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בס"ד

Parashat Vayaqhel Part II

1. The Laver and its Stand

The instructions for the laver and its stand (כִּיּוֹר וְכַנּוֹ) specified that these items should be made of bronze (Ex. 30:18). There was no stipulation instructing the leaders as to where they should obtain the bronze. Indeed, except for the several uses of the silver acquired through the half-sheqel atonement payments (38:27-28), instructions for the Mishkan and its furnishings did not specify any particular source for the raw material to be used for construction; all was to come from the voluntary donations of the public-at-large.

When we read the Torah's description of the construction of the laver and its stand, however, we are surprised to discover that they were made with bronze derived מִיְּמֵי הַמִּיּוֹת (from the mirrors of the congregating women, who congregated at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting," 38:8). Mirrors then were generally highly polished round, flat plates of copper or bronze with a handle, perfectly suited to be melted down for the purpose at hand. These women had decided to donate their mirrors for the laver and its stand. Although the Torah does not provide the dimensions of the laver, given that all the priests who served had to wash hands and feet before their service, it had to have capacity for a large volume of water and numerous mirrors were required for its construction.

Clearly, it is a matter of great significance that a group of women got together to voluntarily dedicate the raw material to be used for construction of a sanctuary accouterment. Aside from the gifts of the chieftains – precious gems for placement in the priestly vestments, oils and spices and wagons for transport – this is the only case the Torah records of the donors of a specific item to the sanctuary project. It requires an explanation.

True, the laver and its stand were not absolutely essential for the functioning of the sanctuary. Washing hands and feet did not constitute a service in itself, but was preparation for a service, and the priests could have washed in another manner. Even after installation of the laver, access to another nearby source of water was assumed that could even serve for ablution since the sanctuary program sometimes requires וְרָחַץ בְּמֵי־מַיִם אֶת כָּל בְּשָׂרוֹ ("He shall wash his whole body in water," Lev. 15:16). In addition, G-d's instructions for the laver and its stand are not prescribed together with the other Mishkan furnishings but appear after the "close" of the primary instructional section, as part of an "addendum." Perhaps instructions for the laver were placed "late" and last of the furnishings because it was not a critical item.

It should be noted, however, that instructions for the laver immediately follow those for the incense altar and the census. As explained in our *Parashat Ki Tissa Part I* study, the incense altar and the census appear to have been added to the Mishkan instructions following the golden calf, as part of the atonement process, while instructions for the other major furnishings preceded that transgression. Although added after the golden calf, they were placed in the text before narration of that episode in order to keep them together with the Mishkan instructional section. But reflecting their "late" origin, they were presented after the main body of instructions was concluded. The laver may also have been commanded after the transgression.

In any event, once prescribed, the laver became a sanctuary vessel that was regularly mentioned with all the other sanctuary furnishings. Surely there is an explanation that it was acceptable for the laver and its stand to be constructed exclusively from the

contributions of a particular group of donors. It is an honor of great distinction for donors to be recognized with such a permanent commemoration. Unquestionably, the Torah implies that these women acted out of extraordinarily noble intentions. Ibn Ezra assumes that these were women of spiritual stature who were accustomed to come to the Tent of Meeting to pray or to hear the expounding of the law. Others are of the opinion that these women came to help in keeping the premises clean. But in the absence of a fuller statement of explanation concerning women congregating at the entrance to the *Ohel Mo`ed* this verse is difficult to interpret.

There is one other Biblical passage that makes reference to women who congregated at the entrance to the *Ohel Mo`ed*, and as it happens the language used there is similar to that of our passage. When the Mishkan was at Shilo, Eli was the high priest and his sons Hofni and Pinehas served as priests. It states there, “Hofni and Pinehas would sexually engage the women who congregated at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting” (1 Sam. 2:22). This scandalous behavior is described as having been their ongoing practice, reflecting on a debased atmosphere in the sanctuary precinct that women participated in. Exploiting the sanctuary for such desecration helps explain the dire punishment that was visited upon them (1 Sam. 2:30-36, 3:12-14, 4:11) as well as the termination of Mishkan Shiloh shortly afterwards.

The clause referring to the women in the Samuel passage is, הַנְּשִׁים הַצְּבָאוֹת פָּתַח אֵהָל מוֹעֵד, while that in our context is, הַצְּבָאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ פָּתַח אֵהָל מוֹעֵד. Similar locutions are attested nowhere else in Scripture. (The total comment of The Oxford Bible Commentary on our Exodus verse is, “No one can really explain this odd note [of the congregating women]. 1 Sam. 2:22 is no help.”)

