Shabbat Sheqalim

In the time of the Bet haMiqdash, the Temple of Jerusalem, communal sacrifices (qorbanot) were offered daily on behalf of the entire Jewish people. This representation was not merely theoretical, nor did it depend solely on the proper intent of those responsible for performing the sacrifices: the Kohanim. The participation of the people was established in a very practical way: every year, in the month of Adar, a special tax was collected—machatsit hasheqel, or "half-sheqel"—which had a fixed amount, the same for both the poor and the wealthy. The money collected in this national fundraising effort was used to purchase the animals for the qorbanot. The daily communal sacrifices and the additional sacrifices (musafim) for Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh, and the festivals were all bought with the funds from these sheqalim. In this way, every Jew had an equal share in the offering of the sacrifices.

The machatsit hasheqel was collected during the month of Adar because the Temple's fiscal year began the following month: Nisan.

The money collected from the sheqalim was also used for the maintenance and general expenses of the Temple, but not for its construction. As we read in Parashat Terumah, the funds to build the Mishkan (the Sanctuary in the desert) and later, to construct the Bet haMiqdash, came from voluntary donations. In other words, the Temple's finances depended on a system that combined donations with a fixed tax (a kind of membership fee) collected in the month of Adar.

Since every individual contributed the same amount, the collection of the sheqalim (plural of sheqel) also served as an annual demographic census.

Today, to remember the collection of the sheqalim:

We read Parashat Sheqalim on the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh Adar (or on Shabbat Rosh Chodesh when they coincide).
We give a fixed, flat donation as a symbolic act to commemorate the machatsit hasheqel.

In our community it is suggested that every adult male donate $10. This money can be allocated to any charitable cause, including synagogue maintenance, Jewish education, or other acts of tzedakah.

In many communities, it is customary to collect these donations on the Fast of Esther .

It is important to emphasize that we are not donating the actual “half-sheqel,” something that, God willing, we will be able to do once we have the Bet haMiqdash again. Instead, this is a ZEKHER LEMACHATSIT HASEQEL, a commemoration of the half-sheqel.

Image of the Half-Sheqel Coin from the Second Temple Era

(Approximately 50-60 CE)
On the left side, in ancient Hebrew script, it reads: Sheqel Yisrael (“Sheqel of Israel”).
On the right side, it reads: Yerushalayim HaQedoshah (“Jerusalem, the Holy”).

