

Introduction to Tractate ‘Arakhin

Scripture provides at Lev. 27: 1–8 that people may take a “special vow of persons,” pledging the value of a given person, whether oneself or another, to the Temple. The value of persons or real estate is estimated, and the cash paid to redeem the person or property from the sanctuary goes to the Temple for its upkeep. Scripture explicitly makes provision for such votive offerings of personal worth, specifying the requisite number of sheqels that measure the worth of a person of a given classification. For an adult male, it is one hundred times the half-sheqel paid annually; for an adult female, sixty; and so on. But those who sanctify their own value and cannot pay the fixed sum may be subjected to an individual evaluation. When it comes to real estate, the law focuses upon the disposition of real estate received by inheritance, that is, real estate assigned to a specific party in the original, perfect division of the Land at the time of Israel’s first entry into the Land. Both personal valuations and dedications of real property—fields and houses under specified circumstances—represent donations to God through the Temple and the priesthood.

- I. Valuations and vows for the benefit of the Temple
 - A. Basic rules
 - B. Special rules
 - C. Ability to pay in assessing vows
 - D. The difference between pledging a valuation and vowing the worth, or price, of someone or something
 - E. Collecting valuations
- II. The dedication and redemption of a field that has been received as an inheritance
- III. The devoted thing (*herem*)
- IV. The sale and redemption of a field that has been received as an inheritance and of a dwelling place in a walled city

In every case ‘*Arakhin* deals with statements of sanctification of a person or some thing of worth to the Temple. A person may sanctify himself or his property, or he may sanctify the worth of another party, and in either case is obligated to pay to the Temple the value of what he has declared sacred. That payment represents the process of “redemption.” Such statements apply even to a portion of the value of the person:

[If someone said,] “The head of this slave is sanctified,” he [the owner] and the sanctuary are partners in [owning] him.

“The head of this ass is sanctified,”—he and the sanctuary are partners in [owning] it.

Bavli Tractate ‘*Arakhin* 1:35F, H

The process of redemption regularizes the matter.

All normal Israelites, capable of an informed statement of intentionality, including women and slaves, may pledge the valuation of third parties and may be subjected to such a pledge of their worth by third parties. Since the pledge is one of volition, and since Gentiles may sanctify offerings for thanksgiving or free-will donations to the cult, they

may also pledge the value of others and are subject to such a vow. The minimum payment of a vow of valuation (Lev. 27: 8) is a *sela* according to '*Arakhin* and the maximum payment, fifty *sela*. In addition to the vow of valuation, fixed by the Torah, the vow of personal worth further individuates. Vows to pay the value apply to anything, man or beast, live or slaughtered beasts, whole persons and limbs, and the ability to pay is not an issue. The individual is singled out as to his or her actual traits. One may vow to give his weight to the sanctuary, even in silver or in gold. He may pledge to give the worth of his hand, in which case he pays the difference between his value with, and without, a hand. If one pledges his own valuation and dies, his estate pays; the obligation takes effect forthwith. If he pledges his worth and dies, the estate pays nothing.