

The Most Precious Gift

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Parshat Vayak'hel

The wash-stand and its base did [Moses] make of copper, of copper from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. (Exodus 38:8)

Rashi says that the women had copper mirrors (probably brass, as pure copper is not so easily polished to a highly reflective surface as is its alloy, brass) with which they adorned themselves. Much as they appreciated “looking good” (human vanity is human vanity, in every time and place) by use of these mirrors, they did not hesitate, Rashi continues, to contribute them to the building of the Tabernacle. Moses, however, not wishing to use instruments of vanity in the building of the Holy Place, initially wanted to decline these gifts, until, Rashi maintains, the Blessed Holy One said to him, “Do accept them, for these are dearer to Me than all the other contributions.”

Moses, it seems, fell into the familiar trap – masters of virtually every religious and spiritual tradition have done so throughout human history – of divorcing the spiritual from the physical. Let us not be too harsh in faulting Moses, however. Moses was raised in the atmosphere of Pharaoh’s palace, and Pharaoh, revered in Mitzrayim as a god-king, typified the blending of physical and spiritual power. Moses, in reacting against this background (having experienced at first hand the consequences of that lack of boundary), seems to have tried to impose a very strong boundary between the physical and the spiritual. And G*d, recognizing Moses’ need for that clear demarcation, established a similar separation, granting to Moses the political leadership and to Aaron (as the first High Priest) the spiritual leadership.

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But now Moses wishes to make the distinction between the physical and the spiritual too strong, and G*d gently corrects him. “Do accept these gifts, for they are dearer to Me than all the others.”

What is it that makes the gift of the vanity-mirrors so dear to G*d?

First of all, we note that the vanity use of the mirrors is quite unobjectionable. It is perfectly legitimate for people to wish to present themselves in as pleasing a way as they can, and the mirrors contributed to that presentation.

The mirrors, then, represent the natural desire of people (in this case, the women, but men, in their own way, do the same) to “look good.” But this is precisely what the tradition calls the *yetzer ha’ra*, the so-called “evil” (a better rendering might be “negative”) inclination.

The *yetzer ha’ra* is one of two “inclinations” which are found in every human being, the other being the *yetzer ha’tov*, the good inclination. Calling them “good” and “evil” rather misses the point, however, since, as the Talmudic sages tell us, if it were not for the *yetzer ha’ra*, nobody would ever build a house, marry, or raise a family. Rather than “good” and “evil,” we may fairly characterize the two inclinations as the tendency to take care of others and the desire to take of oneself, the altruistic and the self-centered drives.

And the women now wish to take that natural desire, the *yetzer ha’ra*, and use it explicitly to fulfill G*d’s wishes, a beautiful expression of faith.

There it is, then. The taking of our natural desires, our natural inclinations, our self-centered, self-directed drives and using them for positive ends. That, as Moses needs to be reminded, and as we also need so often to be reminded, is what is the most precious to G*d.

Shabbat Shalom.

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