

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

SHEMOT

VAERA

BO

BESHALACH

YITRO

MISHPATIM

TERUMA

TETZAVEH

KI TISA

VAYAKHEL

PEKUDEI

KI TISA

HOLINESS REQUIRES PREPARATION

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One of the integral parts of the Tabernacle was the copper (*nechoshet*) basin,¹ provided for Aaron and the priests to 'wash their hands and feet and not die.'² Why was a priest who came to serve without having previously washed in this copper basin destined to receive such a severe heavenly punishment? And what is the significance to it being copper (*nechoshet*)? Adding to the perplexity, the *Sforno* explains that there is a key distinction between the basin and the other holy utensils, in that all of the other priestly utensils functioned in order to elicit the Divine Presence. The basin, in contrast, served to prepare the priests.³ How could something that does not even directly affect the action performed, but only the performer, be connected with such severe consequences? A textual and thematic similarity between this description and another episode found later in the Torah may shed light on

these difficulties.

After forty years of wandering in the desert, the Jewish people complain, 'why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness? For we have no bread and no water, and our soul is weary of this unsubstantial nourishment.'⁴ Rabbi Hirsch explains that despite being provided daily with a miraculous portion of manna during their sojourn in the desert, they missed normal food like bread and water.⁵ What was once appreciated as God's Grace had now become for them a bland monotonous routine. As a response to their complaints, God 'released (*vayeshalach*) on the nation the venomous snakes (*nechashim*) and they bit the nation and a great amount of people died...'⁶ The word *vayeshalach* is generally found in the *paal* grammatical state meaning send whereas here in this context, it is found in the *piel* state

meaning release or let go. This implies the snakes were a natural consequence of residing in a dangerous area such as the desert, where snakes are very common. Moses later describes the way God leads the Jewish people through the 'great and awesome Wilderness - of snakes, fiery serpents and scorpions...'⁷ In addition to providing them with manna, God miraculously protected the Jewish people from these natural dangers. Now, however, as a direct outcome of their lack of appreciation for His protection, God lets nature take its course and allows the dangerous animals to be released.

The repeated usage of the root *nachash* and the thematic parallel of death as a consequence whether in the context of the copper (*nechoshet*) basin or in the context of the snake (*nechashim*), may suggest an answer to the original questions.

The severity of the issue of the priests not washing their hands is related to the possibility that they may enter into the sacred service of the Tabernacle with the same mindset as that of any other task - as menial work. In parallel, when the generation of the desert complains, they display a lack of appreciation for the miraculous nature of the manna they are sent. To them, the sacred has become routine.

In both situations, God's response involves the *nachash*. In the case of the desert, as a direct outcome of the people's lack of appreciation for the Godly goods bestowed upon them, He releases the venomous snakes (*nechashim*) out to the people. In the case of the priests, rather than being a response,

the institution of the washing ritual at the copper (*nechoset*) basin is a pre-emptive move designed to prevent complacency in a moment of sanctity.

It may be for this reason that though the Torah highlights the basin's purpose as 'for washing', Onkelos rendered it 'for sanctification'⁸ - reflecting the true function of the basin as beyond a simple means for washing, but rather as a reminder of the fact that serving in the Tabernacle is a sanctified practice that should never be reduced to habitual action.

In contrast to being merely peripheral, it turns out that the use of the copper basin is in fact fundamental to the underlying holiness of the priests' service.



It reflects the entire mindset required of them in order to elevate their service from mundane to sacred. It represents their moment of transition from the ordinary to the extraordinary; the very moment during which they acquire an acute appreciation of the sanctity of the place, the time and their role.

This message reigns true to this day through the commandment that every Jew should wash their hands every morning, an echo of the practice required of the priests to wash ahead of their holy service.⁹ With this association, not only is the implication that our daily behaviour should be imbued with holiness, like that of the priest's service in the Tabernacle, but that in order not to fall into routine, nor stumble into complacency, appropriate preparation and forethought are essential.

Notes ¹ Exodus 30:18. ² Exodus 30:21.

³ Sforno on Exodus 30:21. ⁴ Numbers 21:5.

⁵ Rabbi Hirsch on Numbers 21:5. ⁶ Numbers 21:6.

⁷ Deuteronomy 8:15. ⁸ Onkelos on Exodus 30:18.

⁹ Nachmanides on Exodus 30:18;

Rashba Responsa 1:191; Mishna Berura 4:1.

Parasha Fact:

Although forgiven by God after the sin of the calf, the new tablets must be carved by Moses, not God, representing a decline in holiness. Even when we patch things up in life, the damage of a transgression still remains, and we can never get back to where we used to be.

Next week in Vayakhel

We identify the head as the seat of intellect, and the heart as the source of emotion. Wisdom can generally be attributed to those who refine their intellect and kindness generally attributed to those who work on their hearts. In that context, when the Torah unusually and repeatedly weaves these two concepts together in its use of the term wise-heart it leaves us wondering what deeper underlying message it might behold.