

Women, Seduction and the Tent of Meeting

Nechama Goldman Barash

ח וַיַּעַשׂ, אֶת הַכִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת, וְאֵת, כְּנֹ
נְחֹשֶׁת--בְּמִרְאֵת, הַצְּבָאוֹת, אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ,
פְּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד. {ס}

8 And he made the laver of brass, and the base thereof of brass, of the mirrors of the thronging women that did service at the door of the tent of meeting.

Ibn Ezra: The mirrors of the women who performed tasks. These were the skillful women who spun the five types of cloth previously mentioned. Or it may refer to the women who came regularly to pray at the tent and study the commandments. It is customary for every woman to make up her face every morning and look in a bronze or glass mirror in order to adjust her hair style and ornaments as mentioned in Isaiah 3. The Israelite women behaved exactly as the Ishmaelite women today. But there were pious women in Israel who overcame their worldly temptations and freely gave away their mirrors. Because they found no more need to beautify themselves but came instead daily to the door of the tent of meeting to pray and hear religious discourse for their edification. The text says: “Who crowded at the door of the tent of meeting” because there were many of them.

Ramban: We may perhaps take it in its plain sense that he made the basin and stand out of the mirrors of the women who crowded in a great host and assembled at the door of the tent of meeting to give their mirrors as a freewill offering. It may also be part of the straightforward meaning of the text to say that it was a vast “army” of women who gathered at the tent to give their mirrors, voluntarily.

The bronze of the mirrors was designated for this vessel because of its smooth, polished hollowed out surface. When the women saw this, they trooped in army after army so that all of them could have their mirrors made into the laver and stand. It is also correct to say that they understood right from the start that this laver would be used to test the women who were suspected of adultery and they accepted joyfully and volunteered to bring all of their mirrors for this purpose.

Nahum Sarna: the mirrors: In ancient times the mirrors were mainly of the kind held in the hand. They were highly polished disks of molten metal, copper or bronze, and were fitted with handles made of metal, wood, faience or ivory. Egypt was the manufacturing center of this article of toilet for the entire Near East... Sarna translates *tzove'ot* as the “women who performed tasks” and notes that nothing is known about this class which is mentioned in only one other place, 1 Samuel 2:22. He feels it is likely these women performed menial work and the idea here is that even these women at the bottom of the occupational and social scale displayed unselfish generosity and sacrificial devotion in donating their valuable bronze mirrors.

Midrash Tanhuma Shemot: You find that when the Israelites suffered hard labor in Egypt that Pharaoh decreed that they should not sleep at home nor have relations with their wives. Said R. Simeon ben Halafta: What did the daughters of Israel do? They would go down to draw water from the river. Whereupon the Holy One Blessed be He prepared small fishes for them inside their jars. They would cook some, sell some and buy with the proceeds wine and go out into the fields and give their husbands to eat there. After they had eaten they took their mirrors and looked into them together with their husbands. She said: I am more beautiful than you. He said: I am more beautiful than you. In the course of this *tete-a-tete* their sexual desire was aroused and they became fruitful and multiplied, the Holy One Blessed be He forthwith

remembering them (i.e. blessed them with issue) as it is stated: “and the children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and became exceedingly mighty”...As soon as the Holy One Blessed be He told Moses to make the Tabernacle, all Israel came along to contribute. Some brought silver, some gold or brass, onyx and stones to be set. They readily brought everything. Whereupon the women said: What have we to contribute to the offerings of the Tabernacle? They came along and brought the mirrors and presented themselves to Moses. When Moses saw the mirrors he was furious with them. He said to Israel: Take sticks and break their thighs of those who brought them. What use are such mirrors? Said the Holy One Blessed be He to Moses: Moses! You look down on them! It was these mirrors which raised up all those hosts in Egypt! Take them and make out of them the basin and its stand for the priests in which they can purify themselves, as it is stated And he made the basin....

Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch

במראות הצבאות To carry out an idea, in material which is appropriate to that idea, is expressed by עשה ב. So that when here it says ויעש את הכיור וגו' במראה וגו' the shape and nature of the materials out of which the כיור was made are designated as being as important as the actual raw material itself for the idea which the כיור was to symbolize. It is deeply significant that the vessel of the Sanctuary which was to represent “the moral “keeping holy” of one’s acts and efforts” קידוש ידים ורגלים was made out of the women’s mirrors. Mirrors are articles which lay stress on the physical bodily appearance of people being an object of special consideration. So that it was shown that the physical sensual side of human beings is not merely not excluded from the sphere which is to be sanctified by the Mikdosh, but that it is the first and most essential object of this sanctification. After all, at rock bottom as Man has complete free will in moral matters, it is just this side of human nature which is necessary to come under the influence of the Mikdosh, if the sanctification of life which is aimed at, is to be achieved. This designation of the כיור emerges with great significance in the laws of Sotah in Numbers. The working מראות צבאות can even be meant to say that the copper mirrors were not melted down but that the basin was made up of the mirrors fitted together almost without any alteration at all so that it was recognizable that the basin consisted actually of mirrors.