



Ki Tisa: The Basin of Beginnings

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

God spoke to Moshe, saying: "Make a copper wash basin and its copper base for washing; and place it between the Tent of Meeting and the Altar, and put water in it. Aharon and his sons will wash from it their hands and their feet. Before entering the Tent of Meeting they must wash with water and they will not die, or whenever they approach the Altar for Divine service, or to burn a fire-offering to God. They must wash their hands and their feet and they will not die. This is a perpetual statute for them, for him [Aharon] and his descendants for all their generations (Shemos 30:17-21)."

God instructed Moshe to construct the *Kiyor*, the basin from which Aharon and his sons would wash their hands and feet prior to performing the sacred *avoda* (sacrificial service) in the *Mishkan*. But why here? Why not include the *Kiyor* in *Parshas Terumah* where the Torah discussed all of the other *keylim* (utensils)? Some of the commentaries (*Sforno*, *Chizkuni*) explain that the *Kiyor* was not a service utensil; it was not necessary for *avoda* (sacrificial service). The role of the *Kiyor* was for *hechsher mitzvah* (preparatory act), to allow the *Kohanim* to prepare for *Mishkan* service. Therefore, it is mentioned separately from the other "service" utensils (mentioned in *Parshas Terumah*).

Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner (1801-1854), the Rebbe of Ishbitz advances a beautiful insight. Positions of leadership come with great challenge. There is the awesome yolk of responsibility that sometimes makes the leader feel like a servant to those he is responsible for. There can be a certain loss of "self" as the leader becomes fully immersed in caring for the needs of the other. But there is also the danger of developing an inflated ego and exaggerated sense of self. With leadership comes great power and influence and the leader can easily misuse this power and influence to advance his own personal interests and forget those whom he is obligated to serve. The Rebbe explains that the *Kohen*, as the spiritual leader of the people, had to take precautions to ensure that his power and responsibility would not go to his head. This was the purpose of the *Kiyor*. The hands represent man's ability to do and accomplish. The feet represent man's mobility and ability to ascend to higher levels of greatness. Together, the hands and feet represent man's strength, prowess and ability to impact and shape his world. The *Kohen* yielded this great power. Every day he served as the agent of Israel and the agent of God, he served as the conduit between two worlds. He was charged with serving in the *Mishkan* and inspiring the people. He was to be the role model for what it means to be an "*Eved Hashem (servant of God)*." He was a religious leader whose influence was felt far beyond the walls of the *Mishkan* (and later on the *Beis HaMikdash*). He was man whose power could shape individual and national worlds. Therefore, God commands Moshe that upon arriving in the *Mishkan* the *Kohen* must wash his hands and feet. He was to wash away any personal motivation or "*nigius*." He was to wash away any thoughts of using his position for self-aggrandizement or self-serving motivations. He was to wash away his individual interests and pledge himself to serve the nation and God.

Perhaps, this is why the *Kiyor* is mentioned here after all of the other *Mishkan* details. It was now, after the *Kohen* saw the grandeur of the *Mishkan* and the magnificently detailed work of the *Bigdei Kehuna* (priestly vestments) that he may begin to get a bit carried away with his newfound honor and glory. In the very moment when the *Kohen* would be most susceptible to feelings of exaggerated self-worth, in the very moment when the *Kohen* may be thinking about how to use his position and stature to advance his personal agenda, the Torah introduces the *Kiyor*. The simple basin reminded the *Kohen* to wash away those feelings that would erode the sanctity of his holy mission.

The Ishbitzer explains that this is why we wash our hands in the morning and before we eat. As we start our day we remind ourselves that all we do must be for a higher purpose. Our actions, activities and endeavors cannot simply be to advance the self. To live a life where my hands serve me and no one else, is a compromised and deficient existence. Too often, meaningful and beautiful life initiatives and projects (that began with noble and holy intentions) become about egos and honor. There are times when I begin something with the intention of benefitting another but as time goes on it becomes about me. We must wash our hands and feet in everything we do to make sure we are working not to serve the self, but to be better serve the other. Before we eat and partake of the physical pleasures of this world we wash our hands to show that we are not simply satisfying the body – we are fueling the physical in order to grow, accomplish and perform great deeds.

Each and every day we pray for the restoration of the *Beis HaMikdash*. The day will come when we will be privileged to see the *Kohanim* standing by the *Kiyor* preparing for their holy work. But until that great day, let us carry the message of the *Kiyor* in our heart, sanctify what we do, elevate where we go and ensure that all we accomplish is of benefit for our people and our God.