

Tithes, Offerings & Tz'dakah

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Tithing first appears in the Bible when Abraham gives one-tenth of the increase of his wealth to Melchizedek; reading Genesis 14:18-20:

“Malki-Tzedek king of Shalem brought out bread and wine. He was cohen of El 'Elyon [God Most High], so he blessed him with these words: "Blessed be Avram by El 'Elyon, maker of heaven of earth. and blessed be El 'Elyon, who handed your enemies over to you." Avram gave him a tenth of everything.”

This event is spoken to in more detail in Hebrews 7:1-11.

Tithing appears again in Genesis 28:13-22, when God promises Jacob blessing and land, and Jacob, in turn, promises to return ten percent of that which he is given:

“Then suddenly ADONAI was standing there next to him [Jacob]; and he said, "I am ADONAI, the God of Avraham your [grand]father and the God of Yitz'chak. The land on which you are lying I will give to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the grains of dust on the earth. You will expand to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. By you and your descendants all the families of the earth will be blessed. Look, I am with you. I will guard you wherever you go, and I will bring you back into this land, because I won't leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Ya'akov awoke from his sleep and said, "Truly, ADONAI is in this place- and I didn't know it!" Then he became afraid and said, "This place is fearsome! This has to be the house of God! This is the gate of heaven!" Ya'akov got up early in the morning, took the stone he had put under his head, set it up as a standing-stone, poured olive oil on its top and named the place Beit-El [house of God]; but the town had originally been called Luz. Ya'akov took this vow: "If God will be with me and will guard me on this road that I am traveling, giving me bread to eat and clothes to wear, so that I return to my father's house in peace, then ADONAI will be my God; and this stone, which I have set up as a standing-stone, will be God's house; and of everything you give me, I will faithfully return one-tenth to you.””

This was not, as some construe it, an attempt on Jacob's part to bargain with God, but rather an expression of Jacob's acceptance of the Covenant that had just been

passed on to him, and his acknowledgement that all things with which he would be blessed in fulfillment of that Covenant belonged to God.

The tithe appears again in Numbers 18:20-25 as part of the Mosaic Law, in which the Israelites were commanded to give one-tenth of their increase (usually crops and animals) to sustain the Levites who had no inheritance of land:

“ADONAI said to Aharon, "You are not to have any inheritance or portion in their land; I am your portion and inheritance among the people of Isra'el. To the descendants of Levi I have given the entire tenth of the produce collected in Isra'el. It is their inheritance in payment for the service they render in the tent of meeting. From now on, the people of Isra'el are not to approach the tent of meeting, so that they will not bear the consequences of their sin and die. Only the L'vi'im are to perform the service in the tent of meeting, and they will be responsible for whatever they do wrong. This is to be a permanent regulation through all your generations. They are to have no inheritance among the people of Isra'el, because I have given to the L'vi'im as their inheritance the tenths of the produce which the people of Isra'el set aside as a gift for ADONAI. This is why I have said to them that they are to have no inheritance among the people of Isra'el.”

This giving of a tenth is referred to by Maimonides in his Positive Commandment #127 as the “first tithe.” Maimonides also refers to a “second tithe” in his Positive Commandment #128 that is based on Deuteronomy 14:22-23, which requires that once a year the Israelites were to eat, in the Tabernacle, one-tenth of their crops and the firstborn of their domestic animals that were grown or raised during that year:

“Every year you must take one tenth of everything your seed produces in the field, and eat it in the presence of ADONAI your God. In the place where he chooses to have his name live you will eat the tenth of your grain, new wine and olive oil, and the firstborn of your cattle and sheep, so that you will learn to fear ADONAI your God always.”

Clearly, an Israelite could not eat one-tenth of all of his crops grown within the year, so how this particular *mitzvah* was complied with remains a mystery.

Then there is Maimonides’ Positive Commandment #130 known as the “third tithe” or “poor tithe,” that is based on Deuteronomy 14:28; it states:

“At the end of every three years you are to take all the tenths of your produce from that year and store it in your towns.”

Presumably, each town had a storehouse wherein produce could be stored to sustain those among them who were poor.

