

Mirrors, Mirrors, On the Wall - and in the Mishkan

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

You [Moshe] shall make a washstand (*kiyor*) of copper and its base of copper for washing, and you shall place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and you shall put water therein. (*Sefer Shemot* 30:18)

And he [Bezalel] made the washstand (*hakiyor*) of copper and its base of copper from the mirrors of the women who had set up the legions, who congregated at the entrance of the tent of meeting. (*Ibid.* , 38:8)

He [Moshe] placed the washstand (*hakiyor*) between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and there he put water for washing. (*Ibid.* , 40:30, these and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

These three *pasukim* (verses) are found, respectively, in Parshiot Ki Tisa, Vayakel, and Pekudei. Each speaks about the *kiyor*, the washstand that was in the Mishkan (Portable Desert Sanctuary). The middle verse, however, differs from the other two in that it describes the origin of the copper from which the *kiyor* was fashioned: “... from the mirrors of the women who had set up the legions, who congregated at the entrance of the tent of meeting.” This is a perplexing statement to say the least, and it begs to be interpreted. We can readily ask three questions:

- 1 What was the original purpose of the mirrors?
- 2 Who were “the women who had set up the legions?”

3 What or who were the legions?

It is to these questions that we now turn.

Rashi, the Prince of Commentators (1040-1105), addresses all of our inquiries in his famous comment on *Sefer Shemot* 38:8:

from the mirrors of the women who had set up the legions: Heb. *בְּמִרְאֵת הַצְּבָאוֹת* Israelite women owned mirrors, which they would look into when they adorned themselves. Even these [mirrors] they did not hold back from bringing as a contribution toward the Mishkan, but Moses rejected them because they were made for temptation [i.e., to inspire lustful thoughts]. The Holy One, blessed is He, said to him, “Accept [them], for these are more precious to Me than anything because through them the women set up many legions [i.e., through the children they gave birth to] in Egypt.”

When their husbands were weary from backbreaking labor, they [the women] would go and bring them food and drink and give them to eat. Then they [the women] would take the mirrors and each one would see herself with her husband in the mirror, and she would encourage him with words, saying, “I am more beautiful than you.” And in this way they aroused their husbands desire and would have relations with them, conceiving and giving birth there, as it is said: “Under the apple tree I aroused you.” (*Megillat Shir HaShirim* 8:5) This is [the meaning of] what is *בְּמִרְאֵת הַצְּבָאוֹת* [lit., the mirrors of those who set up legions]. From these [the mirrors], the washstand was made, because its purpose was to make peace between a man and his wife... (Emendations for clarification my own)

Let us now analyze Rashi’s forthright and compelling exegesis of our verse:

1. “The mirrors of the women who had set up the legions” refers to the mirrors our female forebears used in Egypt to make themselves as attractive as possible to their spouses. Our male ancestors had all but given up hope regarding the possibility of a Jewish future. Their despondency, in conjunction with almost total physical exhaustion, lead them to separate themselves from their wives – thereby

potentially ending the prospect for a new generation. The women refused to accede to their husbands' dire prognostication and acted in such a manner as to ensure that a new generation of Jewish children would enter the world. In our Sages estimation, these Jewish women were authentic champions of the spirit. Little wonder, then, that *Talmud Bavli, Sotah* 11b states: "Because of the reward of the righteous women [for having and raising children under nearly impossible conditions] that were in that generation [i.e. the final generation in Egypt bondage], the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt."

2. "The legions" refers to the children born to the heroic Jewish women immediately prior to the Exodus from Egypt, whose *lamrot hakol* (against all odds and obstacles) attitude guaranteed the survival and future of our people.
3. Moshe, and by extension the entire Jewish people learned an invaluable and eternal lesson from the interchange that he had with the Holy One blessed be He. G-d created us with two inclinations, namely; the *yatzer hatov* (inclination intrinsically dedicated to altruistic behaviors and mitzvot performance) and the *yatzer hara* (the predisposition inherently dedicated to selfish behaviors and "doing whatever you want"). *Prima facie*, one might have thought that only the first one could be used to serve the Almighty. As Rashi on *Sefer Devarim* 6:5 notes, however, nothing could be further from the truth:

And you shall love [the L-rd]: Perform His commandments out of love. The one who acts out of love cannot be compared to the one who acts out of fear. If one serves his master out of fear, when the master sets a great burden upon him, this servant will leave him and go away [whereas if out of love he will serve him even under great burden] (*Midrash Sifrei* 6:5). **With all your heart:** Heb. **בְּכָל לִבְךָ** [The double "veth" in **בְּכָל לִבְךָ**, instead of the usual form **בְּכָל לִבְךָ**, suggests:] Love Him with your two inclinations [the good and the evil]. (*Midrash Sifrei; Talmud Bavli Berachot* 54a) ...

Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him [Moshe], “Accept [the mirrors], for these are more precious to Me than anything because through them the women set up many legions in Egypt.” In other words, Hashem taught Moshe and the entire Jewish people for all time that even the *yatzer hara* can and should be used to serve our Creator.

May we, like the holy and visionary Jewish women of Egypt, be *zocheh* (merit) to serve Hashem with both the *yatzer hatov* and the *yatzer hara*, and may the mirrors upon our walls ever be placed in the sanctuaries of our hearts. In that way, may we experience the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkanu* (the Righteous Messiah), the ingathering of the Exiles, the rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Holy Temple), and the complete fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy: “And the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His name one.” (*Sefer Zechariah* 14:9) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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