

Parshas Ki Sisa

Transforming Negativity

Parshas Ki Sisa discusses the commandment to construct the *kiyor*. This Sicha explains the curious placement of this instruction and the uniqueness of the *kiyor*.

In this week’s *parsha*, G-d commands Moshe regarding the building of the *kiyor* (washstand) for use in the Tabernacle.

Text 1

The Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: "You shall make a washstand of copper and its base of copper for washing, and you shall place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and you shall put water therein. Aharon and his sons shall wash their hands and feet from it. When they enter the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water so that they will not die; or when they approach the altar to serve, to make a fire offering rise up in smoke to the Lord, they shall wash their hands and feet so that they will not die; this shall be for them a perpetual statute, for him and for his descendants, for their generations."

Shemos, 30:17-21

Before the *kohanim* (priests) served in the *Mishkan* they were to wash their hands and feet. To facilitate this, G-d commanded Moshe to construct a copper laver.

Interestingly, while the commandments to build all the other vessels for the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) are spoken of in the previous two Torah portions, G-d’s instruction to build the *kiyor* is not placed together with the rest of the Sanctuary’s vessels, and is instead articulated in

this week’s *parsha* (Torah portion), *Parshas Ki Sisa*.

When discussing the vessels that served an important role in the Sanctuary, Rambam states the following:

Text 2

The following utensils are integral for the Sanctuary...a washstand with a pedestal where the priests would sanctify their hands and feet for the (Temple) service. It was positioned between the Entrance Hall and the altar, to the left when entering the Sanctuary.

Rambam, Hilchos Beis HaBechira 1:6

Rambam describes the *kiyor* as a utensil with an essential role for the service. Notwithstanding its importance, it nevertheless is not stated amongst the instructions for the rest of the vessels. Instead, it is mentioned in an entirely separate *parsha*—*after* the Torah enumerates the other vessels for the *Mishkan*.

For what reason was the commandment to build the *kiyor* separated from all the others, and only mentioned after all the rest of the vessels?

Difference in roles

The commentators explain that this marked separation expressed a focal difference between the purpose that the *kiyor* served in the *Mishkan*

and the role of the rest of the vessels. Because of the difference in its purpose, it is set apart from the rest of the vessels.

The commentaries explain this distinction as follows:

Text 3

This vessel as well, is not mentioned above with the rest of the vessels, because its intent was not that the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) should reside in the Sanctuary, as was the intent of those vessels. Its intent was rather to prepare the *kohanim* for their service.

Seforno, Shemos, 30:18

All the other vessels fulfilled a direct service of G-d in the *Mishkan* and caused G-dliness to rest therein. The *kiyor*, on the other hand, served the purpose of washing the hands and feet of the *kohanim* before they served in the *Mishkan*. The *kiyor* therefore was a *preparation* for the service and not part of the service itself.

It is for this reason that the commandment to build the *kiyor* is not stated together with the rest of the vessels in the *Mishkan*, but instead is mentioned in a different *parsha*, after the rest of the other vessels.

Its placement

This difference is not only seen by the order of the *kiyor's* instruction in the Torah, but it can also be recognized from the distinction of where it was situated in the *Mishkan* as well.

The Torah describes the position of the *kiyor* as follows¹: “You shall place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar.”

Rashi explains its specific location in his commentary on the verse:

Text 4

[This refers to] the altar for burnt offerings, about which it is written that it was in front of the entrance of the *Mishkan* of the Tent of Meeting. The washstand was drawn away slightly [from the entrance] and stood opposite the space between the altar and the *Mishkan*, but it did not intervene at all [between them], because it is said: “And he placed the altar for burnt offerings at the entrance of the *Mishkan* of the Tent of Meeting” (Exod. 40:29), implying that the altar was in front of the Tent of Meeting, but the washstand was not in front of the Tent of Meeting. How is that so? It [the washstand] was drawn away slightly to the south.

Rashi, Shemos, 30:18

While the rest of the vessels—such as the *menorah*, the *shulchan* and the altar for incense—were placed *inside* the Tent of Meeting, the *kiyor* was placed outside of it. Though the altar for burnt offerings was also technically situated outside in the courtyard, it was positioned directly in front of its entrance.