It appears evident that we are dealing with an intended intertextual comment. The spirit prevailing among the Shilo women was diametrically opposite to that of the women of our context. Taken so, it sheds light on the profound significance of the women’s act of donating their mirrors. Surely our Exodus verse is to be viewed as an idealistic statement that was symbolic of the essential values of the sanctuary; it was the contravening of those values that brought destruction.

At the outset of the Mishkan project – as we shall soon see, even before it became operative – contact with its holy purpose had inspired these women to achieve a more spiritual disposition. They decided to donate precious beauty accessories to it. A mirror was the item that more than any other symbolized concern for appearance and attractiveness to men; donating them manifested a “Grace is false and beauty is vain” (Prov. 31:30) orientation. In contrast to the women in Shiloh, these women identified with the Mishkan’s goal to foster G-d’s presence in the nation and increase the practice of holy living. Illicit sexual behavior was being ruled out. They sacrificed their mirrors for construction of the vessel from which priests will wash their hands and feet before their service. This symbolizes the requirement for purity when interacting with the sanctuary.

The Shilo narrative reflects on the time of the Mishkan’s decline, when a new generation of priestly leaders, Hofni and Pinehas, led a life of debauchery in the sanctuary. The result was the Philistine capture of the holy Ark (repository of the Tablets, the core of the Covenant), which was never to be returned to Shilo and G-d’s abandonment of the Mishkan at Shiloh (as mentioned in Jer. 7:12; Ps. 78:60).^{*} Thus, the donation of the mirrors was a symbolic gesture worthy of commemoration.

2. A Question

Although instructions for the laver and its stand were presented “late,” construction of these accouterments are described as having taken place together with all the other furnishings of the Mishkan. The laver was present on the Mishkan dedication day. Hence, at the time when the women were described as having congregated at its entrance, there was not as yet an operating Mishkan!

Ramban proposes that the Tent of Meeting they congregated at was the one Moshe had set up after the golden calf while plans for the Mishkan were suspended (Ex. 33:7). However, that structure was “outside the camp, distant from the camp.” Cultic activity was not performed there; it was a somewhat isolated site designated for serious individuals, “and it was that whoever sought Hashem would go to the *Ohel Mo`ed* that was outside the camp.” It was not an

appropriate site to have been a center for “congregating women.” Furthermore, the Biblical statement seems to imply that the women donated the bronze for the accouterment that was to be placed near the spot where they had been wont to congregate.

The explanation may be as follows. The tent structure of the Mishkan was erected before its furnishings, as per Moshe’s instructions and the account of Bezalel’s construction activity. In accordance with G-d’s instructions, the official date of the Mishkan’s assembly, when everything was to be complete and set in its place, was the first day of the first month of the second year. At some earlier point the Tent of Meeting had been standing in preliminary fashion, before the furnishings were completed, especially before the laver was built, which was late in the manufacturing sequence. There was eager anticipation and women began congregating in front of the Tent of Meeting even before any ritual service began.

The women discovered that a laver with a stand were going to be constructed out of bronze and placed in the general area in which they had become accustomed to congregate. They raised the suggestion of donating their mirrors for construction of these articles. The authorities recognized the sincere devotion to the sanctuary goals of these women as well as the symbolic value of their gesture and the idea met with general acceptance.

3 . Further Signs of Israel’s Repentance

Shortly after leaving the assembly at which they heard Moshe’s instructions for the Mishkan and his call for donations, people began returning, bringing generous gifts (35:20-29). The text is detailed and expansive; in essence it informs us that a broadly based, inspired outlook toward the project took hold and there was a vast and exuberant outpouring of contributions from men and women alike. All the required materials were quickly presented in abundance. Skilled artisans in all fields volunteered. In short order Moshe had to instruct the people to cease their contributions, but “the people had to be restrained from bringing” (וַיִּכְלֹא אֶת־הָעָם מִהִבְרִיא מִהִבְרִיא 36:6). The overwhelmingly enthusiastic response is a further sign that Israel eagerly awaited G-d’s presence in its midst, having repented from the golden calf transgression.

The response to Aharon’s call for contributions to that latter venture was unfortunately prompt and enthusiastic, but the response for the Mishkan far surpassed it in every way. For the calf they were asked for “gold earrings” (32:2-3), which they brought; here, they brought “brooches, earrings, rings and pendants – gold objects of all kinds” (35:22, NJPS).

