"*Vayyak'hel*: Women's spirituality and initiative – A reminiscence"

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey Cohen

Our sidrah has an abstruse reference to the Mishkan's copper laver and stand which were made – *b'mar'ot ha-tzovot asher tzav'u petach ohel mo'ed* – 'from the mirrors of the women who gathered, gathering in their numbers, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting' (Ex.38:8). Sadly, we know nothing more of those women. Neither are we told of any such appointments by Moses or what precise service they performed.

However, whenever we have a Talmudic clue as to the meaning of a difficult word or phrase we obviously must take note. The same goes for an Aramaic rendering (Targum) from the pen of Onkelos, who wrote his work under the authority of the great Mishnaic sages, Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and Joshua ben Chananya and who frequently offers glosses for clarification.[1.]

So here is how Onkelos translates the above phrase: 'And he made the laver and its base from the mirrors of the women *who came to pray* at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.'

Ibn Ezra, quoted by Moses Nachmanides,[2] offers the explanatory note that Onkelos was referring to 'women who served the Lord by denying themselves the desires of this world. They consequently gave up their mirrors and donated them to the Sanctuary. They would also come each day to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting to pray and to listen to

[Moses'] exposition of the Torah's mitzvot…They exerted such an influence on their fellow women that they were joined by them in their throngs.[3]

But, according to Midrashic tradition, there is an extra significance to be read into the gift of mirrors. The *Midrash Tanchuma* relates the following tradition, as quoted by Rashi:

> The young Israelite women would keep to hand mirrors which they would use when they were adorning themselves, and even those they never withheld from donating to the Mishkan. Initially, Moses spurned them because of their use to stimulate physical passion, but God said to him, "Accept these, for they are dearer to me than anything else, since, through their use, the women were enabled to procreate enormously in Egypt.[4] Hence when their worn-out husbands returned from their daily toil at Pharaoh's construction sites, the wives would bring out food and drink for them. When refreshed, the women would bring out their mirrors and flirt with their husbands. They would tell their men to look at them both together in the mirrors and invite them to see how much more beautiful they were than them. Such flirtatiousness succeeded in making them forget their weariness, arousing them, and enabling them to procreate into a vast nation.[5]

* * *

"*Vayakhel*: A reminiscence on Women's Tefillah Groups and their election to Shul Boards of Management."

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

At the age of 84, as I look back on my rabbinic career, I take the greatest pride in having promoted, almost single-handedly, the cause of women's spirituality in the face of opposition on the part of the highest authorities in the UK Orthodox Rabbinate and the slings and arrows aimed in my direction.

My study of the relevant halachic sources convinced me that my approach was justifiable and the battle worthwhile and that the religious and communal spin-off of giving women a more worthy and active role in the running of our United Synagogues would yield untold benefit.

The battle was ultimately won, due primarily to the women's indomitable spirit, and their passion to participate in and lead tefillah in a chavurah that touched the feminine soul and released powerful elements of their hitherto suppressed spirituality.

One of my most gratifying moments was the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Stanmore Women's Tefillah Group on the 3rd of July 2018, where I was privileged to recount my reminiscence of the difficult road to its ultimate recognition. I paraphrased the psalmist's maxim, *Yegi'a kapecha ki tochel ashrecha v'tov lach* – 'When you enjoy the fruits of your labours, how happy are you, and how great is your sense of achievement' (Ps. 128:2).

I detailed the bitter struggles and frustrations of the founding members of the group, and how I joined them when summoned to appear before the London Bet Din on two occasions. I shall never forget how I was subsequently subjected to an interrogation on the halachic propriety of a Women's Tefillah Group before an *ad hoc* court— more a kangaroo court!— presided over by the late Chief Rabbi, Lord Sacks *zt"l* who, only five days earlier, had promised to support my ruling that the Group could hold its tefillot on the premises of Stanmore Shul, but who then retracted under pressure from the Bet Din.

Joining him at that hastily convened meeting were the entire Bet Din, the executive of the Rabbinical Council, and some other senior colleagues. I had been told by the Chief Rabbi that this was to be a private discussion between him, the Rosh Bet Din, Dayan Ehrentreu *zt"l,* and me, to [and I quote] 'sort things out!' Imagine my shock when I arrived at the venue to find the room crowded with the entire senior rabbinic fraternity! If ever there was an example of 'over-kill,' that was it!

