

Parashat Vayakhel

A Reflection of One's Beauty

“He made the laver copper and its base copper, with the mirrors of the women who thronged at the opening of the tent of meeting” (Exodus 38:8). Rashi fills us in on the Midrashic backstory of the latter half of the verse:

The daughters of Israel had mirrors in which they would look when adorning themselves. Even those [mirrors] they did not refrain from bringing as a donation to the *Mishkan*. Moshe was disgusted by them since they were made for the evil inclination. The Holy One said to him, “Accept, because they are dearest to me of all.”¹

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explicated that Moshe could not make peace with the fact that mirrors used for pleasure and beauty would be incorporated into the laver, since it was located right next to the altar, where Jews opened their hearts and offered innumerable confessions in search of atonement.

Given that the altar and the laver seem to represent two mutually exclusive motifs, the physical proximity of these two items seems strange. How can the beauty of the mirrors harmonize with the sensation of self-criticism with which the road of the altar is bound?²

God said to accept the mirrors because in the darkest exile of Egypt, the women were able to comfort and strengthen their husbands. Their inner resolve and resilience were the key ingredients to withstanding the degradation and humiliation they all underwent daily. After being beaten down they would not stay down, they would get up and carry on.

Self-criticism and Self-transcendence

The same kind of tension existed in the psyche of the sinner approaching the altar, seeking to make amends for their wrongs with the holiest sacrifices, the *chatat* (sin-offering) or *asham* (guilt-offering). The offeror would confess over the sacrifice, an exercise in self-criticism, wracked by feelings of inferiority and unworthiness. On Yom Kippur, we declare, “I am like a vessel filled with shame and humiliation,” and “You are just regarding all that befalls us, for You have done what is true and we have abetted wickedness.”³ The outer altar itself was built from unwrought stones—since metal tools could not be used (Exodus 20:22)—which reflected back at the sinner his imperfections and faults.⁴

At the same time, repentance is predicated on the capacity for self-transcendence. We have the ability to be better than we were, to turn our lives around in the blink of an eye.

¹ Rashi on Exodus 38:8.

² Lustiger, *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 2:333.

³ From the prayer *Elohai ad she-lo notzarti* at the end of the Yom Kippur Amidah, and from the paragraph *Sarnu mi-mitzvotcha* following the short confession, respectively.

⁴ Holzer, *The Rav Thinking Aloud: Shemos*, 155–158.

The laver reflects the inner beauty of an individual, the ability to reform oneself. One cannot leave the past behind, committed to a new and improved future, without faith in one's inner talents and creative potential.

This, then, is the majestic symbolism expressed by the proximity of the laver to the altar. Here is how the Rav articulated it:

Every confession of sin expresses itself in the outcry, "I am black and I am beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem" (Song of Songs 1:5). When we do not see the "beauty," we cannot discern the "blackness." The sinner must view himself from two antithetical viewpoints: the nullity of being, and the greatness of being.⁵

All of this still applies today in our Temple-less world. On Yom Kippur we search our souls and criticize ourselves. This fulfills the requirement of *charatah*, remorse, that is part of repentance. But we must not forget that resolving to change, *kabalah al he-atid*, is also a prerequisite to repentance, which can only be sustained with a healthy dose of self-confidence and conviction in one's self-worth.

"Confessing" Good Deeds

Characteristically, the Rav revealed this duality at play in Halachah. In the fourth and seventh years of the sabbatical cycle, we make a declaration that we have properly fulfilled the mitzvot of taking and apportioning tithes. We say:

I have removed all of the holy from the house, and I have also given it to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. In accord with all of Your commandments that you have commanded me, I have neither transgressed any of Your commandments nor forgotten. ...I have hearkened to the voice of the Lord, my God; I have done according to all You commanded me. (Deuteronomy 26:13-14)

This is a statement of proud accomplishment; with much effort we have gotten it right. Why, then, is the ritual referred to in rabbinic literature as *vidui ma'aser*, when *vidui* is a term usually reserved for confession of wrongdoing?

The Rav explained that accomplishment and failure are two sides of the same coin. By underscoring our success in this area, our shining "beauty," we call to mind the train of errors that still blots other areas of our observance, our inky "blackness." When we recognize our accomplishments, we can improve our less-than-stellar record on other scores. Taking pride in our achievements, even the small gains, helps us make even larger strides.⁶

Exploring the Rav's Insight

Alongside the brotherly love for which *Chassidut* is known, there is a salient strand of thought that espouses self-love. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov expressed this in his unique way in his celebrated teaching, *Azamerah lelohai be-odi*, based on the verse, "I shall sing to

⁵ Lustiger, *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 2:331.

⁶ Soloveitchik, *Shiurei HaRav*, 30.

my God as long as I am" (אֲזַמְרָה לֵאלֹהֵי בְעוֹדִי) (Psalm 146:2). The rebbe urges his readers to find the good in themselves:

Just as we must judge others favorably, even the wicked, to find in them good elements... so must a person do for himself, to judge himself favorably, and to find some element of good, in order to strengthen himself so he does not completely collapse. On the contrary, he will revive himself, and gladden his soul with the modicum of good that he finds in himself.⁷

Rebbe Nachman reinterpreted the verse on which he is meditating to mean "I shall sing to God with my *od*," my little ounce of goodness. It is imperative not to lose sight of this goodness, so that a person can serve God with joy and song. In the same way the songwriter strings together beautiful notes to create a melody, so must we string together the high notes within us to sing our song to God. Elsewhere, Rebbe Nachman pithily captured this sentiment: "If you believe that you can ruin, believe you can repair."⁸

Rebbe Nosson Sternhartz of Nemirov, Rebbe Nachman's main disciple and much more, adapted his rebbe's teaching in explaining the very first law in the *Shulchan Aruch*. How one rises in the morning is not only a question of how we physically get out of bed, but how we get up when feeling down. How does one shake off the spiritual grogginess of feeling disappointed in oneself and distant from God? His answer is that one must seek out the bright spots to remain encouraged and in good cheer.⁹

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, spiritual leader of Aish Kodesh Congregation in Woodmere, New York, adds to this lesson from Rebbe Nosson. According to some *rishonim*, the washing of our hands in the morning (*negel vasser*) symbolizes our use of the laver. This means that our day begins with positive reinforcement. At dawn (שחר), as the new day begins, we must look for the light, even if outside everything still appears black (שחור).¹⁰

⁷ *Likutei Moharan*, 1:282.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:112. See further *Parashat Ki Tisa*, "Believe You Can Repair."

⁹ *Likutei Halachot, Orach Chayim, Hashkamat ha-Boker, halachah 1.*

¹⁰ Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, "Finding the Good Within," <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/831642/rabbi-moshe-weinberger/finding-the-good-within/> (accessed March 10, 2021).

