MISHNA Initially, the practice among the priests was that whoever wishes to remove the ashes from the altar removes them. And when there are many priests who wish to perform that task, the privilege to do so is determined by a race: The priests run and ascend on the ramp leading to the top of the altar. Any priest who precedes another and reaches within four cubits of the top of the altar first is privileged to remove the ashes. And if both of them were equal and neither preceded the other, the appointed priest says to all the priests: Extend your fingers, and a lottery was performed, as will be explained.

And what fingers do they extend for the lottery? They may extend one or two fingers, and the priests do not extend a thumb in the Temple. The reason is that the lottery was conducted by the appointee choosing a number and counting the extended fingers of the priests standing in a circle. As the count progressed, a priest could calculate and manipulate the result in his favor by surreptitiously extending his thumb and an additional finger. Since there is separation between the thumb and the forefinger it could appear as though they belonged to two different priests, skewing the results of the lottery.

GEMARA The Gemara questions the original practice of holding a race to determine which priest would remove the ashes: And what is the reason that the Sages did not initially institute a lottery for the removal of the ashes as they did for other parts of the service? The Gemara answers: Initially they thought: Since it is a service performed at night it would not be important to the priests, and not many of them would come to perform it, so a lottery would be unnecessary. Then, when they saw that many priests did indeed come and that they were coming to danger by racing up the altar’s ramp, they instituted a lottery.

The Gemara poses a question against the assertion that nighttime Temple services did not normally require a lottery: But there is the burning of the limbs of burnt-offerings and the fats of other offerings, which is a service that is performed at night, and nevertheless the Sages instituted a lottery for that from the outset. The Gemara answers: The burning of those parts is not considered a nighttime service but the end of a daytime service, as the main part of the sacrificial service, the slaughtering and the sprinkling of blood, took place during the day.

The Gemara asks: If so, it could be argued that this service of removing the ashes is also not a nighttime service but the start of a daytime service, as Rabbi Yoḥanan said: If a priest has sanctified his hands at night by washing them for the removal of the ashes, the next day, i.e., after daybreak, if he remained in the confines of the Temple, he need not sanctify his hands again, because he already sanctified them at the start of the service. Apparently, the removal of the ashes, though performed at night, is considered the start of the next day’s service.
We learned that the priests run and ascend on the ramp and only afterward it says: Any priest who precedes another – מִי כֵּיוָן בְּסִידּוּר בֵּינֵיהֶם מִי כֵּיוָן קִידֵּשׁ לָהּ רַבָּנַן. Some commentators claim that the Gemara’s proof from this sentence is from the baraita: לאָ קִידֵּשׁ לָהּ רַבָּנַן מִמֵּיקַם וְנִיפַּיְיסוּ הַדֶּשֶׁן לָא לֵﬠֲבוֹדָה אָתוּ, תַּקִּינוּ שֶׁכְּבָר וְנִיפַּיְיסוּ. The Gemara answers: Rav Ashi said: There were two separate ordinances instituted. Initially, the Sages thought that priests would not come forward to perform the task of removing the ashes. Once they saw that many priests did come and that they were also coming to danger, the Sages instituted a lottery for this task. Then the Sages instituted a lottery for the priests who were privileged with laying out the arrangement of wood on the altar and with placing the two logs that were placed on the altar each morning. Since these were inherently important tasks, the only way to assign them was through a lottery, which would also determine who removed the ashes.

The Gemara responds by emending Rabbi Yohanan’s statement: Say the following version of the end of Rabbi Yohanan’s statement: Because he had already sanctified them at the outset for service. According to this formulation, Rabbi Yohanan did not say that the removal of the ashes is considered the start of the following day’s service. Rather, he said that although the removal of the ashes is a nighttime service, since the priest sanctified his hands before performing that service, the sanctification remains in effect for the services performed after daybreak as well, since there is no interruption between the two activities.

Some say that the original practice should be explained as follows: Initially, the Sages thought that since there is a likelihood of being overcome by sleep at that time of night, not many priests would come. When they saw that they did indeed come and that they were also coming to danger, the Sages instituted a lottery for this task. The Gemara asks: But there is the burning of the limbs of burnt-offerings and the fats of other offerings, a service for which there is the same likelihood of being overcome by sleep, and nevertheless the Sages instituted a lottery for that from the outset. The Gemara answers: Lying down to go to sleep late is different from rising in the middle of the night. It is not as difficult to stay up late in order to burn limbs on the altar as it is to rise before dawn to remove the ashes from the altar.

