

When Copper Was More Precious Than Gold

Rabbi David Etengoff

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 bat Yeziel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The final five *parshiot* of *Sefer Shemot* describe every conceivable aspect of the construction of the *Mishkan*, including its *kalim* —vessels and utensils — and the *bigdei kohanim* — the garments worn by both the *kohanim* and the *Kohane Gadol*. Within this context we find a number of *pasukim* wherein the *kiyor* and its base, the copper washstand used by the *kohanim* to sanctify themselves, are referenced. One of these verses is quite unusual, as it specifies the exact group from whom the copper for constructing the *kiyor* was sourced — something that is not found regarding other *kalim*: “And he [Bezalel] made *hakiyor* of copper and its base of copper from the mirrors of the legions who congregated at the entrance of the tent of meeting. (38:8, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Chazal teach us that “the legions who congregated at the entrance of the tent of meeting” refers to the Jewish women who responded to Hashem’s command to the Jewish people to donate items for the building of the *Mishkan*. (25:2) They sought to fulfill this *mitzvah* by bringing their highly polished copper mirrors before Moshe. His reaction to their heartfelt offering, however, was anything but positive: “And when Moshe saw these mirrors, he became angry at them [the women] and declared... ‘Of what possible value are these mirrors!’” (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Parashat Pekudei IX, this

and the following translations my own) What accounts for Moshe's angry response to the women, especially since the mirrors were given *b'nidvat leban* — from the depths of their hearts?

The answer to this question is found in the opening words of our midrash that explain the exponential population growth of our ancestors during the period of their terrible Egyptian servitude:

But as much as they [the Egyptians] would afflict them, so did they [the Jewish people] multiply and so did they gain strength... (1:12) In the merit of the mirrors; they had mirrors [to beautify themselves] for their husbands in order to encourage them to have intimacy with them — even in the midst of their back-breaking labor. It is from these acts that untold numbers of children sprang forth.

In his *Commentary on the Torah* on our *pasuk*, Rashi (1040-1105) elaborates upon our midrash and states that, “Moshe was disgusted by the mirrors because they were made for the *yetzer harah* (that is, lustful purposes).” As such, he viewed their origin and use as antithetical to the *kedushah* that was to reign supreme in the *Mishkan* — the dwelling place of Hashem's presence on earth. Our midrash continues by teaching us that the Holy One blessed be He radically disagreed with Moshe and summarily overruled him:

Moshe — are you [honestly] willing to reject and degrade the singular import of these [mirrors]? Do you not realize that it is precisely these mirrors that brought about the birth of myriads of Jews in Egypt? No! Take these from them [the women] and make from them [the mirrors] the copper *kiyor* and its base — for it is precisely from them that the *kohanim* will sanctify themselves.

Quite often, Rashi's presentation of a midrash will differ from the original text of the midrash in order to allow him to teach what he deems to be a crucial lesson. Our case follows suit when he reframes Hashem's response to Moshe in the following manner:

“The Holy One blessed be He said to him: ‘Accept [the mirrors], for they are more beloved to Me than anything else that has been brought; for it is because of them that the women were able to bring forth myriads of Jews in Egypt.’”

Rashi's restatement is an exegetical tour de force that gives him the freedom to teach us that the copper mirrors of the Jewish women of Egypt were more beloved to the Almighty than gold itself. Little wonder, then, that *Talmud Bavli, Sotah* 11b, famously states: "Because of the reward of the righteous women that were in that generation [the final generation of Egypt bondage], the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt." This is a powerful thought, indeed, and one that enhances our understanding of the depth-level spirituality of the Jewish women in Egypt. May they ever serve as a model of devotion to Hashem. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.