

This week's many commemorations all involve courageous, resourceful women. International Women's Day on March 8 originated in the labor movements in North America and Europe in the first decade of the 20th century, but did not become a worldwide event until the UN established it in 1977. The earliest documented Women's Day took place in New York City on February 28, 1909, spearheaded by Theresa Serber Malkiel, who had fled the Russian pogroms with her family. The first female factory worker to achieve a leadership role in the Socialist party, she spoke out against white supremacy within her party and actively promoted adult education for female workers. Shabbat Shekalim, the first of four special Shabbatot that relate to Purim and Pesach, falls on the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh Adar. As we read at the beginning of last week's parashah and will repeat in our special readings (30:11-16), every male from the age of 20 is to contribute a half-shekel toward the *mishkan*. In Temple times, Shabbat Shekalim reminded people of the due date for the half-shekel tax. The association of this tax, called the *kesef ha-kipurim*, the silver of atonement, with Purim and Yom Kippurim, literally a day like Purim, evokes Queen Esther's fasting in preparation for approaching King Ahashverosh to plead for her people, as well as our fasting on Yom Kippur as we approach HaShem to plead for forgiveness. This is also a *Shabbat Mevarchim*, the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh, when we bless the new month. The feminine connection with Rosh Chodesh is also based on last week's parashah. Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 45: "Aaron argued with himself, saying, 'If I tell Israel to give me gold and silver, they will bring it immediately; but I will tell them to give me the earrings of your wives, and of your sons, and the matter will fail, as it is said: And Aaron said to them, Break off the golden rings (Exodus 32:2).' The women heard, but they were unwilling to give their earrings to their husbands; but they said to them: You desire to make a graven image and a molten image without any power to deliver. The Holy One of Blessing gave the women their reward in this world and in the world to come. ... In this world they should observe the New Moons more stringently than the men, ... in the world to come they are destined to be renewed like the New Moons." The more stringent observation was being forbidden to work, a welcome respite. And according to the same source, women were offered the Torah first. "On the eve of Sabbath the Israelites stood at Sinai, arranged with men and women separated. The Holy One of Blessing said to Moses, 'Go, speak to the daughters of Israel, asking whether they wish to receive the Torah.' Why were the women asked first? Because the way of men is to follow the opinion of women." A most interesting conjecture considering the status of women at the time! In our parashah, which reprises much of the material concerning building and outfitting the *mishkan* and the priestly garments, women also play a major role. "And every wise hearted woman spun, and they brought spun fabric: blue, purple, and crimson wool, and linen. And all the women whose hearts uplifted them with wisdom, spun the goat hair." (35:25-26) In a discussion about forbidden work on Shabbat Talmud Tractate Shabbat 74b defines the wisdom of these women: "... they washed the hair on the goats, and they spun it into threads on the goats themselves without first shearing the hair? Apparently, spinning on the back of any animal is considered a typical matter of spinning. [However] Extraordinary wisdom is different. Although certain people are capable of spinning wool that way, the typical person is not able to perform that feat." Later we read that the copper washstand and its copper base was made "from the mirrors of the serving women who served (or assembled) at the entrance to the tent of meeting." (38:8) The root used for serve is צָבָא – *tzava*, which actually means military fighting force, i.e. a host, as well as to assemble and to perform sacred service. Although we don't know exactly what these women did, there are many stories about their unique contribution and how it was used. Midrash Tanchuma Pekudei 9 teaches that these are the mirrors the Israelite women used to seduce their husbands in the fields when Pharaoh forced them to live apart. Plying their men with fish (symbolizing abundance), wine, and erotic play with the mirrors they had brought, they bore many children in fancifully large multiple birth pregnancies, thus thwarting Pharaoh's plans. (This story is found in greater detail in Tractate Sotah 11b.) They brought these mirrors to Moses, who rejected them as a frivolous gift, and in his anger told the Israelites to beat the women with canes. "The Holy One of Blessing called out to Moses: Do you beat them because of these? These very mirrors produced the hosts in Egypt; take them and make a basin of copper and its base of copper for the priests, that they may sanctify the priests from it." Indeed, one can read "from the mirrors of the serving women – *b'mirot hatzovot* – as "from the mirrors of those who set up the hosts," referring to Exodus 12:41 ("All the hosts of Adonai left Egypt") and 12:51 ("Adonai brought the Israelites out of Egypt in hosts.") After having refused to contribute their jewelry for the golden calf, these wise and boldly creative women once again demonstrated their loyalty to HaShem by offering this highly symbolic gift. The common denominator of all of these commemorations is women's courageous civil disobedience. Refusing to succumb to despair, the women of these stories, and many others like them all over the world, have rallied to fight oppression and injustice with boundless ingenuity. May their unique insight, unflagging energy, and indomitable courage inspire us in these troubled times.

Shabbat shalom!