And yet, a few years later, a volte-face occurred and the halachah was perceived as capable of lending itself to a more flexible interpretation. I assumed that not only did the tefillah group's women cease to be regarded as a threat to Orthodoxy, but, to the contrary, their heightened commitment to Torah learning and observance had so impressed the Bet Din that a way was found to accommodate them within the synagogue complex and the halachic orbit!

I must admit to having felt a profound sense of *v'tov lach* – personal satisfaction – but more, pleasure at the Women's Tefillah Group's ultimate achievement of their spiritual objective.

I smiled, therefore, when I read, on 16th March 2018, a JC report headed, "Edgware to hold first ever women-only service." It had taken a sister congregation 25 years in fact to catch up with Stanmore!

Women on Boards of Management

I had been gratified by another volte-face a year earlier when the issue of Women on Boards of Management was raised in the time of Lord Jakobovits *zt"l*. In an article in the 13th November 1992 issue of the Jewish Chronicle, I discussed the biblical verse on which this modern halachic issue hinged.

When the Israelites clamoured for the appointment of a king, to put them on a par with the surrounding nations, God tells Moses, *Som tasim alecha* ***melech* – "**You may indeed appoint *a king* over you" (Dt 17:15). Picking up on the apparent emphasis of the masculine noun, 'king,' the Midrash stresses, ***melech*** – *v'lo malkah* – 'A king, but not a queen.'[6] Maimonides expanded upon the latter ruling, stating, *V' chein l'chol mesimot*[7] *sheb'Yisrael ein m'manim bahem ela ish* – 'And similarly with all other such Jewish appointments, the rule of "a man and not a woman" is to be applied.[8]

It was based on the latter inference that the Bet Din opposed the appointment of women to Boards of Management.

However, applying the principle of *Davar ha-lammed mei'inyano,* 'we infer halachic matters from their context,' I argued that by employing the biblical term *mesimot,* - from the context of a king (*Som tasim*) – to define the 'appointments' from which women were excluded, Maimonides was referring specifically to those who fell under the category of 'monarchy', namely who wielded absolute authority, whereas membership of Boards of Management offers no such individual authority since the decisions it makes are collective.

A decade on and that inference has become widely accepted, to the extent that not only has it become acceptable for women to be elected as Board members, but, since May 2013, even to occupy the role of Chairperson!

So, Stanmore women had much of which to be proud. They disproved what the Bet Din might have feared, namely that their agitation to have their tefillah group and achieve a greater role in synagogue life might have sprung from some urge to rock the Orthodox boat. The truth was, however, that it was rather to enable it to sail far more smoothly to far-flung shores and to engage more profoundly and actively with the source of their spirituality and faith. It was also to encourage the younger generation of religious women to expand their knowledge to the extent that we are now witnessing an upsurge of Torah scholarship among women in the UK. Hence, there is now a Ma'ayan course of training, under the auspices of the Chief Rabbi, through which they may gain

official recognition as women's halachic educators and advisers to shuls and Battei Din, and a generation of rabbis' wives who contribute, in partnership with their husbands, towards the education and spiritual invigoration of their communities.

May they go from strength to strength.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Jeffrey

_____

NOTES

1. Tal. *Meg*. 3a.

2. See *RMBN* on Ex. 38:5.

3. The additional comment, that they were joined by other women *in their throngs*, is derived from the otherwise tautologous phrase, 'the [mirrors of] the women who gathered (*ha-tzovot*),' followed by 'gathering in their numbers (*asher tzav'u*).'

4. The reference to the Israelite women 'procreating enormously' is derived by the Midrash from the additional phrase, *asher tzav'u*, which it understands as 'through which they created *a vast host*,' from the word *tzava*, 'a host'. This is an alternative explanation to that referred to in n.3, above.

5. See *Rashi ad loc*.

6. See *Sifrei* on *Parashat Shoftim*, sec. 157.7. See *RMBM Hilchot Melachim umilchamot* 1:5.

8. Maimonides employs the term *mesimot* here, as derived from the biblical phrase in question, *Som tasim*. I contended that he did that consciously in order to define any other 'appointments' to which the exclusion of women should apply, namely those that wield sole authority, as in the case of a monarch. Any lesser or shared authority would not therefore be excluded.