Finally, there is Maimonides’ Positive Commandment #129 or the “Levites’ tithing,” whereby the Levites are required to tithe to the *Cohanim* one-tenth of the one-tenth tithing that they received from the Israelites,. This is based on Numbers 18:26, which states:

“Tell the L'vi'im, 'When you take from the people of Isra'el the tenth of the produce which I have given you from them as your inheritance, you are to set aside from it a gift for ADONAI, one tenth of the tenth.’”

Offerings, over and above tithes, were used for other purposes. They were sometimes voluntary and sometimes not, but a percentage of income was not required of offerings as it was of tithes. The first offerings mentioned in the Bible were those of Kayin and Hevel (Cain and Abel) in Genesis 4:1-8:

“The man had sexual relations with Havah his wife; she conceived, gave birth to Kayin [acquisition] and said, "I have acquired a man from ADONAI." In addition she gave birth to his brother Hevel. Hevel kept sheep, while Kayin worked the soil. In the course of time Kayin brought an offering to ADONAI from the produce of the soil; and Hevel too brought from the firstborn of his sheep, including their fat. ADONAI accepted Hevel and his offering but did not accept Kayin and his offering. Kayin was very angry, and his face fell. ADONAI said to Kayin, "Why are you angry? Why so downcast? If you are doing what is good, shouldn't you hold your head high? And if you don't do what is good, sin is crouching at the door- it wants you, but you can rule over it." Kayin had words with Hevel his brother; then one time, when they were in the field, Kayin turned on Hevel his brother and killed him.”

There are many other examples of offerings in Scripture; here are three:

Exodus 25:1-2: *“ADONAI said to Moshe, "Tell the people of Isra'el to take up a collection for me- accept a contribution from anyone who wholeheartedly wants to give.”*

Exodus 30:13-14 (Maimonides P171): *“Everyone subject to the census is to pay as an offering to ADONAI half a shekel [one-fifth of an ounce of silver]- by the standard of the sanctuary shekel (a shekel equals twenty gerahs). Everyone over twenty years of age who is subject to the census is to give this offering to ADONAI”*

Deuteronomy 16:16-17: *“Three times a year all your men are to appear in the presence of ADONAI your God in the place which he will choose- at the festival of matzah, at the festival of Shavu'ot and at the festival of Sukkot. They are not to show up before ADONAI empty-handed, but every man is to give what he can, in accordance with the blessing ADONAI your God has given you.”*

Finally, there is *tz'dakah* (charitable giving), which is giving to the poor and to good causes. Although not required, it was expected, and was considered a matter of moral justice and not mere benevolence:

Deuteronomy 15:7-11: *“If someone among you is needy, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which ADONAI your God is giving you, you are not to harden your heart or shut your hand from giving to your needy brother. No, you must open your hand to him and lend him enough to meet his need and enable him to obtain what he wants. Guard yourself against allowing your heart to entertain the mean-spirited thought that because the seventh year, the year of sh'mittah is at hand, you would be stingy toward your needy brother and not give him anything; for then he may cry out to ADONAI against you, and it will be your sin. Rather, you must give to him; and you are not to be grudging when you give to him. If you do this, ADONAI your God will bless you in all your work, in everything you undertake- for there will always be poor people in the land. That is why I am giving you this order, 'You must open your hand to your poor and needy brother in your land.'”*

An example of *Tz'dakah* from the New Testament is Matthew 6:1-4:

“Be careful not to parade your acts of tzedakah in front of people in order to be seen by them! If you do, you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So, when you do tzedakah, don't announce it with trumpets to win people's praise, like the hypocrites in the synagogues and on the streets. Yes! I tell you, they have their reward already! But you, when you do tzedakah, don't even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Then your tzedakah will be in secret; and your Father, who sees what you do in secret, will reward you.”

What survives of tithes, offerings, and *tz'dakah* in the New Covenant today is not a requirement of law, but rather the loving principles of giving to God's work in our institutions and to individuals who are in need. One sometimes hears that tithing to one's church or synagogue is required, and that is not right. One also sometimes hears that tithing to one's church or synagogue today is no longer appropriate, and that is not right either. The reason these seemingly contradictory things can be said is that, like many things of the Mosaic Law, certain of its principles find their way into the New Covenant, while the particulars and the enforcement mechanisms of the Mosaic Law do not.

