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material needed to make the tabernacle's bronze basin, is there significance to the contribution being mirrors?

Two medieval commentators, Rashi and Ibn Ezra, come to answer these questions. Incorporating a midrash in his commentary, Rashi writes that Moses was initially angry when he saw the offering of mirrors and wanted to reject them. Moses associated the mirrors with the "Yetzer HaRa" - the lustful Evil Inclination - because they are used by women to beautify themselves and arouse their partners. But God told Moses to think again - to consider the mirrors an extra special gift because they had been used by the Israelite women in Egypt to entice their partners, weary from long days of back-breaking slave labor. According to Rashi, the mirrors should be seen not as tools of vanity, but as objects made holy by their role in ensuring Jewish survival. It may be a stretch, but one could also read Rashi, and this midrash, as affirming beauty and sexuality.

Ibn Ezra, however, takes a different approach. He writes that the donation of the mirrors signaled a new breed of women - women no longer interested in playing upon their appearance to become wives and mothers. This "women's collective" came regularly to the Tent of Meeting to pray and hear words of Torah; the new spiritual life offered by the Tabernacle enabled such women to find meaning outside the traditional roles assigned to them by society. So giving up a mirror is more properly read as a symbolic gesture indicating a rejection of beauty and sexuality.

This rich and timely argument speaks to a deep tension within Judaism and religion in general. Our society encourages young and old alike, either implicitly or explicitly, to care about how they look - often at the expense of more significant and meaningful accomplishment. Synagogues spend precious resources for interior decorators to come beautify the spaces in which we learn and pray, leaving less to spend on the learning and praying activities themselves!

For Rashi, aesthetics and being "turned on by what we see" are necessary and even holy when harnessed to ensure continuity. For Ibn Ezra, scruffiness is next to godliness because there are simply more interesting and important things to think about than how things look. Are we striking the right balance?

**For Discussion:** Should physical beauty, and the efforts to enhance it, be celebrated or transcended? And more generally, should Judaism accept, leverage, and even valorise social norms, or should it seek to subvert them?

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## **TORAH SPARKS**

### **Parashat Vayakhel & Pekudei**

### **Shabbat Parah**

### **Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh**

### **March 10, 2018 | 23 Adar 5778**

Annual | Exodus 35:1-40:38 (Etz Hayim p. 552-572; Hertz p. 373-391)  
Triennial | Exodus 37:17-39:21 (Etz Hayim p. 560-567; Hertz p. 379-381, 385-387)  
Maftir | Numbers 19:1-22 (Num 19: 1-22; Etz Hayim p. 880-883; Hertz p. 652-655)  
Haftarah | Ezekiel 36:16-38 (Etz Hayim p. 1290-1294; Hertz p. 1001-1004)

## **D'var Torah: A Woman's Gifts**

*Rabbi Joel Levy, Rosh Yeshiva, Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem*

This double parasha, which describes the building of the tabernacle in the wilderness, mentions various contributions made specifically by the Israelite women. The first is found in Exodus 35:25-26: "...every woman wise of mind with their hands they spun ... the goats'-hair." By way of the ancient and time consuming activity of hand-spinning - twisting fibres together to produce thread - they played an essential role in the manufacture of the cloth that hung on the tabernacle walls and adorned its holy vessels. A second contribution, this time of goods rather than services, is mentioned in Exodus 38:8:

8) And he made the basin of bronze, and its pedestal of bronze, out of the mirrors of the women's collective that would gather at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

ה) וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת הַכִּיּוֹר נְהֻשֶׁת וְאֶת כְּנֹוֹ  
נְהֻשֶׁת בְּמִרְאֵת הַצְּבָאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ  
בְּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד.

What should we make of this contribution? How does it compare to the time-consuming labor of hand-spinning thread? Beyond giving Betzalel the raw

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# D'var Haftarah: A New Heart

*Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

This Shabbat, our maftir Torah reading is Parshat Parah which describes the rite of the Red Heifer - the only means to purify individuals who became ritually impure through contact with the dead. The reading's placement, shortly before Pesach, served as a reminder that one had to be ritually pure to partake of the Korban Pesach (the traditional Passover sacrifice we no longer perform).

In the haftarah for this special Shabbat, the prophet Ezekiel offers a complementary vision, in which the problematic "impurity" is a result of immoral behavior and social ills. He asserts that it was, in fact, THIS impurity that caused the Babylonian Exile and destruction of the First Temple. But just like we need God's help to be rid of ritual impurity, we need God's help as well to overcome our base natures and be rid of our moral impurity.. This idea is exemplified by a famous verse in Ezekiel's message: "And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you. I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh, and I will put My spirit into you." (36:26-27)

But how does God do this? It seems likely that Ezekiel understood this to be some kind of supernatural act in which God imposes His will upon human beings, causing a radical change in their natures. But as the following midrash indicates, the Sages saw it differently:

Rabbi Levi in the name of Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said: 'God's laws are called hukkim because they are engraved (hakukim) as a safeguard against the Yetzer Hara (the evil inclination).' Rabbi Levi elaborated: 'This can be compared to an outpost threatened by brigands. What did the king do? He sent a guard to protect it. So, too, the Holy One Blessed be He said: The Torah is a rock and the Evil Inclination is a rock. The Torah (a harder rock) will defend against the Evil Inclination (a less hard rock) – "I will remove the heart of stone from your body."

-adapted from Vayikra Rabbah 35:5 Margoliot ed. pp. 822-3

For the Sages, God revealed the Torah as a means for human beings to exercise self-control, refrain from self-destructive and world-destructive activities, and master the Evil Inclination. In essence, the process of change, of purifying ourselves as individuals and as a society, is in our hands. God gives us Torah as a tool and leaves the work for us.

**For Discussion:** How has Torah made you, and your community, better? Do you believe that individuals and societies can truly overcome the darker and more problematic aspects of human nature? Why or why not?

# Parashat Vayakhel & Pekudei Self-Study

*Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

We have reached the point of action. After receiving lengthy instructions for building the Mishkan (Tabernacle), it is finally happening. Note that this is a double parasha and it brings us to the end of the book of Shemot (Exodus). This Shabbat is also Shabbat Parah (before Rosh Chodesh Nissan.)

- 1) The parasha opens (35:1-3) with Moshe gathering all of the People of Israel to tell them about Shabbat. Why do think that it is important that all the people hear the instructions regarding Shabbat?
- 2) Moshe gives the instructions for all that is to be donated and all that is to be made for the Mishkan to all the people of Israel (35:4-20). What might this setting tell us about the place of the people in the process?
- 3) The involvement of women in the making of the Mishkan is noticeable. What was the special art that the women donated to the Mishkan (35:25-26)? What does the Torah call a person who is talented in an art?
- 4) The chief artist/architect who built the Mishkan was Betzalel. He made everything that God commanded (38:22-23). With him was Oholiav for whom more specific skills are listed. What do you think might have been the relationship between them in their work?
- 5) The Mishkan is put up on the first day of the first month, Nissan, which is starting this week (40:1-2). How long passed since the people left Egypt? In what ways do you think that the Mishkan reflects what has happened to the people?

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