

# The Copper Laver: The Women's Vessel

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Just when it seemed that the *parshios* were finished presenting the often tedious details of the *Mishkan* and the vestments of the *kohanim*, and we would, at last, return to the more familiar stories of the *Torah*, suddenly we find ourselves back in the *Mishkan* section of the library.

This week's *parshah* begins discussing the half shekel, and as we are about to return to the narrative of the travels of the Jewish people on their way to the Holy Land, God says, "Oh right, by the way, I almost forgot... and don't forget to wash your hands!" *Hashem* instructs Moshe to construct a copper laver, the *kiyor*, for the *kohanim* to wash their hands and feet prior to their *Mishkan*/Temple service. Obviously, nothing is forgotten before God's throne of glory<sup>1</sup>, so why is the command regarding the *kiyor* disparate from everything else involving the *Mishkan*?

Both the *Seforno* and the *Netziv* answer that there is a fundamental distinction between the *kiyor* and all the other Temple vessels. Every other vessel involves the actual service in the Temple, whereas the *kiyor* is a preparatory act. In the language of the *Netziv*, it is a *Machshir* for the *Avodah*. For this reason, it's construction is not commanded in conjunction with any other vessel.

When one examines the *kiyor*, he begins to discover it's fascinating history.

*Rashi*<sup>2</sup> explains that the *kiyor* was made out of copper mirrors that were donated by the Jewish women. When the Jews were slaves in Egypt, the oppression weighed so heavily upon them, physically, psychologically and emotionally, that procreation was nearly an impossibility. Such a reality would certainly have put an end to the existence of the Jewish people. To avoid this disastrous eventuality, the Jewish wives developed a game. When they would deliver food and drink to their husbands in the fields, they would bring along their copper mirrors, and say, "I'm cuter than you" all the while showing their husbands face and their face in the mirrors. In this way they relaxed their husbands from the stress, aroused them, and were able to produce the next generation of Jews amidst the horrendous oppression.

When the women discovered that the "*Mishkan* fund" was open for donations, they offered their copper mirrors. The initial reaction of Moses was that these mirrors were inappropriate to be donated to the *Mishkan*, because they are "made for the evil inclination." God though, had a different perspective on the matter, and told Moshe that these mirrors are more precious to Him than anything else, because it was through these mirrors that the next generation of Jews were produced in *Mitzrayim*.

The *Ramban*<sup>3</sup> points out that this was not the first time that items "made for the evil inclination" were donated. In fact, certain adornments popular among the women at the time, were certainly more objectionable. Yet we find this dialog between Moshe and *Hashem* only regarding the copper mirrors! Why didn't Moshe object to any of the other items?

The *Ramban* explains that every other donated item was melted down along with everything else and became indistinguishable, but the *kiyor* was to be composed solely of these copper mirrors. It was for this reason that Moshe

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1. *Mussaf* of Rosh HaShanah.

2. Exodus 38:8

3. *Ibid*.

initially found it objectionable.

Apparently, the *kiyor* was destined to be the “women’s vessel”.

Now, copper was used for many things in the *Mishkan*, including the outer alter and all of its utensils. The women’s mirrors could have been melted down and used for anything. Why were they all used for the *kiyor* – in effect, making the *kiyor* the “women’s vessel.” Is there something about the *kiyor* that lent itself to this identification?

Here we will digress to answer this question.

In Meggilas Esther<sup>4</sup> we are told that Mordechai took Esther as a “*בית*.” The simplest understanding would be that he adopted her, like a daughter. However, *Rashi* quotes the Talmud<sup>5</sup>, that you should not read the word as “*בית*,” but rather as “*ביתא*,” a “house”. From this reading, we are apparently supposed to understand that Mordechai married her. Why does the word “house” indicate a wife? It is striking to note that *Chazal* are consistent with this terminology. In the first Mishnah in Yoma, we are informed that the *Kohen Gadol* must be married during *Yom Kippur*, because the verse says he must, “Atone for himself and *ביתא*.” The word *ביתא* refers to his wife.

It gets worse. The Talmud<sup>6</sup> relates that forty days before a fetus is formed (perhaps the moment of conception) a voice echoes from heaven saying, “The daughter of so and so is destined for this boy.” This is the source for the common term *bashert*. However, the Talmud goes on to relate that the echo continues, “This house is destined for this boy,” and “This field is destined for this boy.” Why do *Chazal* put a wife a house and a field together as the things predestined for this boy? Can the three be said together in one breath? Is a woman merely another form of property belonging to her husband? The *Halachah* is clear that such is not the case. What did *Chazal* have in mind<sup>7</sup>?

I think that *Chazal* are telling us something very deep about the nature of women and their role in Jewish life.

The verse in Proverbs<sup>8</sup> says, “Listen my son to the *mussar* of your father and do not abandon the *Torah* of your mother.” King Solomon here tells us to listen to the *mussar* – discipline of our fathers, because, apparently, if we do not listen, we will not learn it. Yet when it comes to the *Torah* of our mothers, instead of instructing us to listen, he says not to abandon it! If we never pay attention to listen, how will we acquire the *Torah* of our mothers that we should ever need to be warned about abandoning it!

