

Vayakhel: Exodus 38:1-20

Mirror, mirror ...

Ibn Ezra

These were the skillful women who spun the five types of cloth previously mentioned. Or it may refer to the women who came regularly to pray at the tent, and to study the commandments. They had abandoned all the vanities of the world: hence they gave up their mirrors, which they no longer needed. For ordinarily women have no other occupation than to beautify their faces every morning in copper or glass mirrors, and to arrange their hats (see Isa. 3:20). For the customs of Israel were the same as those preserved to this day in Islamic countries [where Ibn Ezra lived -RJN]. The verb does not mean "to perform tasks, but "to show up in armies," for there were so many of them.

Rashi

The Israelite women had mirrors that they used when they were adorning themselves. But they did not hesitate to bring even these as contributions to the Tabernacle. Moses spurned them as having been made for the purposes of the Evil Inclination. The Holy One told him: Accept them! They are more precious to Me than all the rest. For by means of them the women produced vast armies of Israelites in Egypt. When their husbands were exhausted from the ruthless toil imposed on them by the Egyptians, they would take them something to eat and drink, and would bring along the mirrors. Each of them would look at herself and her husband in the mirror, and entice him, saying, "I'm better looking than you are!" In this way they would arouse their husbands' desire and have relations with them and conceive, and bear children: "Under the apple tree I roused you" (Song of Songs 8:5). So the words of our verse can also be translated: "By means of the mirrors, the women made armies."

“And they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God” (Neh. 9: 4): What did they say?

Said Rab, and some say, Rabbi Yohanan, “Woe, woe — here is the one who has destroyed the sanctuary and burned the Temple, killed all the righteous, exiled all Israel, and is still dancing around among us! Have you not given him to us so that we may receive a reward through him? But we don’t want him and we don’t want the reward that comes through suffering inflicted by him.”

A note fell down to them from the firmament, in which it was written, “Truth.” Said Rav Hanina, “That yields the inference, the seal of the Holy One, blessed be he, is truth,”

They ordained a fast for three days and three nights, and he was handed over to them. He came forth from the house of the Holy of Holies in the form of a young fiery lion. Said the prophet to Israel, “This is the impulse to worship idols. As they grabbed him, a hair of his beard fell out. He cried out, and his roar was heard for four hundred parasangs. They said, “So what do we do now? Is it possible, God forbid, that they have mercy on him from Heaven?”

Said the prophet to them, “Throw him into a lead pot, close the opening with lead, for lead absorbs sound. They said, “Since this is a time in which we enjoy favor, let us seek mercy for this one, who tempts to transgress the law.” They sought mercy and he was handed over to them.

He said to them, “See, if you kill me, the world will come to an end.” They put him into prison for three days, and then they went looking for a day-old egg in the whole of the Land of Israel but it was not to be found.

They said, “What should we do? If we kill him, the world will come to an end. Should we seek mercy by halves? Heaven does not bestow mercy by halves.” So they put out his eyes and sent him off.

It worked so far as he no longer entices people to commit incest.