

Mirrors

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

One of the reasons why we much such a point of reading the Torah in public each week is that if you really do go through it word for word, you come across little gems that might go unnoticed in the body of the text, that teach us important moral lessons.

This week repeats the detailed lists of the how the Tabernacle was built and the priests were dressed. And then sandwiched in between comes this odd verse:

“And he made the brass washing bowl out of the mirrors that belonged to the women who used to gather (or petition) at the entrance to the tabernacle.”
Exodus 38.8.

In the ancient world women used mirrors made from burnished brass. Mirrors were obviously objects of vanity but Judaism has always emphasized the value and importance of beauty and dignity when it is allied to spiritual values. But physical beauty by itself is skin deep, it fades and nowadays it's only a surgeon's knife or a cosmetician's art away. If one only pays attention to outward beauty one will be easily deceived. But in combination with inner qualities, aesthetics is the handmaiden of philosophy.

The women who attended the Tabernacle were clearly motivated by their religious values, that was why they gathered there, to pray or simply to be seen identifying with the community. But they were still women of society, involved in the wider community and concerned with looking good while still being modest. Modesty above all, self-control, was what they valued. And so if they were going to give any single thing up it would be vanity. Their donation to the Tabernacle showed that beauty and goodness should be combined, in people and in the institutions of Judaism.

But there's another fascinating detail here. What does it mean by “the women who gathered”?

Gathered to petition Moses? Or to be near to the spiritual center of Israelite life? Did they have nothing better to do? The Hebrew word used here is TSOVOT. Which comes from the same word as army TSAVA. Does this mean they were Amazons? Israelite women who fought to defend the community? It is a fanciful idea but unlikely from everything we know from Israelite life at the time.

The idea that it means to plead is because of the sound resonance with another word TSAVA meaning to bequeath or allocate. Except that word has a different central letter, a VAV instead of a BET. The simple fact is that TSAVA also means to paint and the simple obvious meaning is they used their mirrors to paint themselves in front of. But that as they became more spiritual (perhaps by attending the Tabernacle) they decided to donate those metal mirrors to the Tabernacle itself. In a way not dissimilar to the Torah telling us that after the Golden Calf, the men stopped wearing jewelry. The

mere fact that the Torah mentions it, indicates how significant this donation was.