As pointed out earlier, the women congregating at the entrance to the *Ohel Mo`ed* even before it was functional, and donating their mirrors for the laver and its stand, was a major sign of commitment to the project.

Interestingly, in the first stage of Mishkan construction – that of the tent and major furnishings – the Torah did not comment that it was done in accordance with G-d’s command. At that point the “wait and see” disposition prevailed and the text seems to mirror it. Subsequently, when it came to the manufacture of the priestly vestments, the Torah describes each step of the way in a positive manner, asserting that it was done in accordance with Hashem’s command. As Israel’s sincerity and dedication became more apparent the text reflected it.

The people’s full commitment to reestablishment of the Covenant appears to be reflected by means of a numerological device in the passage. There are eight attestations of the transitive verbs הִבְרִיא and הִבְרִיאוּ, different forms of the root “brought” (in plural), the key term of the section (35:21-29). This is consistent with the widespread use of the number eight as a signifier of the Covenant, as we have often pointed out.** This links the enthusiastic bringing with a desire for restoration of the Covenant. The infinitive form לְהִבְרִיא (v. 29a), which is part of an adjectival clause that describes the people (“whose hearts prompted them to bring”) is not counted, since it does not express actual bringing, as the other eight attestations of this stem do. Biblical literary designs are extremely sensitive to grammatical nuances.

There text contains many Covenantal features associated with establishment of the Mishkan. They reach their zenith with the dedication ceremony on the eighth day (Lev. 9). We will touch upon several prominent ones in our coming studies.

Finally, when the Mishkan was completed, G-d's cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and His glory filled the Mishkan. This proved that the nation was indeed repentant and reconciliation was complete.

Endnotes

* Employing such an unusual locution to relate the righteous women at the *Ohel Mo`ed* donating the laver (*kiyor*) with the Hofni and Pinehas account is so striking that it calls for further analysis. The following is adapted from Ronald Benun's work-in-progress. In addition to the sexual sinfulness, the Samuel text describes another category of major corruption practiced by Hofni and Pinehas in the Mishkan. This concerns their method of taking their priestly emoluments from the sacrifices. Their assistants appropriated for them portions above and beyond their priestly due, denying the presenters their legitimate shares. And by intimidation and force, their assistants prematurely took for them their choice of sacrificial meat, before the fat was burned on the altar. (One assumes this was shared with the women.) In citing the vessels the meat was cooked in, into which the assistant would thrust his three-pronged fork, the first is termed "*kiyor*" (וְהָיָה בְּכִיּוֹר, 1 Sam. 2:14), a rare usage in Scripture when not referring to the laver. This may be hinting at the diametrically opposed purposes of the two contexts. (The only other Scriptural attestation of the word *kiyor* in a non-laver context (Zech. 12:6), appears to refer to a receptacle holding live coals covered by a grill. Perhaps it was called *kiyor* because it was shaped in the form of a laver.)

Apparent linkage between the Hofni and Pinehas passage and that of Pinehas, the son of Eleazar, son of Aharon the high priest (Num. 25) strengthens the case of intended linkage with our passage. In the latter case there also was corruption with sexual activity being practiced in the *Ohel Mo`ed* precinct when Pinehas acted decisively, terminating the plague. G-d therefore granted him and his descendants a בְּרִית עוֹלָם ("a covenant of everlasting priesthood"). In contrast, because Eli did not act decisively to stop his sons from their corruption in the sanctuary precinct, G-d reversed His intention to have Eli's family be priests before Him עַד עוֹלָם ("everlastingly"), with a condemnatory decree on his descendants.

The author of Psalms may have subtly linked the two cases. He stated, "Pinehas rose וַיִּפְלֵל" (Ps. 106:30), apparently meaning he "intervened," putting an end to the sexual activity in the sanctuary precinct. *Vayfalel* is a rare usage of a rarely used root. It is attested in this sense of "intervene," or "intercede," perhaps only one other time in Scripture, in Eli's reproof to his sons regarding their promiscuity with the women who congregated at the entrance to the *Ohel Mo`ed*. He said, "...when a man sins to another וּפְלִלוּ אֶלְקָיִם," ("G-d may intercede on his behalf, but...", 1 Sam. 2:25), reproof that was not heeded as the promiscuity continued. Hence, we may look at all the *Ohel Mo`ed* activity as shedding light one context on another.

** See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah From the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*

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