BASIN-AND-STAND

In our Sidra Moses renders account of the contributions donated to the Tabernacle, how much they totalled and what they were used for. The metals comprised gold, silver and bronze. Regarding the latter it is stated:

תֵּחָשַׁת החששות שלית גتاريخהו חעה וארבעים ושבעה ליברות

The bronze of the offering was seventy talents and two thousand four hundred shekels

(38, 29)

What did they use the bronze for? This we are told in the subsequent verses (30–31):

כִּי צֵאת אֶרֶץ בֶּן אָבִי מֶלֶךְ
כִּי יְמַשֵּׁהוּ תָּחָשַׁת
— — — — —
שְׁלֹשָׁה לֶאֶבֶן מְצֹאְשָׁת אֶרֶץ בֶּן

And with it he made sockets for the door of the tent of meeting, the bronze altar, and its bronze grating.

The sockets in the court and gate, the Tabernacle pegs, too, were made of bronze as well as “all the pegs in the court round about”. But there existed yet another bronze vessel, certainly more important than the pegs and sockets alluded to here. This vessel is not mentioned here but only later in the list of all the vessels brought to Moses towards the end of the next chapter (39, 39):
Pekudei 1

the bronze altar and its grating of bronze, its posts, and all its vessels, the basin and its stand.

Abravanel quite rightly includes this point among all the other questions that he posed on the Sidra:

He mentioned the vessels made of bronze: sockets, altar and grating and all the vessels of the altar and so forth, but the basin and stand that we know were also made of bronze, as it is stated: “And thou shalt make also a basin of bronze with its stand of bronze” (30, 18), is not mentioned here.

The answer he gives is that followed by all our commentators:

The reason why he did not mention here the basin and stand which was also made of bronze was because the text only refers, at this juncture, to the bronze that had been donated as a free offering by the children of Israel, as it is stated: “the bronze of the offering”. The basin and stand were not made out of that bronze but out of the mirrors of the women who crowded (zov’ot — the exact meaning of this word and the passage as a whole will be discussed later) at the door of the tent of meeting. The basin and its stand were therefore not mentioned here since they were not made of that same bronze.

Abravanel alludes here to a passage in the previous Sidra, which is usually joined to ours and read together:

And he made the basin of bronze and its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the women who crowded at the door of the tent of meeting.

(38, 8)

Basin-and-stand

This text poses many problems both as regards content and language. What does the phrase: mar’ot hazov’ot asher zav’u mean? Ramban adheres to the plain sense of the text:

We may perhaps take it in its plain sense that he made the basin and stand out of the mirrors of the women who crowded in a great host (zov’ut — Hebrew for “hosts” or “army”; cf.: “the Lord of Hosts” zov’ot) and assembled at the door of the tent of meeting to give their mirrors as a freewill offering. The bronze of the mirrors was designated for this vessel because of its smooth polished hollowed-out surface. When the women saw this they gathered in their hosts to donate the mirrors for the making of the basin and stand.

He thus renders the text: “the women who crowded at the tent of meeting” who gathered and stood round, in their hosts to hand over their gift. We shall meet another interpretation later on. But the inner meaning of the text transcends linguistic considerations. What prompted Moses in the first place to use the mirrors of the women for the making of a vessel in which the priests would wash their hands and feet on entering the tent of meeting (Ex. 30, 17-21), enabling them to “sanctify their deeds”?

Hirsch devoted a great deal of attention to explaining the symbolic significance of the various appurtenances of the Tabernacle and their respective functions in the Divine service. He likewise draws attention to this unusual feature:

It is deeply significant that the vessel designated for “consecration of hands and feet” i.e. dedicated to elevating and refining the animal movements and instincts of man should be made from such a crucial boudoir item as a mirror, an object which draws attention to the human body as an object of sensual desire.

Ibn Ezra’s solution to the problem is diametrically opposed to this:

It is customary for every woman to make up her face every morning and look in a bronze or glass mirror in order to adjust her hair style and
ornaments as mentioned in Isaiah 3. The Israelite women behaved exactly as the Ishmaelites today. But there were pious women in Israel who overcame this worldly temptation and freely gave away their mirrors, because they found no more need to beautify themselves but came instead daily to the door of the tent of meeting to pray and hear religious discourses for their edification. The text says: “Who crowded at the door of the tent of meeting” because there were many of them.

Ibn Ezra discovered the appropriateness of the mirrors for this sacred use in the fact that the women who brought them as an offering to the Tabernacle symbolized thereby their rejection of vanity. The greatness of these women lay, in Ibn Ezra’s words, in the fact that “they overcame worldly temptations and found no more need to beautify themselves”.

It was not then the physical composition and configuration of the mirrors that warranted their metamorphosis into basin-and-stand for “consecrating hands and feet” but rather the unselliness and spiritual dedication that the gift of them implied. Midrash Tanhuma adopts an entirely different approach. Rashi draws on it but shall cite his source in full:

You find that when the Israelites suffered hard labour in Egypt that Pharaoh decreed that they should not sleep at home nor have relations with their wives. Said R. Simeon b. Halafta: What did the daughters of Israel do? They would go down to draw water from the river. Whereupon the Holy One Blessed be He prepared small fishes for them inside their jars. They would cook some, sell some and buy with the proceeds wine and go out into the fields and give their husbands to eat there. After they had eaten they took their mirrors and looked into them together with their husbands. She said: I am more comely than you. He said: I am more comely than you. In the course of this [tête-à-tête], their sexual desire was aroused and they became fruitful and multiplied, the Holy One Blessed be He forsooth remembering them (i.e. blessed them with issue), as it is stated: “and the children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and became exceedingly mighty”. It is written regarding them: “and the land was filled with them” “but the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied”. Through the merit of those same mirrors which they showed their husbands arousing their sexual desire in the midst of the hard labour, they raised up all the hosts, as it is stated (Ex. 12): “all the hosts of the Lord went out of the land of Egypt” and (12, 51): “the Lord did bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts”.

As soon as the Holy One Blessed be He told Moses to make the Tabernacle, all Israel came along to contribute. Some brought silver, some gold or brass, onyx and stones to be set. They readily brought everything. Whereupon the women said: What have we to contribute to the offerings of the Tabernacle? They came along and brought the mirrors and presented themselves to Moses. When Moses saw the mirrors he was furious with them. He said to Israel: Take sticks and break the legs of those who brought them. What use are such mirrors?

Said the Holy One Blessed be He to Moses: Moses! You look down on them! It was these mirrors which raised up all these hosts in Egypt! Take them and make out of them the basin and its stand for the priests in which they can purify themselves, as it is stated: “And he made the basin
and its stand of bronze out of the mirrors that raised up hosts" — those same mirrors which raised up all these hosts.

Rashi echoes this Midrash:

The daughters of Israel came along with the mirrors they gazed into to adorn themselves. Even those they did not withhold from bringing as an offering to the Tabernacle. But Moses rejected them because they were made to satisfy the evil inclination. Whereupon the Holy One Blessed be He said to him: Accept! For these are dearer to me than everything else, because through them the women raised up countless hosts in Egypt. When their husbands were weary from the hard labour, they would go along and bring them food and drink, give them to eat and take the mirrors. Each one would look into the mirror together with her husband and egg him on with words saying: “I am more comely than you”. In the course of this they would arouse their husbands’ desire and copulate, becoming pregnant and giving birth there, as it is stated: “Under the apple tree I aroused thee” (Song of Songs 8, 5). To this the text “mirrors that raised up hosts” refers, whereof the basin was made...