My Rebbi, Rav Aharon Kahn Shlit”a, explained that certain things we never actively learn. We do certain things merely because that is how we were raised. Often other people notice these things about us, while we take them for granted. A friend might say to us, “Why did you do that? It was so thoughtful!” To which we might respond, “I don’t know, that’s just how I was raised.” This is the *Torah* of the mother. It refers to those things that we never learn actively. We simply imbibe them by growing up in our homes. It is for this reason that King Solomon admonishes us not to abandon the *Torah* of our mothers, while never instructing us to listen to it in the first place.

Let’s go one step deeper.

Twice in the *Torah* we find a series of ten, where the first one is not like the other nine. One is the ten

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4. Chapter II verse 7.

5. Meggilah 13a.

6. Sota 2a.

7. It’s also interesting to note that linguistically, the Aramaic word for a wife is *ביתא*, obviously rooted in the word *בית*.

8. Chapter I verse 8.

commandments, and the other, the ten sayings through which God created the world<sup>9</sup>. The first of the ten commandments is not presented as a command, but rather as a statement of fact, "I am the Lord your God." To which one might respond, albeit irreverently, "Yes, it's true, but what do you want from me!?" We derive from this verse that it is a Mitzvah either to know or to believe that God exists, but either way, it is not presented as a command. Similarly, regarding the ten sayings in which the world was created, the Talmud<sup>10</sup> tells us that if one counts, he will discover only nine times that God created through speech. Where then does the *Mishnah* see ten sayings? The Talmud answers that the word "*Bereishis*" was also a saying of creation. According to the Vilna Gaon, with the word *Bereishis* God created time, sequence<sup>11</sup>. Be that as it may, the first "saying" of creation is not presented by the *Torah* as speech. The *Torah* does not say "And God said" whereas it does by the other nine. Why are the first of these ten not like the others?

Rav Moshe Shapiro explained that the first step is always to create a certain reality, a context for whatever it is that one is about to do. To have commandments, one needs to have a commander. Therefore, God says, "I am commander." Now that reality of the commander has been established, commandments make sense. Similarly, for creation to occur, sequence is necessary. First there had to be "time". The first of these series of ten is the creation of a reality, a context in which everything else can then proceed.

I think that ultimately the *Torah* of the mother is the power of context. This is expressed most tangibly as the atmosphere of a home. A wife and a mother is the *Bayis*, the "house". She creates the context in which the father can teach *Torah* and the children can learn it. To learn *Torah* one must pay attention and listen, but the *Torah* of the mother is not learned, it is simply lived.

For example, a child comes home from school with two pieces of news: he finished *Sefer Shmos* in *Chumash* class, and he hit a grand slam home run in bottom of the ninth, winning the game in gym. Which gets the greater emphasis? A child learns priorities this way, even though no active teaching or learning is going on. This is an opportunity for the *Torah* of the mother. The tone, the underlying values, the hidden sensitivities, are all essential aspects of the *Torah* of the mother.

From what we have learned we can understand in a deep, abstract way, why *Chazal* refer to a wife as a house, and list a wife together with a house and a field. It is because her's is the power of context, just as a house is the context for everything that occurs within and a field is the context for produce. Mordechai made Esther his *Bayis*. A wife, a mother is the "I am the Lord your God," and the "*Bereishis*" of the Jewish people.

Immediately prior to the giving of the *Torah*, the verse states:

”בְּהַגִּדְתָּ לְבָתְּיָאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֵאמֹר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד.”

“So shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell to the children of Israel.”<sup>12</sup>

Three questions beg answers here. Why do we need two phrases for the Jewish people? Say simply, “Moses go tell the Jews.” Why is the word *בְּהַגִּדְתָּ* used in reference to the house of Jacob, while the word *וְלֵאמֹר* is used in reference to the children of Israel? Finally, if for some reason there is a need for a dichotomy among the Jewish people.

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9. Avos chapter V Mishnah 1.

10. Rosh HaShanah 32a.

11. Perhaps others might say God created energy, or matter, as the *Ramban* says that first God created something from nothing, but subsequently the remainder of creation was mere formation of that original matter.

12. Exodus chapter XIX verse 3.

why is the house of Jacob spoken to first?<sup>13</sup>

Based on what we have said the questions almost fail to begin. *Rashi* explains that the “house” of Jacob refers to the Jewish women, while the children of Israel refers to the men. Therefore, the word רַחֲמֵיךָ, connoting soft spoken, inspiring words is used in reference to the women, while the word קָשָׁה, connoting harsh language is used in reference to the men. Why is Moshe instructed to first approach the women to accept the *Torah*? Because it is the women who will determine its success. If there is no context for *Torah*, there will be no *Torah*. First *Beis Yaakov*, the “house” of Jacob must create the reality for *Torah* to be accepted in the world.

Now we come full circle. We began by asking what it is about the *kiyor* that lent itself to become the women’s vessel. The answer should be clear. The *kiyor* is not part of the Temple service, it is a preparatory act. However, it is more than that. The *kiyor* provides the context for the Temple service. The *Halachah* is that if the *kohen* does not wash his hands and feet from the *kiyor*, he is not considered a *kohen*, and his service is invalid<sup>14</sup>. Washing his hands and feet from the *kiyor* makes him a *kohen* that can then do the service. This is the *Torah* of the mother; the power of context, and this is why the *kiyor* is the “women’s vessel”.

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13. As *Rashi* says there, “With this language and in this order.”

14. See the *Mishnah* beginning chapter *Kol HaZevachim*, the source for the invalidation in *Zevachim* 19b, and *Rashi*’s explanation for the invalidation of service performed without the required vestments on 18a, *Aval*.