There is no true comparison of our congregational sanctuaries today to that of the Tabernacle or Temple, except that our sanctuaries are today (as the Tabernacle and Temple were then) places where members of the community go periodically to meet God in prayer and worship, mediated by priests and a High Priest. In the Tabernacle, they were the Levitical priests and Aaron (the High Priest) and his sons, but now we (the priesthood of believers) are the priests, and Yeshua (our Messiah) is the High Priest. There is another similarity of "then and now," in that both institutions – the Tabernacle (later the Temple) and today's synagogues – have expenses of upkeep. In Mosaic times the expenses included maintaining the Levites, and today it includes mortgage payments or rent, program costs, and the salaries of clergy and other employees.

Whereas tithes and offerings were prescribed by the Mosaic Law for maintaining the Temple and its priests, we have no such law today, but each institution (synagogue, apostolic network, etc.) prescribes the way(s) that its members will maintain it. In denominational synagogues, support of the institution is usually through membership fees and charging for High Holy Day seats, and in Christian churches and Messianic Synagogues it is usually through members paying ten percent tithes on their income – a logical adaptation of the Mosaic Law. As for special offerings and *tz'dakah*, they are as needed today as in the past because membership fees and tithes cannot take care of every need. Messianic communities take up "freewill" offerings to cover such needs, and members of the traditional Jewish community often consider that charitable giving (*tz'dakah*) of ten percent is a minimum moral obligation.

This brings me to Ohev Yisrael, which is your Messianic Jewish congregation and mine. We have expenses as do all synagogues and churches, and our way of acquiring money to pay our bills is to require a ten percent tithe from our members. In years past, last year in fact, Ohev Yisrael closed its year in the black, where its expenses did not exceed its income from tithes. That is not the case this year, and

with half the year to go, we already have a serious shortfall. This is due to a number of things. First, our income from tithes has decreased because a number of our tithing members have moved away for better jobs, and a few have left for other reasons. The economy is also a factor in that some members have been laid off from work, and some who are self-employed have not fared well in their businesses. There is also the concern that some of us that should be tithing are not, or are tithing partially rather than giving an entire ten percent.

But diminished income is not the only reason for our financial down-turn. When Fairfax County prohibited us from using our upstairs for classrooms and fellowship, the Landlord gave us an office in another building rent-free so that we could turn our offices in this building into classrooms. Ohev along with our sub-tenant La Cena del Senor had to move our offices to that location at considerable expense to us, and Ohev had to reimburse La Cena because, as our tenant, we owed them office space in our lease with them. Then, after a while, Ohev's landlord changed its mind about not charging us rent for the new office space, and their demand for payment was so much that we had to move both offices once again, and move many of our belongings back to this building for storage. Also, Ohev had to hire a lawyer in all of this, in order to assess our rights, and to coax our landlord to communicate with us since, for a while, they cut off communicating with us with no reason given.

Now, because our lease on this building ends in November and we need more space than just this ground level area provides us, we will have to move once again (another expense), and this time we will have to move almost everything, to whatever new facility we will be in. We are looking at sharing space in a Sunday church and, although we do not yet know which one, none of them will be able to accommodate all of our property, and so we will have to pay for storage.

So, this brings me to the bottom line of why I am speaking to you about this. Ohev Yisrael's congregants are the sole source of Ohev's income with which we are able to pay our congregation's expenses. Many of you tithe faithfully, and I cannot in good conscience ask you to do more. However, considering our average weekly attendance, it is clear that not all who attend Ohev regularly tithe to Ohev. Now, members have a covenant commitment to tithe, but the principles of Scripture strongly suggest that we should all tithe to where we receive our spiritual nurturing and oversight.

Ohev Yisrael is the only Messianic Jewish congregation of its size and influence in the Northern Virginia area, and it is clear that God wants much from us, both by

way of ministering Yeshua to our Jewish people, ministering the Jewish roots of Christianity to our brothers and sisters in neighboring Christian churches, and caring for our own congregants. We will not be able to do these things if our income continues at its diminished level, and our expenses persist or, even worse, increase. In order to do what the Lord wants us to do, we have to limit our expenses, grow our membership, and be dutiful and generous in our giving.

I am certain that the Lord wants you to take this appeal to heart.