

Washing Your Hands is the Main Thing

In this week's Parsha, Ki Sisa, we are commanded about the *Kiyor*, the Laver, from which the Kohanim would wash their hands and feet before they did the service in the Mishkan and the Temple.¹

The other vessels are discussed in Parshas Terumah and Tetzaveh, where we are commanded about the construction of the Mishkan, its vessels, and the garments that the Kohanim wore when they were to do the service. Why is the Kiyor discussed in Parshas Ki Sisa, separate from all the others?

You certainly can't say that it was less holy than the rest of the vessels, because later, when the Torah speaks about the anointing of the vessels, it lists the Kiyor together with all the others and it calls them "Holy of Holies."²

The commentaries³ explain that because it wasn't used in the actual service, as it was only used in preparation of the service, it is mentioned separately.

This separation is not only seen in its placement in the Torah, but also in its actual placement in the Mishkan and Temple. While the rest of the vessels were in the Mishkan itself – either in the Holy or Holy of Holies, or in the case of the sacrificial altar, directly in front of the opening of the Mishkan – the Kiyor was placed in between the altar and the Mishkan, but to the side, not directly in front of the entrance. Since it was to the side, the Kohanim could wash their hands and feet before they would approach the altar, the Mishkan or the area in between.

The Talmud⁴ tells us that in order for it to sanctify the Kohanim, it had to be able to contain enough water for four people to wash from it. This is derived from a verse about the Kiyor: "Moshe, and Aaron and his sons should wash..."⁵ Moshe and

Aaron are two, and his sons are two, so all together, that makes four.

The commentaries ask the following question: Moshe was only a Kohen during the days of inauguration,⁶ which was a training period for Aaron and his sons. Why, then, should the Kiyor for all generations need to be for four people, when it is really only for Aaron and his sons, who are only three?

Because the days of inauguration were a period of preparation for the Kohanim to be able to serve in the Mishkan, and the whole idea of the Kiyor is to prepare the Kohanim to serve in the Mishkan, it therefore has to be able to accommodate not only Aaron and his sons, but it must also include all who were Kohanim at the time of this initial preparation – the days of inauguration – meaning Moshe, too.

It turns out that even though the Kiyor was only used for preparing to do the service, it had a distinct advantage over the other vessels because it was connected to Moshe, who was greater than Aaron, and it is connected to the Kohanim who were part of the inauguration, Moshe, Aaron and his sons.

In other words, every time the Kohanim washed from the Kiyor, every time they prepared to do the service, they connected to Moshe, and to Aaron and his sons, and that was part of their preparation.

So, the Kiyor contains within it two ideas from opposite sides of the spectrum. On one hand, it was only a preparation. On the other hand, through this preparation, the Kohanim connected to Moshe, Aaron and his sons.

We see the same dichotomy with the material that the Kiyor was made from. It was made from the copper mirrors that the women used to beautify themselves in order to entice their husbands to be with them, and through that, they brought up generations of our people. On one hand, Moshe was uncomfortable accepting them because,

¹ Shemos, 30:17.

² Ibid., 30:29.

³ Chizkuni/Seforno on Shemos 30:18.

⁴ Tractate Zevachim, 19b.

⁵ Ibid., 40:31.

⁶ Talmud, Zevachim, 102a.

seemingly, “they are made for the evil inclination,” but on the other hand, Hashem told Moshe to accept them, because “they are most precious of all.”⁷

The explanation of the dichotomies of the Kiyor:

The commandment, “You should make Me a Mishkan,”⁸ is that we should take physical things, and specifically the thirteen or fifteen⁹ physical materials mentioned in Parshas Terumah, and make from them a dwelling for Hashem, as the verse continues, “...and I will dwell in them.” This is also a Mitzvah that is ongoing, as the Midrash says¹⁰ that the reason that Hashem created the world is because “He desired that we should make for Him a home below,” in this lowly realm.

Since making a home below includes even the lowest levels,¹¹ the Mishkan necessarily had to include the mirrors that “are made for the evil inclination,” because Hashem wants to dwell in them, too.

If this is the case, then obviously Moshe knew it, so why did he not want to accept the mirrors initially?

Moshe saw the true essence of things, and he wanted for the Mishkan, that the materials used to make it should be things that allow G-dliness to shine directly through. The problem with mirrors that are used for bodily cravings is that both the body and the mirrors, even when refined, still block the truth from coming through.

Window glass or a magnifying glass both allow light to come clearly through. A mirror, however, though also made of glass, doesn’t give you the truth; it gives you a reflection and doesn’t allow any light to come through.¹²

The body and the animal soul are specifically designed to block G-dliness from coming through.

Still, Hashem said about the mirrors, “they are the most precious of all.” The things that are made to block G-dliness from coming through are refined through accepting the heavenly yoke,¹³ and there is no enjoyment in that; it is purely done through deciding to accept whatever Hashem wants, and that is very difficult. Therefore, it is “the most precious of all.”

It is the most physical and the most mundane that Hashem wants to dwell in. And the importance placed on the Kiyor, which is the most precious vessel of all, even though it is only a preparation for the service, teaches us that the hardest part is the preparation. The hardest part is washing your hands from the bad and the negative; once you do that, the rest is downhill. Once you wash your hands from the bad and negative, you are in, and then, from here on, you are free to serve Hashem. Washing away the negative is freeing.

It is amazing how the Parsha of the week is connected to current events.¹⁴ Right now, with the pandemic¹⁵ that we are facing, the experts are saying that the most important thing is washing your hands.

May everyone be protected from all harm connected to this trouble we are facing. May we gain the strength from Moshe to face our most difficult challenges. May we see how our challenges, and facing them, was the thing that broke us free from the dark and bitter exile. And may we see how we are the most precious to Hashem with the coming of Moshiach. May he come soon.¹⁶

⁷ Rashi, Vayakhel, 38:8. See Tanchuma, Pikudei, 9.

⁸ Shemos, 25:8.

⁹ There is debate amongst the commentaries as to the precise number.

¹⁰ Dira Bitachtonim: Midrash Tanchuma, Nasso 16, Bechukosai 3. Bereishis Rabbah, end of Chap. 3. Bamidbar Rabbah, Chap. 13, par. 6. Tanya, Chap. 36.

¹¹ Tanya, Chap. 36.

¹² *Torah Or*, 33 a–b.

¹³ *Kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*.

¹⁴ See Shaloh, at the beginning of Parshas Vayeshev, who says that the Parsha that we read is connected to the time of year. See also Zohar vol. 2, p. 206

¹⁵ At the time of this writing.

¹⁶ Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Lekutei Sichos VI, p. 196.