

PLACES IN ISRAEL

Ancient Embezzlement

Rivi Frankel



Included in the Yom Kippur *vidui* is the request to be forgiven “for the sin we have committed before You by embezzlement.” While the word embezzlement may conjure up Wall Street and Ponzi schemes images today, embezzlement in the ancient world was often conducted by a merchant using purposefully incorrect weights and scales. We are commanded many times in Tanach to ensure our businesses’ weights and measures are honest:

“You shall not have in your pouch alternate weights, larger and smaller. You shall not have in your house alternate measures, a larger and a smaller. You must have completely honest weights and completely honest measures, if you are to endure long on the soil that the L-rd your G-d is giving you.” (Devarim 25:13–15)

Around the City of David and Temple Mount, archaeologists have discovered many stones used as weights in commerce during the First and Second Temple periods. The stones were often crafted out of local limestone and marked with an Egyptian symbol that resembles the Greek letter gamma, as the Egyptian weight system was the commonly used system in international trade. Next to this symbol would be a demarcation of the stone’s weight. For example, two lines indicated a two-shekel stone. Remarkably, these stones were consistently accurate; all of the shekel stones weighed about 11.5 grams.

In the 1960s, Kathleen Kenyon found 34 weights in a First Temple building in the City of David. Most of them were shekel weights, but two of them had the word “*pim*” engraved on them. This added a new understanding to the verse found in Shmuel I 13:21: “The charge for sharpening was a *pim* for plowshares, mattocks, three-pronged forks, and axes, and for setting the goads.”



A First Temple-period weight measure unearthed in an excavation. (PHOTO: ELIYAHU YANAI, CITY OF DAVID)

As we see, this translation reflects the new understanding of the word *pim*. However, *pim* is a hapax legomenon, a word only appearing in Tanach once. As such, the commentators struggle to understand what this word means. *Mitzudat David* suggests that it is a type of sharpening tool, and Rashi also relates it to something that sharpens. It is only after Kenyon’s discovery that we can come to a more historically accurate translation.

A *pim* is measured as two-thirds of a shekel and can be seen on display at the Israel Museum. In the same room, you will also find a stone with the word *netzef*, weighing approximately five-sixths of a shekel, as well as a stone equating to 24 shekel.

While the Temple Mount is often associated with prayer and holiness, visiting the area reminds us that this was also a market center of the city. Of course, the City of David had administrative and commerce sections in the royal plazas, but the area between the City of David and the Temple was also a bustling financial sector. With remnants of shops, coins, and weights

and measures for scales, it is easy to be transported back to a time when this part of Jerusalem was alive with business – much of it related to pilgrims coming to pray at the Temple.

How fitting that directly below where the people stood, anxiously waiting to see the *Kohen Gadol* emerge from the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, a sign of G-d’s forgiveness of the people’s sins, we find proof of the people’s dedication to following the Torah’s laws of honest business. The Torah is not restricted to ritual matters, nor is it limited to the precincts of the Temple Mount. We are meant to walk in the way of G-d every day, in all of our interactions. The finding of consistent weights in the ancient streets of the City of David demonstrates that the Jews of antiquity strove to serve G-d in every aspect of their lives. May we merit to do the same!

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