In contrast, the *kiyor* was not placed in front of the entrance, but rather, it was situated off to the side.

This positioning actually enabled the *kohanim* to access the *kiyor*.

The Mishna states that there are several instances when it is prohibited to enter the area between the Tent of Meeting (where the altar

¹ Shemos, 30:18

for the *ketores*, *menorah* and *shulchan* are housed) and the altar for burnt offerings:

Text 5

R. Yossi stated: “In five respects in the area between the Ulam and the altar on par with the Heichal: for those afflicted with blemishes, or with a wild growth of hair, or who have drunk wine, or whose hands or feet are unwashed may not enter there.”

Mishna, Keilim, 1:9

While the *kiyor* was situated “between the Tent of Meeting and the altar,” it was obviously permitted to approach it without washing one’s hands and feet. The reason for this is because it was not directly opposite the Tent of Meeting, but was instead, off to the side.

Not only was the *kiyor* of lesser holiness than the rest of the vessels, in that it served a preparatory service, but it was as well positioned in the *Mishkan* in a place of lesser holiness.

The reason for both of these distinctions is due to the fact that the *kiyor* served a preparatory purpose, and was therefore on a lower level than the rest of the vessels. Rather than being an actual service that took place in the *Mishkan*, the role of the *kiyor* was to *prepare* the *kohanim* to be able to perform these rituals.

Its size

This idea that the *kiyor* was a preparation for the rest of the service in the *Mishkan* is also expressed in the physical dimensions of the *kiyor*.

At the time of the erection of the *Mishkan*, after all of the vessels had been constructed, the verse

² Shemos, 40:31

describes Moshe’s placement of the *kiyor* into the *Mishkan*:

Text 6

He placed the washstand between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and there he put water for washing, and Moshe, Aharon, and his sons would wash their hands and their feet from it.

Shemos, 40:30-31

The Talmud understands the specific wording of the verse and the mention of these four individuals—Moshe, Aharon, and Aharon’s two sons—as an indication that the *kiyor* must contain enough water for four people to be able to wash from it.

Text 7

R. Yossi ben R. Chanina said: “You may not wash in a laver which does not contain sufficient [water] for the sanctifications of four priests, for it says²: “Moshe, Aharon, and his sons would wash their hands and their feet from it.”

Talmud, Zevachim 19b

The Talmud explains that there must be enough water for Moshe, Aharon and his two sons. Though Aharon and his sons were *kohanim*, whether or not Moshe was a *kohen* is a Talmudic dispute.

Text 8

The Sages maintain: Moshe was invested with priesthood only for the seven days of consecration. Some maintain: Only Moshe’s

descendants were deprived of priesthood, for it is said³, “But as for Moshe the man of G-d, his sons are named among the tribe of Levi;” and it says⁴, “Moshe and Aharon among His priests, and Shmuel among them that call upon His name.” Why [add] “and it says”? — You might argue that [the first proof-text] is written for [future] generations, hence it says, however, “Moshe and Aharon among His priests.”

Talmud, Zevachim 102a

While according to the opinion that Moshe’s priesthood was everlasting it is understood why he is taken into account when determining the amount of water that is to be in the *kiyor*, according to the opinion that he was a priest for a mere seven days, this is not understood.

If Moshe only served as a *kohen* during the inauguration of the Tabernacle—indicating that from then on, the *kiyor* was only needed for Aharon and his sons—why then, for all eternity must the *kiyor* have enough water for four *kohanim*? Why should *Moshe* be enumerated as one of the *kohanim* if he only served as such for the seven days of the inauguration of the *Mishkan*?

Explanation

The days of inauguration were a preparation for the general service in the *Mishkan* afterwards. Being that the entire existence of the *kiyor* served as a preparation for its general service, its measurements therefore included that which was *also* needed only during the time of the *inauguration* of the *Mishkan*.

While Moshe was only considered a *kohen* during the days of preparation, the entire idea of the *kiyor* was indicative of preparation. Moshe’s need for its use during this stage was thus

included in the measurements of its permanent dimensions.

