

Vayakhel-Pikudei

Vanity Mirrors

This week's shiur connects two most unlikely themes: the Mishkan and sexuality.

One of the interesting items contained in the Mishkan was the Kiyor - the Laver or Wash-basin. The Kohanim had to wash their hands and feet before they performed the Avoda (Service of the Mishkan) so this was a rather essential element of the Mishkan.

The command to create the Kiyor is described in last week's parsha:

“Make a laver of copper and a copper stand for it, for washing; and place it between the Tent of meeting and the altar. Put water in it, and let Aaron and his sons wash their hands and feet from it. When they enter the Tent of meeting they shall wash with water, that they may not die...” (30:17-20)

The construction of the Kiyor is described in our parsha where we are told in a single sentence:

“He made the laver of copper and its copper stand from the **mirrors of the women who gathered at the entrance to the tent of meeting.**” (38:8)

And here our puzzlement really begins. We are unaccustomed to hearing the specific identity of the donors of the raw materials for the particular vessels of the Mishkan. We are not informed as to the origin of the gold used to craft the Menorah, nor whose wool made the curtains of the Mishkan. So, why are we emphatically informed that this copper originated with this group of women? And do are we particularly concerned as whether a women donates her copper mirror or a pair of earrings or anything else for that matter?

And we should raise a further query here. Who is this group of women who congregate at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting? They are referred to as if they were a definitive group, however, we know nothing about them!

WOMEN OF FAITH

RASHI (38:8) answers both our questions. He tells us why the materials used for the Kiyor are singled out and this is interlinked with the identity of these women.

“The womenfolk of Israel had mirrors which they used when they beautified themselves with cosmetics. When the women offered these mirrors as gifts for the Mishkan, Moses' immediate reaction was to reject them as they

were made for the “*yetzer hara*” (ie. for sexual purposes - to make themselves beautiful and endear them to their husbands.) God told him ‘Accept them! - These are dearer to me than all the other gifts! - It was due to these mirrors that these women brought myriads (*Tzevaot*) into the world when they were in Egypt.’

When their husbands were engaged in backbreaking labour they would go to see their husbands, bringing with them provisions of food and drink. They would eat together and then they would hold up the mirrors together and would see themselves in the mirror. She would tease him saying - ‘I am better looking than you’ and in this way they would seduce their husbands... and had children....and these are those mirrors (*mar'ot hatzov'ot*)”

This rather daring Midrash paints for us the image of desperation experienced by the Israelites in their Egyptian slavery. There was no hope in the future. Husbands lived in labour camps away from their wives. In this environment, bringing children into the world was an absurdity. Why bring another slave into the world? The baby will just be torn away from his parents to be raised as another desperate slave! And if it happens to be a boy, he will be flung into the river!

The situation, vividly depicted by Rashi, is reminiscent of the famous Midrash (See Chizkuni on Shemot 2:1) about Yocheved and Amram - Moshe's parents - who (in the Midrashic imagination,) separated rather than bring further children into the world. It was Miriam, their daughter who convinced them to have another child. She challenged her parents: “You are worse than Pharaoh! - He kills the children, but you two won't even risk having a child at all!” It was with immense courage and a spirit of defiance that Moses' parents made the difficult decision to continue the growth of their family despite the despair and the danger. Amram and Yocheved got back together. Indeed, they were rewarded with Moses as their son.

Here too, in Rashi's Midrash, the men have despaired of the future of their people. The women still have faith in God. They have hope. The women visit their husbands in the midst of their backbreaking labour, their depression and filth, and they use the mirrors as part of a process that induced their husbands to sleep with them. In this way the Jewish people was given new life, and “myriads were brought into the world.”

Rashi uses a interesting pun here. The mirrors are described as “*Mar'ot Hatzov'ot*”. *Mar'ot* are mirrors, but the word “*tzov'ot*” is unclear as to its meaning. Rashi connects it with the word “*tzeva'ot*” - myriads. These were the mirrors which created myriads of Jews - an entire generation.

