



Biblical Women

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WOMEN HOSTS – SACRED MIRRORS

Background

After the revelation at Mount Sinai, God reveals the plan for the Israelites to construct a sacred place for the divine Presence to dwell among them. The major part of the biblical Book of Exodus is occupied with the instructions for and building of the Tabernacle, the *mishkan*. This project elicits the contributions of all members of the community according to the desire of each woman and man to give freely. The materials are derived from many aspects of the created world, from plant, animal, mineral, and sea sources, precious and everyday, colored and textured. This diversity of gifts symbolizes the differences among the people and the value of each as a constituent part of a sacred collective endeavor. The detailed account of the project deals with both the mobile structure and the implements used in the functioning of the sacred service.

The spiritual center of the Israelite people, the *mishkan* is occupied with ritual that involves the body, its cycles and functions, and the manipulation of physical materials. Ritual purity is one of the expressions of preparedness to enter ever-increasing domains of sacred space in order to engage in sacred acts. Cleansing with water is a form of purification that is mandated for those participating in and officiating in the services. For this purpose, special washing vessels are specified among the items to be made and used for the service of the priests. An assembly of women seeks to bring an offering that will be used as material for the washing vessels.

Biblical Sources

יז וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. יח וַעֲשִׂיתָ כִּיֹּר נְחֹשֶׁת וְכִנּוֹ נְחֹשֶׁת--לְרִחֻצָּה; וְנָתַתָּ אֹתוֹ בֵּין-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּבֵין הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְנָתַתָּ שָׁמָּה מַיִם. יט וְרָחֲצוּ אֶהָרָן וּבָנָיו מִמֶּנּוּ אֶת-יְדֵיהֶם וְאֶת-רַגְלֵיהֶם. כ בְּבָאֵם אֶל-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד יְרָחֲצוּ-מַיִם--וְלֹא יָמָתוּ; אוּ בְגִשְׁתֶּם אֶל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְשִׁרְתוֹ לְהִקְטִיר אִשָּׁה לַיהוָה. כא וְרָחֲצוּ יְדֵיהֶם וּרַגְלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יָמָתוּ; וְהָיְתָה לָהֶם חֻק-עוֹלָם לֹא יִלְזָרוּ לְדֹרֹתָם. (שמות ל)

17 God spoke to Moses, saying: 18 Make a laver of copper and a stand of copper for it, for washing; and place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar. Put water in it, 19 and let Aaron and his children wash their hands and feet [in water drawn] from it. 20 When they enter the Tent of Meeting they shall wash with water, that they may not die; or when they approach the altar to serve, to turn into smoke an offering by fire to God 21 they shall wash their hands and feet, that they may not die. It shall be a law for all time for them--for him and his offspring--throughout the ages. (Ex. 30)

ח וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת הַכִּיֹּר נְחֹשֶׁת וְאֶת כִּנּוֹ נְחֹשֶׁת--בְּמִרְאוֹת הַצְּבָאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ פָתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד. (שמות לח)

8 He made the laver of copper and its stand of copper, from the mirrors of the hosts of women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. (Ex. 38)

כב ועלי זקן מאד; ושמע את כל-אשר יעשו בניו לכל-ישראל ואת אשר-ישכבון את-הנשים הצבאות
פתח אהל מועד. כג ויאמר להם למה תעשו כדברים האלה אשר אנכי שמע את-דבריכם רעים
מאת כל-העם אלה. (שמואל א, ב)

Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons did unto all Israel, and how they lay with the women who serve at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He said to them, "Why do you do such things? I get evil reports about you from the people all around. (I Samuel 2:22–3)

Interpreters

Rashi on Ex. 38:8 [Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105, French biblical and talmudic commentator]

The womenfolk of Israel had mirrors which they used when they beautified themselves. When the women offered these mirrors as gifts for the Mishkan, Moses' immediate reaction was to reject them as they were made for the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination [ie. for sexual purposes - to make themselves beautiful and endear them to their spouses.] God told him, "Accept them! - These are dearer to me than all the other gifts! - because it was due to these mirrors that these women brought myriads, *tzvaot*, into the world when they were in Egypt." When their spouses were oppressed with slave labor, the women would go and take them food and drinks, and feed them. They would bring the mirrors with them and each one of the women would look at herself in the mirror with her spouse and entice him with words, saying, "I am more beautiful than you." From this they would make their spouses desirous and have sex, and the women became pregnant there (in the fields), as it says, "Under the apple tree I roused you" (Song of Songs 8:5). And this is why [the Hebrew for the word "mirror" is] *marot tzovot* which can be read as "mirrors of hosts."

Ramban (based on comment by Ibn Ezra) on Ex. 38:8 [Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270, Spanish mystical bible commentator]

Women habitually look in the mirror - made of copper or glass - every morning to put their headdress into shape. Now, amongst the Israelites were certain women, dedicated to the service of God, who distanced themselves from worldly desire. They donated their mirrors to the Mishkan, as they had no further use for beautification. These women would come each day to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to pray and to hear the details of the mitzvot.

What are the meanings of the women's presence and gift-giving?

Questions for Discussion

The Torah mandates meticulous preparation of the body for sacred service; severe consequences result from neglect of these prescriptions. What is the meaning and relevance of these strictures in your conceptions of holiness? How are cleanliness and beauty related to holiness?

These two commentators, Rashi and Ramban, take radically different approaches to the same biblical verse. Their assumptions and values underlie their interpretations. Investigate the contrasting attitudes expressed by these interpretations. What views about gender and sexuality are implicit in each?

Might there be any affiliation between the divine Name, "Lord of Hosts" and the reference to the women as "hosts" in these passages?

How do the verses in I Samuel affect your interpretation of the verse about the women *hosts* in Exodus? Consider the issues of corruption, abuse, sexuality, gender and power.

How do the women hosts embody/ arouse/ challenge the intersections of holiness, cleanliness and sexuality in these texts and concepts?

Links for Inquiry

For an sample of Nehama Leibowitz' commentary on the issues of the stand and the laver, <http://www.jafi.org.il/education/torani/NEHAMA/pekudei.html>

Concerning the divine Name,

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/name.html>

Summary of Issues

Hosts of women contribute a controversial offering, copper mirrors, to the collective sacred project of the Israelite community, the *mishkan*, the Tabernacle. According to one midrashic tradition, the leader of the people, Moses, resists the gift because it is affiliated with sexuality and vanity. While one commentator finds grounds for an ascetic women's sect that eschews sexuality, another rebuts the inclination toward prudishness and expresses an emphatic divine affirmation of the worthiness of the women's gift to the *mishkan* precisely because of its affiliation with the sacredness of sexuality and procreation.

The process of investigating attitudes to the women hosts reflects implicit assumptions about gender, sexuality, material and holiness in the shining copper mirrors.

Methodology Matters

Ideology, worldview and assumptions inform all interpretations of the Torah and texts in general; there is no value-free perspective. Attitudes toward women, sexuality, roles and status often shape commentaries and legal and social norms that derive from them. The extent and appropriateness of these kinds of influences are the subject of

controversy. Discriminatory perspectives often disable women's participation in public Jewish life. Inspecting and evaluating our views, goals and presuppositions and their impact on Jewish life and practice are critical to the process of Torah study.

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