This idea leads to an interesting conclusion: although the *kiyor* merely served as a *preparation* for the service in the *Mishkan*, and thus in many ways, retained a lower level of holiness, it simultaneously possessed an aspect that was *greater* than the rest of the vessels.

It was for this reason that the *kiyor* contained an aspect that alluded to Moshe, who was *greater* than his brother Aharon.

Thus, although in a general sense the *kiyor* was lower than the rest of the vessels, it also held a unique superior quality from all the other vessels in the Tabernacle.

Two extremes

These two extremes found in the *kiyor* in which, on one hand, it only held the status of a preparatory vessel and on the other, it contained the superior quality of Moshe being expressed therein, are also expressed in the specific material from which it was made.

The Torah says as follows:

Text 9

You shall make a washstand of copper and its base of copper for washing, and you shall place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and you shall put water therein.

Shemos, 30:18

The Torah relates that the specific copper that was used for the construction of the *kiyor* was from copper mirrors that were donated by the Jewish women.

³ Divrei HaYamim 1, 23:24

⁴ Tehillim, 99:6

Text 10

And he made the washstand of copper and its base of copper from the mirrors of the women who had set up the legions, who congregated at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

Shemos, 38:8

Rashi's commentary on that particular verse describes (based on the Medrash) how Moshe had originally opposed using these mirrors in the construction of the *Mishkan*, and that G-d specifically instructed him to do so.

Text 11

The Israelite women owned mirrors, which they would look into when they adorned themselves. Even these [mirrors] they did not hold back from bringing as a contribution toward the *Mishkan*, but Moshe despised them because they were made for temptation [i.e., to inspire lustful thoughts]. The Holy One, blessed is He, said to him, "Accept [them], for these are more precious to Me than anything because through them the women set up many legions [i.e., through the children they gave birth to] in Egypt." When their husbands were weary from back-breaking labor, they [the women] would go and bring them food and drink and give them to eat. Then they [the women] would take the mirrors and each one would see herself with her husband in the mirror, and she would seduce him with words, saying, "I am more beautiful than you." And in this way they aroused their husbands' desire and would copulate with them, conceiving and giving birth there.

Rashi, *ibid*

Moshe despised the mirrors, as they are a tool for temptation. G-d, however, loved them, as they were used to create the Jewish people.

From one angle, the mirrors served a lowly function as a tool for arousing desire, and from another, they were so valued by G-d, that he treasured them above all else.

This dichotomy that on one hand, they were a tool for negativity and on the other, they were especially precious, is expressed in the *kiyor* as well. While it is the lowest of the vessels, there is also an element within it, in which it is the highest, and expressive of Moshe.

The Sanctuary

When G-d told the Israelites that they should build a sanctuary for Him, the ultimate purpose that it served was that through its physical materials, G-dliness could dwell in the mundane.

This fulfills G-d's ultimate intent for the creation of the world, in that it should become a dwelling place for His Presence.

Text 12

It is a well-known Rabbinic statement that the purpose of the creation of this world is that the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to have an abode in the lower worlds. But surely with Him the distinction of "upper" and "lower" has no validity, for He pervades all worlds equally...clearly, the purpose of the *Hishtalshelut* of the worlds and their descent, degree by degree, is not for the sake of the higher worlds, because for them this is a descent from the light of His blessed Countenance. But the ultimate purpose [of creation] is this lowest world, for such was His blessed will that He shall have satisfaction when the *sitra achra* is subdued and the darkness is turned to light, so that the Divine light of the

blessed *En Sof* shall shine forth in the place of the darkness and *sitra achra* throughout this world, all the more strongly and intensely, with the excellence of light emerging from darkness.

Tanya, Likutei Amarim, Ch. 36

G-d's intent for the world is to create a dwelling place for Himself in the lowest of places. For this to be accomplished, G-dliness must permeate every area—even those that were originally used for negativity.

This is expressed in the use of the mirrors for the *Mishkan*. Though created for the purpose of temptation (albeit for a good and holy intention of increasing Jewish progeny), G-d wanted holiness to specifically permeate the lowest levels. It is for this reason that G-d desired that they be included in the building of the *Mishkan* so that there too G-dliness should be expressed.

Moshe despised them

Moshe did not want G-dliness to be expressed *also* in negativity, he desired that there shouldn't be negativity at all.