The Gemara addresses the substance of the mishna’s claim: But was the ordinance to assign the removal of ashes by means of a lottery due to that reason? The ordinance was instituted due to this reason: There were other important tasks associated with the removal of the ashes that required a lottery in their own right, as it was taught in a baraita: The priest who was privileged to perform the removal of the ashes was also privileged with laying out the arrangement of wood on the altar and with placing the two logs that were placed on the altar each morning. Since these were inherently important tasks, the only way to assign them was through a lottery, which would also determine who removed the ashes.
It is also not referring to four cubits somewhere in the middle, between the four on the bottom and the top of the altar, because the matter is not defined and there is no clear indication which four cubits on the ramp are the determining cubits. In light of all this, it is obvious to me that the four cubits we learned in the mishna are referring to the four cubits that are adjacent to the altar itself. The priest who reaches those four cubits first is the one privileged to remove the ashes.

Rav Pappa raised a dilemma based on the above clarification: Are the four cubits that they stated, which are the four cubits adjacent to the altar, calculated including the cubit of the base of the altar and the cubit of its ledge, as the ramp continues and overlaps these two cubits at the top of the altar, or are they perhaps calculated excluding the cubit of the base of the altar and the cubit of its ledge? The altar’s edge can be considered to be at the end of the ramp, the point at which it meets the altar, or it can be considered the point on the ramp that is directly over the external base of the altar, which is two cubits away from the point where the ramp meets the altar. Which of these two calculations is the correct one? Rav Pappa’s question remains unanswered, and the Gemara concludes: The dilemma shall stand unresolved.

§ It was taught in the mishna that if both of them were equal and neither preceded the other, the appointed priest says to all the priests: Extend your fingers [hatzbiy], and a lottery was performed. A tanna taught the meaning of the unusual term hatzbiy: Put out your fingers for a count. The Gemara asks: Let him count the priests themselves directly, rather than counting their fingers. The Gemara answers: This is a support for a teaching of Rabbi Yitzhak, as Rabbi Yitzhak said: It is prohibited to count Jews directly, even for the purposes of a mitzva, as it is written concerning King Saul and his count of his soldiers: “And he numbered them with bezek” (1 Samuel 11:8), meaning that he counted them through shards, one shard representing each man, rather than counting them directly.

Rav Ashi strongly objects to this interpretation of the verse: From where do you derive that this word bezek is a term related to the verb meaning to break apart, so that it means shards? Perhaps it is the name of a town, and it means that Saul counted them in Bezek, as it is written: “And they found Adoni-bezek in Bezek” (Judges 1:5), which shows that Bezek is the name of a place. The Gemara answers: Indeed, the proof is not from that verse but from here, where it says: “And Saul summoned the people and numbered them by sheep” (1 Samuel 15:4), meaning that Saul tallied his soldiers by having each one take a sheep and put it aside to represent him in the count.

Rabbi Elazar said: Whoever counts a group of Jews violates a negative mitzva, as it is stated: “And the number of the children of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured” (Hosea 2:1). Rabbi Elazar interprets the verse to be saying: Which may not be measured. Rav Naḥman bar Yitzhak said: One who counts a group of Jews in fact violates two negative mitzvot, as it is stated in that verse: “Which cannot be measured and cannot be counted” (Hosea 2:1).
A leader of the community becomes wealthy – פַּרְנָס אֶת
The reason for this is that a leader who is financially secure will not be intimidated by wealthy members of the community and will feel little compunction in rebuking them for their misdeeds (Ben Yehoyada).

Rabbi Shmuel bar Naḥmani said that Rabbi Yonatan raised a contradiction: It is written in this verse: “And the number of the children of Israel will be like the sand of the sea,” suggesting that they will have a specific number, though it will be very large. On the other hand, it continues and says: “Which cannot be measured and cannot be counted,” which means they will not be countable at all. How can these two statements be reconciled?

It is not difficult: Here, in the second statement, it is referring to a time when the Jewish people fulfill the will of God; then they will be innumerable. There, in the first statement, it is referring to a time when the Jewish people do not fulfill the will of God; then they will be like the sand of the sea, having a specific number. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said a different resolution in the name of Abba Yosei ben Dostai: It is not difficult: Here, in the second statement, it is referring to counting by the hand of man; the Jewish people will be too numerous to count by man. There, in the first statement, it is referring to counting by the hand of God, and He will find that they are like the number of the grains of the sand of the sea.

