

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Shabbat HaChodesh; Parshiyot VaYakhel-P'kudei — I am beautiful!

25 Adar; 20-21 March 2009

This Shabbat we conclude the book of Exodus, after fifteen chapters describing in minute detail the design and manufacture of the Temple, including every wall, altar, curtain, screen, vestment, headpiece, mantle, etc. One appurtenance, however, is described very quickly: "He made the Laver (used by the priests to wash themselves) of copper and its stand of copper, from the mirrors of the service-women at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting" (Exodus 38:8)

Rashi cites a Midrash in explaining the origins of these mirrors. The women of Israel possessed mirrors in which they looked "K'she'hein Mit'kshtot", when they adorned themselves". Moses objected to these mirrors because they had been used to arouse sexual desire. (Moses is one of the Jewish heroes of any time attracted, at least according to the Midrash to celibacy.) G-d replies, "Accept them; these are more beloved to me than anything else". G-d reminds Moses that when the male Israelite slaves came back exhausted from their day of backbreaking work, the wives "would take the mirrors, and would appear together with their husband in the reflection of the mirror. Thus they would entice their husbands and they would become pregnant". So, the Children of Israel multiplied!

The Midrash reminds us that the most basic physiological drives can be sanctified. Marriage sanctifies sexuality. Kashruth sanctifies eating. Tzedkah and modesty sanctify material wealth. Today, we can also understand these women as sanctifying narcissism, the psychological condition of excessive self-love. Narcissism is all around us today, especially in fast paced contemporary urban America. We stress competition, we glorify the individual and we turn business leaders in particular into high profile celebrities. In his bestseller, "Social Intelligence", New York Times health writer, Daniel Goleman, distinguishes between healthy and unhealthy narcissism. Both types have extraordinarily high self-regard, but they differ in their openness to criticism and in their capacity for empathy. Healthy narcissists absorb criticism, keep the broader goals in mind, and remain empathetic to the social costs of their decisions. Unhealthy narcissists strive only for glory, have low internal standards, and care little about how their actions affect the lives of others. "They can close or sell a company, or lay off multitudes of employees, without feeling an ounce of sympathy for those for whom those decisions are personal disasters" (pages 119-120).

So the "service women" as they loved and beautified themselves, also imagined the spiritual legacy that would be the heritage of their families and people. Especially in difficult times, we ought to love ourselves: "Bishvili Nivra Ha'Olam - For my sake the world was created". If our self-worth is strong, then we will see not only ourselves in the mirror, but the influence and the hopes of others.