who wishes to reclaim the consecrated object, and forbade attempts to substitute an animal designated as a sacrifice with a lower-quality animal.

One might wonder, at first glance, why the Torah sought to discourage people from rescinding their decision to consecrate an animal or other object. If a person voluntarily chose to consecrate some of his property, why should it not be in his right to buy it back, even for less its value? Since the initial gesture was voluntary, why should he be penalized?

Maimonides answers this question in the subsequent passage, where he writes, "And all these matters are in order to bend one's inclination and correct his character." These laws are part of the Torah's overall program to assist a person in overcoming instinctive, negative tendencies. In this instance, the Torah seeks to combat the natural tendency towards greed and the unwillingness to forego on one's property. Even if, intrinsically, it would seem legitimate for a person to regret his decision to relinquish ownership over a certain item and donate it to the Temple, the Torah urges a person to follow through on his pledges as part of its general effort to help us overcome our overly possessive nature.