

United We Stand

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March 9, 2024

Parshas Vayakhel

29th of Adar Aleph 5784

The Parsha's Path

He made the basin out of copper and its base out of copper, from the mirrors of the women who had gathered at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting (38:8).

Parshas Vayakhel's account of the creation of the components of the Mishkan concludes, almost as an afterthought, with the *kiyor*, the copper wash-basin situated in between the altar and the sanctuary. The Torah tells us that the *kiyor* was made specifically from the copper mirrors that the women donated; while copper was used extensively throughout the building of the Mishkan, only here were mirrors used. Obviously, this requires some explanation. What is the relationship between mirrors and the wash-basin?

Rashi famously cites the midrash, which suggests that Moshe was initially reluctant to accept the mirrors as a donation. What is the propriety, he thought, in using these mirrors, which are a means towards impropriety (as women use it to beautify themselves and attract men), in the construction of the Mishkan? G-d reassured him that these mirrors were more precious than any of the other donations, for in Egypt, the women would use them to entice their husbands, exhausted from a hard day of backbreaking labor, to procreate with them, and thus ensure the continuation of the Jewish people. It was uniquely appropriate that these mirrors be used for the construction of the *kiyor*, whose waters would be used to test a *sotah* and thus restore family harmony through her vindication. Thus, the mirrors remained a vehicle to preserve the Jewish family.

Perhaps we can add an additional dimension to the appropriateness of the mirrors being used for the *kiyor*. When reading the description of the *kiyor*, both in our Parsha and especially in the commandment to build it in Parshas Tetzaveh, one is given the impression that it is mentioned almost as an afterthought, after concluding the discussion of all of the other vessels in the Mishkan. Likewise, while all of the other vessels are described as holy or holy of holies, no mention of holiness is associated with the *kiyor*. Indeed, its function would also seem periphery to the *avodah*; no actual service was performed with the *kiyor*. Its primary function was to enable the *kohanim* to wash their hands and feet before performing the *avodah*.

Nevertheless, the *kiyor* is also indispensable to the *avodah*. The Torah clearly indicates that any *kohen* who serves in the *Mishkan* without washing their hands and feet is liable to death. Washing with the *kiyor* must come before all else. Only after the *kohen* is purified by its waters can he engage with the holiness of the *avodah*. Thus, while the *kiyor* may not have much intrinsic holiness, it is also of supreme importance in that nothing is possible without it.

Likewise, the mirrors the women used to ensure the continuation of the Jewish people may be unimportant in and of themselves, but their role in what they enabled to follow was indispensable. They were used to break free the spirit of despair, exhaustion, and negativity of the Egyptian slavery and enable the fathers of the next generation of Jews to move forward.

We all have, or have had, glorious dreams of how things could be. We want to live a life of wholeness, entrenched with spirituality and filled with great accomplishments. We want wholeness for our families, our communities, and the world. We see such potential, in ourselves and in things around us, and it can be overwhelmingly depressing to see so many seemingly insurmountable problems that prevent it.

We try things. We lead lives full of Torah, mitzvos, and chesed, but it seems woefully insufficient. The negativity is strangling; the problems persist. We may learn to cope with them, but our dreams of wholeness too often turn into a wistful fantasy.

This is especially true in the age of technology, where we are bombarded with every problem around the world, with billions of negative voices on social media, and with millions of advertisers and media personalities trying to make us feel insecure and lacking. All of this weakens and breaks us so that we are ill-equipped to deal with actual issues in our lives, whether they be family problems, financial issues, illness, or bad experiences at work or school.

A prerequisite for living an elevated life of holiness is to cleanse ourselves from impurity. We must free ourselves from a mentality that is fixated on the negative, that is bogged down by the unpleasant, that can't get over the unfortunate. We must recognize the potential for everything to be used for a positive purpose - just like the mirrors of our ancestors - no matter how negative a force it may seem to be, and enter a frame of mind that seeks to elevate everything and everyone around us. Nobody wants to be dirty or be around dirty people, so why dirty ourselves with negativity? Why let it cling to us when we can wash it off?

