



**Shabbat Shekalim**  
**II Kings 11:17 - 12:17**  
**Ashkenazim begin at 12:1**  
**February 28, 2014 / 28 Adar 1 5774**

If you have ever owned a house, or if you've ever been involved in the maintenance of any building, you know that it involves a lot of attention, money and energy. It feels like there's always something to fix.

If you can relate to this, now imagine being in charge of the Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times. With all of the constant traffic of thousands upon thousands of people, with the practice of sacrifice, and with normal wear and tear on a building built without modern technology, you can imagine how the Temple could fall into disrepair.

But what happens in our Haftarah is worse than these normal developments. The priests are given all of the money they need to repair the Temple, and they don't use it. It's not clear whether they keep the money in the Temple treasury or use it to buy basins of silver and vessels of gold for the Temple or take it for themselves, but in any case, they are at least incompetent or they have the wrong priorities and at worst they are sinful and criminal.

What happens is that the king, whose name is Jehoash, is a check and a balance on the priests, and he insists that the money be used correctly and that the Temple be restored to its glory. And the High Priest, Jehoiada, creates a new system so that the money has to be used correctly. The money that is donated to the Temple is put through a hole in the lid of a chest and all money that is donated stays in that chest which is guarded. And when the chest gets filled up, the King's Secretary and the High Priest come at the same time and count the money and tie it all up in bags. And the money is paid out to the workmen, carpenters, builders, masons and stone cutters and is used to buy timber and quarry stone. And the Temple is repaired. So the story has a happy ending.

But how could the priests have been so incompetent or so criminal? We're talking about the holiest people and the holiest place and the holiest tasks that had to be performed in a beautiful environment. There were no alibis or excuses. They were wrong.

We read the Haftarah on Shabbat Shekalim, when we also read how each person brought a half-shekel for the building of the Tabernacle, to contrast what's wrong with what's right. What's wrong is when people in power corruptly use power to enrich themselves or when they do not perform their tasks and everyone suffers. What's right is when we remember that every person

is represented by a half of a shekel; no one is worth more and no one is worth less. No one has the right to steal and everyone has the right to know where the money is going.

In our synagogue, as in just about every synagogue, we have a Board meeting once a month. And we go through this monotonous exercise of handing out sheets of paper with every figure for every budget line and what's been spent; we read monthly reports about our liabilities and our assets. It is not very interesting to someone like me whose eyes glaze over when he sees lines of numbers. But then every year I read the Haftarah for Shabbat Shekalim, and I remember that those meetings are nothing less than holy, for they do for our synagogue what no one was doing in the days of Jehoash: Protecting the interests of all of the people who donate their hard-earned half-shekel to the synagogue and ensuring the maintenance of this holy house of worship.

We have to protect ourselves from those who would misuse money, and we have to be wary even of ourselves, lest we fall into temptation, especially when times are rough. We have to build chests for our money and we have to guard them and we have to open them with another person present and we have to keep careful records.

The Bible includes not only commandments telling us not to steal, and laws punishing us if we steal, but also stories to make us conscious of how stealing happens in the holiest of places by the holiest of people. The story of Temple corruption is a story that should not be hidden, but told over and over again; it is a story that we need to hear, now as much as ever.

Food for Thought:

1. Can you apply the lesson of this haftarah to experiences in your life? In your business? In your synagogue?
2. Have you ever felt the temptation to play games with money that did not belong to you?

*This week's Unraveller author, Rabbi Benjamin Edidin Scolnic, has been the spiritual leader at Temple Beth Sholom in Hamden, Connecticut since 1983. He was educated at Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America(JTS). He also received his Ph.D. from JTS. Rabbi Scolnic was the editor of the journal Conservative Judaism from 1993-2000. He has taught at Yale University, the University of Connecticut, and JTS. He served as the host for a series of The Eternal Light radio shows, which were produced by JTS, and is the author of several books and many articles and essays on the Bible, feminism, liturgy, Jewish education, the relationship between religion and the media, and the future of Conservative Judaism.*