Rav Nehilai bar Ibi said that Shmuel said: Once a man is appointed as a leader of the community, he becomes wealthy. This is derived from the verses cited above. Initially, it is written with regard to Saul: “And he numbered them with bezek,” meaning pottery shards, and in the end it is written: “And he numbered them with sheep,” indicating that he was able to provide enough of his own sheep to use them in counting the people. The Gemara asks: But perhaps the people provided these sheep from their own flocks. The Gemara rejects this: If so, what is the novelty in the matter? Why would the text tell us that the people were counted with sheep if not to illustrate incidentally the great wealth of Saul?

§ Having mentioned the verse about Saul, the Gemara proceeds to interpret more of that passage: “And Saul came to the city of Amalek and he strove in the valley” (1 Samuel 15:3). Rabbi Mani said: This means that Saul strove with God, as it were, concerning the matter of the valley. At the time when the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Saul: “Now go and attack Amalek and proscribe all that belongs to him; do not pity him, but kill men and women alike, infants and sucklings alike, oxen and sheep alike, camel and donkey alike” (1 Samuel 15:3), Saul countered and said: Now, if on account of one life that is taken, in a case where a slain person’s body is found and the murderer is unknown, the Torah said to bring a heifer whose neck is broken to a barren valley, in the atonement ritual described in Deuteronomy 21:1–9, all the more so must I have pity and not take all these Amalekite lives.

And he further reasoned: If the men have sinned, in what way have the animals sinned? Why, then, should the Amalekites’ livestock be destroyed? And if the adults have sinned, in what way have the children sinned? A Divine Voice then came forth and said to him: “Do not be overly righteous” (Ecclesiastes 7:16). That is to say: Do not be more merciful than the Creator Himself, Who has commanded you to do this, for to do so would not be an indication of righteousness but of weakness. At a later time, when Saul said to Doeg: “Turn around and strike down the priests, and Doeg the Edomite turned around and struck down the priests, and he killed on that day eighty-five men who wore the linen ephod, and he struck Nob the city of priests by the sword, man and woman alike, infants and sucklings alike, oxen and donkeys and sheep, by the sword” (1 Samuel 22:18–19), a Divine Voice came forth and said to him: “Do not be overly wicked” (Ecclesiastes 7:17).
Apropos Saul's contravention of God's command to obliterate Amalek, the Gemara observes that Rav Huna said: How little does a person who has the support of his Lord have to worry or be concerned. The proof for this assertion is a comparison between Saul and David. Saul failed with one single sin and it was counted against him, costing him the throne. David, however, failed with two sins and they were not counted against him, as he retained his position. The Gemara asks: What was Saul’s one sin? The incident with Agag, king of Amalek, whom Saul spared in defiance of God's command (see 1 Samuel 15:9). But was this his sole sin? There is also the incident of Nob, the city of priests, in which Saul later slew many innocent people, as cited above. The Gemara asks: Was it after the incident with Agag, and even before the incident at Nob, that God said: “I regret that I have crowned Saul to be king” (1 Samuel 15:11).

The Gemara asks: But were these his only two sins? There is also the incident of Bathsheba, in which he took another man’s wife as his own. The Gemara answers: There, in that case, punishment was exacted from him separately, so the matter is no longer listed among his sins, as it is written with regard to this incident: “And he shall restore the lamb fourfold” (1 Samuel 12:6). The lamb was a metaphor for Bathsheba, and ultimately David was indeed given a fourfold punishment for taking Bathsheba: The first child born to Bathsheba and David died (see 11 Samuel 12:13–23); David’s son Amnon was killed; Tamar, his daughter, was raped by Amnon (see 11 Samuel 13); and his son Avshalom rebelled against him and was ultimately killed (see 11 Samuel 15–18).

The Gemara asks: If sins for which was David was punished separately are not counted, one could ask: There, too, with regard to the sin of the census, he was punished separately, as it is written: “And the Lord sent a plague against Israel from the morning until the appointed time” (11 Samuel 24:15). The Gemara responds: There, David was not punished personally, in his own body; rather, the punishment was inflicted on the Jewish people.

The Gemara challenges this: There, too, in the incident with Bathsheba, David was not punished personally, in his own body; rather, it was his children who suffered punishment. The Gemara answers: That is not so; he was punished personally, in his own body, for that sin, as Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: David was stricken with leprosy for six months after that incident, and the Sanhedrin withdrew from him in protest over his behavior, and the Divine Presence also left him. As it is written that David prayed: “May those who fear You return to me, and they who know Your testimonies” (Psalm 119:79). Since he prayed for the return of those who fear God and who know His testimonies, referring to the Sages of the Sanhedrin, it can be inferred that they had withdrawn from him. And it is written as well: “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, let a vigorous spirit support me” (Psalm 51:14), where David asks for the return of the Divine Spirit, which had left him.