This does not mean solving all our problems, nor is it a substitute for addressing them. What's wrong is wrong, and what we can fix must be fixed. But we don't need to let the problems cling to us. We can make some space between our problems and ourselves, looking at it in a more objective way from a more wholesome and positive place. We can and maybe must deal with them, but first we have to wash them off from clinging to ourselves. There's always going to be problems. But if we want to move past them and pursue a life of holiness, we have to approach them with clean hands.

Deeper Meanings

Reprinted from 5780.

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While this was written during Corona, I believe the lesson is currently unfortunately timely now as well.

This week's Parsha recount how the Jewish people, as many as were willing-hearted, donated their precious materials to help build the Mishkan (35:5). The pasuk uses the term *nediv* to describe the people's willingness to donate, which comes from the same word root as *nedava*, or pledge/oath. The Gemara (Shavuous 26b) derives from here that when it comes to donations to the Mishkan/Beis-Hamikdash, even a non-verbal commitment is binding with the force of an oath, and there is also a concern that the same would be true by any commitment to give tzedaka. Rav Schachter likes to point out how this case is used as the basis for minhagim in general. The Gemara (Nedarim 81b) states that if one violates a minhag, it is like violating an oath. The Ran explains that the Rabbis made a decree that if one has in mind to maintain a good practice, it is as if he made a vow to do so. The Tur and Shulchan Aruch imply that this is likewise the basis for the binding nature of a family or communal minhag. The Torah precedent for imposing oath-status on a practice not formulated explicitly as an oath is the case of dedicating items to the Mishkan. (For other explanations of the nature of minhagim, see <https://www.halachipedia.com/index.php?title=Minhag>).

Why did the Rabbis make this decree? While it's very nice to keep up a good habit, why should it be legislated that such a habit must be binding for all time?

A concept that takes many forms in Halacha is "*maalin bakodesh v'ein moridin*," we only go up in holiness, not down. Something that is holy must not be made less holy by virtue of a change in how it's treated. In this very week's Parsha, we learn a dimension of this concept from the fact that Moshe built the entire Mishkan. Nobody took over for him, the Gemara says, because Moshe was the holiest person around, and once he started building the Mishkan, it would be degrading for anybody else to take over. Fundamental to Torah thought is the importance of climbing to greater and greater spiritual heights without compromise or mediocracy, and reducing holiness is anathema to that idea. Perhaps we can suggest that the Rabbis felt that that principle should be carried over to people's personal commitments. They felt that if a person is willing and capable of going the next step in their Avodas Hashem, it would be antithetical to Torah principles to let them turn back. They needed to strengthen the commitment and lock him into his new state. Thus, minhagim - whether individual, familial, or communal - are legislative tools used to help us maintain a more elevated life.

As we, as individuals and as a community confront the unprecedented challenge our current crisis puts us in, it's important that as much as we do our hishtadlus, we also have to do our part spiritually, thinking seriously about ways we can do *teshuva* and come closer to G-d. Now is the time to strengthen ourselves in what we are already obligated in and consider adding additional practices that will help us be better Jews. From how we use technology to how much we learn and daven to how much we call or show concern for our family and community, now is the time to look inward and take the next step, with a binding commitment that will elevate who we are for all time.

Let us all strive to use this experience to reconnect to who we are and climb to the greatest heights, and may G-d see us and take mercy on all of us speedily.

Goal of the week

What problems are "dirtying your hands"? How can you free yourself from them and get in a better frame of mind? Delete social media? Limit screen time? Learn more Torah? Eat healthier/get more exercise? Daven better? Forgive someone? Take one concrete step towards "washing your hands."

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rachel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Teiviah Leah, Bracha bas Shoshanah, Reuven ben Golda, Yitzchok Moshe haKohen ben Miriam, Ephraim Melech ben Teilah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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