Moshe's wish was to uplift the Israelites to a level as they were prior to when they had sinned with the Golden Calf, and that they should be similar to way the world stood prior to the sin of the Tree of Knowledge. In such a reality, G-dliness was not expressed even in temptation, as there was no temptation to speak of.

Text 13

Before [the sin] they were naked and occupied in copulation to have children yet they were not ashamed, just as [they were not ashamed] to eat or drink. [They were occupied in it] as it was a

⁵ Shemos. 11:4

mitzvah and they did not know that there was any temptation in it. After they sinned though, and ate from the Tree of Knowledge and they knew temptation, then it is difficult to abstain from it. It was for this reason that G-d did not wish that man should eat from the Tree of Knowledge, because it is damaging, as mentioned. [G-d] wished that they would not know at all of the existence of evil and [wished that he should be] entirely holy.

Torah Ohr, 5:4b

Moshe wished to bring them back to this reality, where holiness is completely separate from temptation. He did not wish that they should use negativity for a holy purpose, he wished that temptation cease to exist.

Moshe wished this from the Jewish people, as this was similar to the way that he himself experienced G-dliness.

Text 14

Moshe prophesied with, "So says the Lord⁵, 'At the dividing point of the night...'", and the prophets prophesied with [the phrase] "So says the Lord." But Moshe surpassed them, for he prophesied with the expression, "This is the thing."

Rashi, Bamidbar, 30:2

The difference between "So says the Lord" and "This is the thing," is that the other prophets did not see G-dliness clearly and they were therefore only able to say "so". Moshe however, experienced G-dliness directly and therefore said "*this* is the thing" that G-d said.

Moshe experienced a revelation of G-dliness in a direct way, and he desired that the Israelites experience G-dliness in the same manner.

It is for this reason that Moshe despised the mirrors that the women bequeathed to the *Mishkan*. These mirrors served the purpose of temptation. No matter how refined they may become, they remain a tool of the animal soul. They remain a *means* to a positive end, but they are not the end itself.

Although Moshe knew that the purpose of the *Mishkan* was that G-dliness should reside in the lowest of places, on the level in which Moshe stood, the other physical objects in the *Mishkan* were sufficiently low. He desired that G-dliness should reside in the lower abode in the same manner as it would have were man never to have sinned.

In his perspective, the copper donated for the mirrors would bring this holiness extremely low. Using these mirrors in the *Mishkan* expresses that G-dliness is not directly expressed but is instead expressed through an intermediary. Moshe therefore despised their use in the *Mishkan*.

G-d's response

G-d, however, desired that G-dliness should permeate everything even those things that are the tools of temptation.

On the contrary, from G-d's perspective there was an advantage to these things more than the rest of the articles in the *Mishkan*.

These mirrors were used to "set up many legions." They were used to establish the *army* of G-d. It is because of their use in being a tool to establish the Army of G-d that they were especially precious to the Almighty.

An army specifically is remarkable in the fact that it has the strength to listen even when there is an adversary. They accept the yoke of their commander and listen at all situations. It is specifically through accepting the yoke of Heaven that gives the person the ability to serve G-d even when faced with the temptations of the evil inclination.

The *kiyor*

In a similar way that on one hand the mirrors were the lowest of the donations that were given to the temple yet on the other hand have a significant advantage over the rest of the donations in that they are expressive of the yoke of heaven, so too is with the *kiyor*.

On one hand it only serves as a preparation to serving G-d in the *Mishkan* and for that reason it is lower than the other articles. On the other it has a significant advantage and is expressive of Moshe himself.

The function that the *kiyor* served in the *Mishkan* was that of washing off one's-self off from negativity. This concept of washing one's self from negativity is more precious than the actual service of G-d and is therefore what is especially great about the *kiyor*.

It is for this reason why the *kiyor* alludes to Moshe. Moshe exemplified humility and accepting the yoke of heaven to do G-d's will no matter one's temptation is expressive of this tremendous humility. It is Moshe's humility that is alluded to in the *kiyor* and it is humility that makes the *kiyor* beloved to G-d.

(Based on Likutei Sichos 6, Ki Sisa 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: www.Neirot.com.)