

Mirror, Mirror On the Wall

By Rabbi Dr. Barry Dov Schwartz, Rabbi Emeritus

The Torah portion Vaykhel, read in mid-March, teaches that Bezalel made the kiyor- in which the Kohanim washed their hands before they officiated at the service-out of copper. And the Torah says that this copper came from the mirrors that the women of Israel donated for the making of the Mishkan. (Exodus 38:8)

Here, and only here, in the entire making of the Mishkan do we have an account of who gave what. Everywhere else in the story, it simply says that the people brought gifts.

And that leads Rashi to make this comment: He says that Moses protested to God. “Mirrors? Instruments of vanity? Should they be used in the making of the kiyor that the Kohanim will use when they begin their service? No way!”

To which God answered: “Kiblum! Ki hem chavivim alay min hakol. Accept these mirrors, for they are more precious to Me than anything else.”

Why?

Says Rashi: Because when the men came back from a day of backbreaking slavery, from a day of being treated as less than human, when they came back exhausted and demoralized and worn out, the women were there to greet them. The women, with the help of their mirrors, had beautified themselves. They were the one bit of beauty, the one bit of civilization that these exhausted men had in all their lives. This beauty gave them morale, dignity and hope. And because the women had made themselves so beautiful, the men were moved to make love to them, and that is how children were born during the dark years of slavery. If it were not for the women and their mirrors, the Israelites might have died out in Egypt. And therefore, God said to Moses: “Accept these mirrors, for they are more precious to Me than anything else.”

According to this Midrash, it was the women who kept up the morale of their husbands. Even in these difficult circumstances, the women would beautify themselves with whatever makeup they could find or make. They would greet their husbands looking pretty, and by doing so they kept their husbands from becoming completely dehumanized.

I love that Midrash for several reasons. One is because we think of the Torah and tradition as male-centered; but here is a Midrash in which the credit for the survival of the people is given to women. And I love this Midrash because it teaches that the same object that can be an instrument of vanity in one set of circumstances, can be something sacred in another.

When a woman concentrates only on her appearance-that is vanity. When a woman invests much of her time and energy and money in making herself beautiful instead of being involved in the welfare of her family or of the world-that is vanity. But, when a woman and her family live in the deepest darkness of slavery, when they live in sub-human conditions, when they live in poverty and misery, and she strives to keep one tiny bit of beauty in that world, and uses her mirror for that purpose, then that mirror becomes a spark of holiness. That is why God commands Moses to accept these mirrors, use them in the making of the Mishkan, and consider them more precious than anything else.

What is true of beauty is true of virtually everything else. There is a time when atheism is bad, when it blinds us to the presence of God. But there is also a time to be an atheist. One of the Hassidic rebbeyim says that when a poor man comes to you for help, you are not permitted to say to him: “God will help.” At that moment, you are supposed to act as if there is no God, and you-and only you-have the ability to help him.