

## Vayakhel-Pekudei 5781

### We need a mirror

This morning's Torah portion has almost the same content as two from a little while back. Terumah/Tetzaveh contain the instructions for building the Mishkan, the desert sanctuary. Vayakhel/Pekudei is the account of its being built.

Apart from the ending - the moment where the Mishkan 'goes live' for the first time - there is another difference:

38:8

*He made the laver of copper and its stand of copper, from the mirrors of the women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.*

This is the first time the Torah has mentioned these women.

A number of the commentators describe them as a team of sewing women who had no further need of mirrors because they were working so hard (forgive me for not finding this the most convincing interpretation). Rashi, though, brings a beautiful Midrash that reads the Hebrew word *tzovot* as *tzeva'ot*, making these 'the women who produced armies.' This is the Midrash:

*The Israelite women possessed mirrors of copper into which they used to look when they adorned themselves. Even these did they not hesitate to bring as a contribution towards the Tabernacle. Now Moses was about to reject them since they were made to pander to their vanity, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "Accept them; these are dearer to Me than all the other contributions, because through them the women reared those huge hosts in Egypt!"*

*For when their husbands were tired through the crushing labour they used to bring them food and drink and induced them to eat. Then they would take the mirrors, and each gazed at herself in her mirror together with her husband, saying endearingly to him, "See, I am handsomer than you!" Thus they awakened their husbands' affection and subsequently became the mothers of many children...<sup>1</sup>*

So mirrors - specifically the mirrors of these women - form an integral part of the Mishkan. Why?

Well, the internet provided various answers as to why mirrors might be important for human beings. Being able to see our reflection gives us a sense of self. That in turn means that we can learn how to be less socially awkward when interacting with others. And in certain cases, mirrors can heal us. Dr V S Ramachandran invented the 'mirror box' - a simple box with two mirrors back to back down the center. Amputees could put their whole limb into one side of the box and the reflections gave them the sense of having their other limb back, eradicating phantom limb pain.<sup>2</sup>

As a friend observed:

"I like to get feedback after something....We need a mirror."

But if that's the case, shouldn't we be feeling great because of all the Zooming we are doing?

It turns out...well, no. The benefits of Zoom are obvious, but there's also such a thing as Zoom fatigue. Excessive amounts of eye contact is highly intense, video chat reduces our mobility and our cognitive load much higher because of our restricted field of vision - we can't get feedback from full body language so we have to work harder with what we've got. And all of this is tiring.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Rashi on Shemot 38:8

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-clarity/201808/why-is-seeing-your-own-reflection-so-important>

<sup>3</sup> <https://news.stanford.edu/2021/02/23/four-causes-zoom-fatigue-solutions/>

And there is something else going on as well. We see ourselves on Zoom in mirror image - the manufacturers did that because we are used to it. But we see a non-mirrored version of others, and they see a non-mirrored image of us, the one they would (kinda sorta) see in real life.

Test this out by wearing a t-shirt with writing on it next time you Zoom, and then watch a recording of the session!

So our brains are doing twice the work on a Zoom call. It's disconcerting to see ourselves in the crowd in the first place; doubly disconcerting to see ourselves the wrong way around. We're getting mixed signals - the relationship we'd normally have with our reflection is suddenly happening in a room full of people.<sup>4</sup>

There's a lesson here for us if we contrast this information with the mirrors of the women in the Midrash and the mirrors in the courtyard of the Mishkan. There, everyone would see their own reflection alongside the reflection of anyone else who was there. And just like in the Midrash, that was something that created relationships. Right in the middle of the Torah portion called "vayakhel," the word that means, "Moses made them a community," we have a model of how it can work, when we see ourselves reflected with others not in the ether, but in a mirror.

So in a week that marks the announcing of a new month, and the first anniversary of COVID lockdown, and the cautious prospect of being able to be together again for the summer - my wish and my prayer is that we should soon once more get the true mirrors we need. And then we can renew old relationships and forge new ones, reflecting back the image of the Holy One and helping it multiply over and over again.

---

<sup>4</sup> It's possible to adjust the setting on Zoom so you see yourself as others see you...but that can feel even stranger.