

**AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps**  
Torah Portion: *Metzora*

**MARKET INTERVENTION**

וְאִם-לֹא תִמְצָא יָדָהּ דָּבַר שֶׁהָ וְלִקְחָהּ שְׁתֵּי-תוֹרִים אִוּ שְׁנֵי בְּנֵי יוֹנָה אֶחָד לְעֹלָה וְאֶחָד לְחַטָּאת  
וְכִפֵּר עָלֶיהָ כַּכֹּהֵן וְטָהַרָה:

*And if her means are not sufficient for a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and one for a sin offering. The priest shall make expiation on her behalf, and she shall be clean.* [Leviticus 12:8]

This week's Torah portion describes the sacrificial offerings brought to the Temple by a woman who has just given birth. The standard sacrifice is a sheep. However, sheep were expensive, and not every woman could afford that large a sacrifice. Therefore, the Torah makes provisions for Israelites with modest means and instructs them to bring birds as an offering. Birds were much less expensive.

The Mishna describes a situation in which the market for birds rose so much that even these sacrifices could not be afforded by poorer women. Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel the Elder, a leading rabbi of that time, took decisive action to lower the market price:

**MISHNAH:** A woman who gave birth five times...can eat sanctified foods after she brings only one sacrificial offering, but she is still obligated to bring four more. Once it happened that the price of a pair of birds rose all the way to one gold זוז. Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel said: "I swear that the price of birds will fall before I go to bed this evening!" He went straight to the courthouse and taught the following law: "A woman who has given birth five times...need bring only one sacrifice for all five births..." The price of birds fell that day to one quarter of a silver זוז. [M. *Kritot* 1:7]

**QUESTION:** It seems that Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel's ruling stands in contradiction to the received law. By what authority did he change the law? Should rabbis or other community leaders attempt to influence economic markets on behalf of the poor? Why or why not?

**Note:** Using religious rulings to thwart high prices has been used by rabbis in other situations as well. In the Sixteenth century fishermen in Moravia conspired to drive up the price of fish, putting local Jews, who followed the tradition of eating fish on the sabbath, under severe financial strain. Realizing that releasing the Jews from the observance of this custom could possibly worsen the situation of the poor, who would try to remain true to tradition despite the dispensation, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Krochmal, a leading communal figure in the region, declared all fish to be "treyf," (not kosher). The effect on the market was immediate, and prices normalized the following week. [Responsa *Tzemakh Tzedek* #28; and see *Mishnah Berurah* 242:2]