

**Date:** 24 Shevat 5786 (February 11, 2026)

**Torah Portion:** Mishpatim

**Topic:** Authority Revealed Through Restraint

Matthew 17:22–27 is often remembered for its miracle—the coin found in a fish’s mouth—but its true weight lies in the legal and ethical reasoning that frames it. Read within a Jewish legal worldview, the episode is not a curiosity but a carefully constructed teaching about authority. When set against the background of Exodus 21–24 and Second Kings 12:1–17, the passage reveals a classic Torah movement from Din (law/judgment), through Rachamim (mercy), to Malkhut (rightful kingship).

The question posed to Peter—whether Yehoshua pays the Temple tax—raises an issue of legal obligation. Yehoshua answers not by rejecting the tax, but by clarifying status. He asks Peter whether kings collect taxes from their sons or from strangers. The answer is obvious: from strangers. Yehoshua then draws the legal conclusion, “Then the sons are free.” This is a statement of Din. Within Torah law, obligation follows status. Those under authority pay; those who belong to the household of authority do not. This logic underlies the civil laws of Exodus 21–24, where liability, restitution, and payment are assigned according to one’s position—servant, owner, or judge. Authority does not tax itself, and heirs are not treated as subjects.

Applied to the Temple, the reasoning is precise. If the Temple is the Father’s house, then the Son is not legally obligated to pay a maintenance tax for it. At the level of law, the claim is sound. Matthew presents Yehoshua as operating fully within the logic of Torah, not outside it. Din is upheld, not compromised.

Yet the narrative does not stop at legal clarity. Yehoshua immediately chooses to pay the tax anyway, explaining that this is done “so that we do not cause offense.” This move introduces Rachamim. Ethically, law is not the final word; it is the foundation upon which mercy may act. The rabbinic principle of *lifnim mishurat ha-din*—going beyond the strict letter of the law—praises those who voluntarily relinquish rights they legitimately possess in order to preserve peace. Mercy does not negate law; it presupposes it. Only one who truly has freedom can meaningfully set it aside.

This choice is what transforms the act of payment. Yehoshua does not pay because he must, but because he chooses to. The payment becomes an expression of responsibility rather than submission. Rachamim softens Din without dissolving it, allowing the law to serve communal harmony rather than provoke conflict.

The final layer of the passage is Malkhut, true authority. In the Scriptures, kingship is measured not by the ability to demand, but by the capacity to govern oneself. Second Kings 12 offers a sobering contrast. There, Temple funds are lawfully collected, yet the priests fail to steward them faithfully. The problem is not the tax itself, but the misuse of authority. Din exists, but Malkhut collapses. Authority that cannot restrain itself loses legitimacy.

Matthew’s account offers a corrective vision. The Temple tax is paid, but it is not extracted or exploited. The coin comes through divine provision, emphasizing that the House of YHWH ultimately stands by His sustenance, not by coercive power. By paying voluntarily, Yehoshua neither undermines the Temple nor asserts dominance over it. Instead, he models authority aligned with heaven—free, restrained, and responsible.

Seen as a whole, Matthew 17:22–27 traces a complete Torah pattern. Din establishes the legal truth that the sons are free. Rachamim moves beyond strict right to protect peace. Malkhut is revealed in the wisdom to hold both law and mercy together. Exodus provides the legal framework, Kings exposes the dangers of failed stewardship, and Matthew shows what authority looks like when law, mercy, and kingship are fully integrated.

The passage ultimately teaches that true authority is not proven by refusing obligation, but by freely choosing responsibility. In this way, Matthew does not depart from Torah; it embodies its deepest structure. Authority reaches its highest expression not in exemption alone, but in voluntary faithfulness for the sake of others.

Shalom.