EXCLUSIVE DEDICATION TO GOD

The RAMBAN disagrees with Rashi's reading. He feels that it doesn't fit with the second phrase of the passuk “*asher tzav'u petach ohel mo'ed*”. Textually Rashi's

interpretation is difficult. Ramban comes up with a new theory based on a comment by the IBN EZRA.

“Women habitually look in the mirror - made of copper or glass - every morning to put their headdress into shape. Now, amongst the Israelites were certain women, dedicated to the service of God, who distanced themselves from worldly desire. They donated their mirrors to the Mishkan, as they had no further use for beautification. These women would come each day to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to pray and to hear the details of the mitvot.” (Ibn Ezra - Perush Ha'aroch)

According to this explanation of the Ibn Ezra, there was a group of women who gave away their mirrors! These were women who decided to dedicate every last fibre of their being to God. To this end, it would appear that they paid no attention to their physical appearance and would not indulge in worrying about the way they looked. Instead they occupied themselves solely with Torah and prayer. These ascetic women disposed of their mirrors as an expression of their non-worldly aspirations. They were used - quite appropriately - for the basin that stood, just like these women, at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

HUMAN DESIRE AND GOD

Clearly, these two readings of a single passuk contain diametrically opposed approaches to the same issue: the place of human sexuality in the value system of Judaism.

Rashi expresses a view proposing that sexuality, when used to enhance love between husband and wife, when utilised to further the Jewish people, is appropriate. In fact, it is more than appropriate; it is holy! Interestingly enough, Moses initially sees things differently. He demonstrates reluctance in accepting these mirrors precisely due to the fact that they were instruments of human desire. God had to push Moshe to adopt a wider view. After all, these mirrors were used for a noble purpose, a sacred purpose; for the selfsame purpose that caused God to create human passion in the first place. These mirrors find their place in the sacred space of a Mishkan. Rashi's thesis wants to find a place in the world of Kedusha for sexuality.¹

But in contrast, Ibn Ezra proposes that one can find ultimate holiness specifically when one transcends the human. Sexuality is an important aspect of human living but it does not represent holiness. The spiritual realms rise way above the perfection of the physical. For most people, human desire can find its place integrated within a life of holiness. But there are pious saintly levels that demand that one transcend the passions of the flesh.

Moses went to the top of Mount Sinai and did not eat or drink for forty days. According to the Midrash (see Rashi Bamidbar 12:1) Moshe separated from his wife. There is a certain view that sees the ultimate holiness as beyond the realm of humanity.

Can man enter the holy of holies despite his flawed humanity? Can human desire be sanctified and elevated, or is there a level of Godliness that can be reached only by negating one's humanity? This question is difficult. Maybe there are different answers for different people. Certainly, different groups throughout Jewish History have proposed a whole range of answers.

SHIR HASHIRIM

But maybe we might end with a discussion that dates back to the second century. The Rabbis at the time were deciding on the canonisation of the Tanach - which books would be included and which would be rejected. The question came up of whether to include Shir Hashirim into the Tanach. The hesitation, the problem with this book was its overt sexual imagery. Shir Hashirim is a passionate love story, understood by Chazal as a metaphor for the turbulent but passionate relationship between Israel and God. Was this text an appropriate work to be included in the Tanach? The opponents said that the sexual descriptions could not find their place in the holy writings. The proponents replied that there were certain depths of feeling that could be understood only in terms of the passion and longing between man and woman, that through human desire we could understand religious passion and dedication. Through human feelings we could understand our relationship with God.

“Rabbi Akiva said : ...The world would have justified its existence if only for the day on which Shir Hashirim was given to Israel; for all the other books (of the Tanach) are holy but Shir Hashirim is the holy of holies!” (Mishna Yadayim 3:5)

Shabbat Shalom.

¹ For an excellent (but difficult) article on attitudes to sexuality in classic Rabbinic literature, see Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, "Of Marriage, Relationship and Relations," in A. Lichtenstein, *The Variety of Jewish Experience*, (Ktav 2011,) pp 1-39.