



Rabbi David Silverberg  
Parashat Vayakhel  
The Kiyor

Parashat Vayakhel tells of the construction of the *Mishkan* and its furnishings, which included the *kiyor*, a faucet situated just outside the *Mishkan*, from which the *kohanim* were required to wash their hands and feet before entering the Sanctuary (38:8). In Parashat Pekudei, where the Torah records the assembly and preparation of the *Mishkan*, we read that water was poured into the *kiyor*, and the Torah reiterates the obligation for the *kohanim* to wash before performing the service.

The Mishna in Masekhet Yoma (43b) relates that on Yom Kippur, during the times of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, the *kohen gadol* would not wash from the *kiyor*. Instead, he would use a special gold vessel for washing, as an expression of honor for the distinguished occasion of Yom Kippur. Apparently, the *kiyor* was not indispensable for the washing obligation, and the *kohanim* were deemed suitable to enter the *Mikdash* and perform the service even if they washed from a different source.

Maimonides indeed writes in Hilkhot Bi'at Mikdash (5:10), “It is a *mitzva* to wash from the waters of the *kiyor*, but if one washed from one of the *kelei shareit* [designated vessels in the Temple], he is suitable [to perform the service].” He rules explicitly that a *kohen* fulfills his requirement and becomes permitted to enter the *Mikdash* even if he washes from a source other than the *kiyor*, provided that he used a *keli shareit* – a utensil formally consecrated for use in the *Mikdash*. Maimonides does, however, view it as a “*mitzva*” to use the waters from the *kiyor*. He likely inferred this *halakha* from the Torah’s description of the *kiyor*, where it states, “Aharon and his sons shall wash their hands and feet from it” (30:19; see also 40:31). This verse clearly requires washing “from it” – from the *kiyor* – before entering the *Mikdash*. Thus, although the oral tradition teaches that a *kohen* who washed from a different utensil is nevertheless suitable for service, it appears that *le-chatekhila* – optimally – the *kiyor* should be used for this purpose.

Many writers have question Maimonides’ ruling in light of the aforementioned Mishna in Masekhet Yoma, which Maimonides himself codifies in Hilkhot Avodat Yom Ha-kippurim (2:5). If the Torah establishes the preference that the *kohen* wash specifically from the *kiyor*, on what basis was the *kohen gadol* allowed to use a different utensil on Yom Kippur? Why would the value of displaying honor and grandeur for Yom Kippur override an explicit Torah requirement?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (cited in Rav Herschel Shachter’s *Mi-pinei Ha-Rav*, p. 300) answered by noting that Maimonides does not require using the *kiyor*, but rather using “the waters of the *kiyor*.” Even on the optimal level, there is no obligation to wash directly from the *kiyor*. There is a special *mitzva* to use the water stored in the *kiyor*, but this may done by transferring some water to another utensil and then washing from that utensil – as the *kohen gadol* would do on Yom Kippur.

Apparently, the water in the *kiyor* was endowed with a special halakhic status of sanctity, and the Torah therefore requires using specifically that water for washing before entering the Sanctuary. Indeed, in Sefer Bamidbar (5:17), in the context of the *sota* ritual, the Torah speaks of “*mayim kedoshim*” (“holy waters”) which the Gemara (cited by Rashi) identifies as water from the *kiyor*. The water inside the *kiyor* was deemed special and sacred, and the Torah therefore required using specifically this water for washing. It is thus not the *kiyor* itself which the *kohen* must use when washing in preparation for the service, but rather the special waters that were “sanctified” by being poured into the *kiyor*.