

Parashat Vayakhel Part II

1. The Laver and Its Stand

The instructions for the laver and its stand (כִּיּוֹר וְכִנּוֹ) specified that these items should be made of bronze (Exod. 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-shekel atonement payments (38:27-28), instructions for the Tabernacle 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 **בְּמִרְיָאתָהּ** הַצְּבָאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד (“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 their hands and feet before their service, it had to have capacity for a large volume of water; thus 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 accoutrement. 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, one that could even serve for ablution since the sanctuary program sometimes requires **וַיִּרְחֹץ** בְּשֵׁרוֹ בַּמַּיִם 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 Tabernacle 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 as the last of the furnishings because the laver 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 Tabernacle 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 Tabernacle instructional section. But they were presented after the main body of instructions was concluded to reflect their “late” origin. 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 just as was the case with the incense altar. 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 Tent of Meeting this verse is difficult to interpret.

There is one other biblical passage that makes reference to women who congregated at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, and as it happens the language used there is similar to that of our passage, but no explanation is provided. When the Tabernacle was at Shiloh, Eli was the high priest and his two sons Hophni and Phinehas served as priests. It states there, “[Hophni and Phinehas] would sexually engage the women who congregated at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting” (1 Sam. 2:22). This disgraceful 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 sacrilege helps explain the dire punishment that was visited upon Eli’s sons (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 הַצֹּבְאוֹת פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד, while that in our context is, הַצֹּבְאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד. There are no similar locutions attested anywhere 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]. First Samuel 2:22 is no help.” [p. 90]).

It appears evident that we are dealing with an intended intertextual comment. The spirit prevailing among the Shiloh 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 Tabernacle project –even before it became operative, as we shall soon see – contact with its holy purpose had inspired these women to achieve a more spiritual disposition. They decided to donate their precious beauty accessories to it. A mirror was the item that more than any other symbolized a woman’s concern for her 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 Tabernacle’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 Shiloh narrative reflects on the time of the Tabernacle’s decline, when a new generation of priestly leaders, Hophni and Phinehas, 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 Shiloh and G-d’s abandonment of the Tabernacle 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 accoutrements are described as having taken place together with all the other furnishings of the Tabernacle. The laver was present on the Tabernacle dedication day. Hence, at the time when the women were described as having congregated at its entrance, there was not as yet an operating Tabernacle.

Ramban proposes that the Tent of Meeting at which they congregated was the one Moses had set up after the golden calf while plans for the Tabernacle were in suspension (Exod. 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 Tent of Meeting 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 accoutrement 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 Tabernacle was erected before its furnishings, as per Moses’ instructions and the account of Bezalel’s construction activity. In accordance with G-d’s instructions, the official date of the Tabernacle’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 Moses' instructions for the Tabernacle 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 Moses had to instruct the people to cease their contributions, but "the people had to be restrained from bringing" (וַיִּכְלֹא הָעָם מִהֲבִיֵּא, 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. Though the response to Aaron's call for contributions to the making of the golden calf was unfortunately also prompt and enthusiastic, the response for the Tabernacle 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).

Interestingly, in the first stage of Tabernacle 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 indicated by means of a numerological device in the passage. The key term of the section (35:21-29) is the stem בוא in the sense of "brought" in plural. There are eight attestations of the transitive verbs הֵבִיאוּ and וַיִּבְיִאוּ. 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 outpouring of donations with a desire for restoration of the covenant. The infinitive form לְהֵבִיֵּא (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.

The text contains many features that link establishment of the Tabernacle with the covenant. It seems that they reach their zenith with the Tabernacle dedication ceremony on the eighth day (Lev. 9). We will touch upon several prominent points of association in our coming studies.

Finally, when the Tabernacle was completed, “the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and Hashem’s glory filled the Tabernacle” (40:34). This proved that the nation was indeed repentant and reconciliation was complete.

Endnotes

* Employing such an unusual locution that links the righteous women at the Tent of Meeting who donated the laver (*kiyor*) with the Hophni and Phinehas 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 Hophni and Phinehas in the Tabernacle precinct. 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 referencing 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 Hophni and Phinehas passage and that of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron 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 Tent of Meeting precinct when Phinehas acted decisively, terminating the plague. G-d therefore granted him and his descendants a בְּרִית כְּהֵנֶת 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, “Phinehas rose וַיִּפְּלֵל” (“he intervened”) [ending the sacrilege] “and the plague was halted” (Ps. 106:30). *Vayfalel* 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 Tent of Meeting. He said, “When a man sins against another וַיִּפְּלֵלְוֹ אֱלֹהִים,” (“G-d may intercede on his behalf, but...” [1 Sam. 2:25]). (His reproof was not heeded and the promiscuity continued.) Hence, we may look at the Tent of Meeting activity in all these cases as shedding light one context on another.

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