The Gemara asks: And didn’t David commit other sins? Didn’t Rav say: David accepted a slanderous report from Ziba about Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan, stating that the latter was pleased with David’s downfall? There was, in that case, this additional sin. The Gemara responds: Consequently, it is necessary to follow the approach of Shmuel, who said: David did not accept a slanderous report, because Ziba’s claim was true.
The Gemara continues: And even according to Rav, who said that David accepted a slanderous report, one could answer that that sin is not counted, as was he not punished for it? As Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: At the time when David said to Mephibosheth: “I say that you and Ziba should divide the field” (1 Samuel 19:30), a Divine Voice came forth and said to him: Rehoboam and Jeroboam will divide the kingdom. Because David believed Ziba’s slanderous report and awarded him half of Mephibosheth’s field, David was punished by having his kingdom divided into two. Following King Solomon’s death the Jewish people split into two kingdoms, Israel to the north and Judea to the south (see 1 Kings 12). Therefore, David was punished for that sin too.

The Gemara continues its discussion of Saul and David. It is written: “Saul was one year old when he began to reign” (1 Samuel 13:1), which cannot be understood literally, as Saul was appointed king when he was a young man. Rav Huna said: The verse means that when he began to reign he was like a one-year-old, in that he had never tasted the taste of sin but was wholly innocent and upright.

Rav Nahman bar Yitzḥak strongly objects to this interpretation of the verse, saying: You could just as well say that he was like a one-year-old in that he was always filthy with mud and excrement.8 Rav Nahman was shown a frightful dream that night, and he understood it as a punishment for having disparaged Saul. He said: I humbly submit myself to you, O bones of Saul, son of Kish, and beg your forgiveness. But once again he was shown a frightful dream, and he understood that he had not shown enough deference in his first apology. He therefore said this time: I humbly submit myself to you, O bones of Saul, son of Kish, king of Israel, and beg your forgiveness. Subsequently, the nightmares ceased.

Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: Why did the kingship of the house of Saul not continue on to succeeding generations? It is because there was no flaw in his ancestry; he was of impeccable lineage. As Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehozaddak: One appoints a leader over the community only if he has a box full of creeping animals hanging behind him,9 i.e., he has something inappropriate in his ancestry that preceded him. Why is that? It is so that if he exhibits a haughty attitude toward the community, one can say to him: Turn and look behind you and be reminded of your humble roots. This is why David’s kingdom lasted while Saul’s did not, as David descended from a family with problematic ancestry, namely Tamar (see Genesis, chapter 38) and Ruth the Moabite (see Ruth 4:18–22).

Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: Why was Saul punished in that he was ultimately led to commit the sins described above?8 Because at the very outset of his reign he inappropriately forwent his royal honor, as it is stated with regard to Saul’s inauguration: “And some base fellows said: How can this man save us? So they disparaged him and brought him no present. But he made himself as if he did not hear” (1 Samuel 10:27). And it is stated immediately afterward: “And Nahash the Ammonite marched up and encamped against Jabesh-gilead” (1 Samuel 11:1). The implication is that if Saul had forcefully assumed his throne, Nahash would not have dared to attack the people of Jabesh-gilead. In this way, his humility led to the crisis.

And Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehozaddak: Any Torah scholar

8 See Shabbat 145a.

9 See Gen. 38:2 and Ruth 4:18:

NOTES

Like a one-year-old, filthy with mud and excrement—ךב דפ קורא רחוב – רב קובא: Rav Nahman’s comment is puzzling. Why should he suggest an interpretation that is so unflattering to Saul? Perhaps what he meant to say was that Saul, in his great humility, viewed himself as a soiled child, as expressed in the verse: “Like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child am I in my mind” (Psalms 131:2). Nevertheless, Rav Nahman was punished for stating this idea in a disrespectful manner (Tosafot Halakhot).

A box full of creeping animals hanging behind him—ךב דפ קורא רחוב – רב קובא: It is unwise to appoint an officer over the community who assumes so much power that he comes to view his position as a right. Therefore, one who has a flawed past, if he has the requisite leadership qualities, is a preferable leader to one with no such past (Me’nir).

Why was Saul punished in that he was ultimately led to commit the sins described above? As Rav Me’iri explains: This explanation follows Rashi’s commentary. Other commentaries explain the question in a more straightforward manner: Why was Saul punished in that he was faced with a war immediately upon assuming the crown (yyurin t’kakos)?