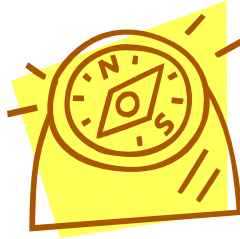


A Year of Encompassing Torah



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Parashat Vayechi

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,  
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,  
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,  
The Sovereign of all worlds,  
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,  
And commanded us to engage ourselves  
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah  
Is to wrestle with Torah –  
To challenge our tradition while loving it,  
To question it while celebrating it.***

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**An Added Blessing
For Spiritual Direction**

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**
find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."

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**Parashat Vayakheil  
"Holy Convocations!"**

The Book of Exodus is about to come to an end. As we do so we mark the importance of sacred time along with the development of sacred space. God and Moses have chosen Betzalel as the one who will oversee the construction project. We are told that he is indeed a man of vision and wisdom that comes from the heart. Not all of us are blessed with such artistic ability. However, each one of us has been endowed with the potential to open ourselves to the emotions that are evoked when we look upon such artistic visions. As his name suggests, the man who is entrusted with building the "*mishkan*" is indeed a man who lives in "the shadow of God." Although Betzalel and Moses have the important job of assembling the materials that the Israelites donated to the project with such willing hearts, they have a task that is perhaps even more difficult in nature, as reflected in the very first word to this week's Torah reading.

"*Vayak'heil!*" – Moses "*convoked*" the Israelite community. Moses called a meeting of the Israelites for the purpose of sharing with them the instructions from God regarding the sanctity of the Sabbath day that was spoken to him while he was on the mountain, before they begin the construction of the "*mishkkan*."

One scholar's note proclaims that this meeting took place on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when God forgave the Israelites for their behavior in fashioning a Golden Calf in the absence of Moses. If this is indeed the case, then it must have been very easy for Moses to gather the people together, in the same way that it is easy for Jewish communities to come together in prayer on such an auspicious occasion. Reading the text in this way,

however, underestimates the significance of what Moses had done for the Israelites, as well as miscalculating what modern day rabbis try to do in reference to their own assembly of people under their tutelage.

The first word, "*Vayakheil*", is closely related to the Hebrew word "*kehillah*" which is most often translated as "*community*," but is more often a common idiom for a "*synagogue*." Rashi, a medieval commentator to the Torah text, suggests that the first word of the *parashah* (Torah portion) should be seen as causative form of the verb in which Moses *actively caused the people to come together*. To further this lesson Rashi suggests that there is a major difference to be distinguished between assembling a bunch of material for the construction of the "*Mishkan*", the place where God will dwell (that which we do with our hands and hammers) and what a person does to bring a group of people to come together (which is usually done through words).

In other words, Moses went out among the people to call upon them rather than sending each of the households of Israel a memo or an e-mail. He personally saw to it that every household received a personal invitation to *bring themselves* to the place where they would do the collective work of building the *Mishkan*.

As my colleague Rabbi Neal expounds, "to physically assemble the *Mishkan* required the action of the hands" (and was relatively simple to do in comparison to assembling the people.) Rabbi Neal continues, "**To make a true community out of the people required persuasion and the articulation of both vision and values. A *kehillah* is not something that can be put together by force, but is something chosen freely by people who have been inspired to come together for a common purpose.**"

While the purpose of the *kehillah* that Moses assembled was to *build the Mishkan* in the wilderness, which represented the dwelling place of the Divine Presence for our Israelite ancestors, I ask you to reflect with me on the spiritual challenge for this week, which is "how do we create a *Mishkan* for our own generation? The *Mishkan* that I refer to is the one that God alludes to in His own instructions to the Israelites of the wilderness generation, the place that exists in each of our own hearts where God can

dwell. What must we do construct a personal spiritual center for ourselves that will allow for others to be a part of a purposeful community?"

May the vitality to which our ancestors responded to the call of Moses inspire us in our response to building spiritual community as we bring vitality and healing to our world.

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#### **Parashat Vayakheil 5768 Home Improvement**

Why *Betzalel*? Why does God announce his name as the one who will be constructing the *Mishkan* in the wilderness? I have often wondered. Surely there had been a number of other men capable of doing the job that was outlined by Moses. In all fairness to these other individuals, didn't Moses and God put the project up for bids to see who would produce the best set of specs? Did Aaron and his sons have any say in the matter since they were the ones to be most affected by the building of a portable studio that would house all of the vestments and the ritual items used in their line of work?

All we are told about *Betzalel* and his qualifications for the job is that he was a man "filled with wisdom and knowledge." Even his name suggests this endowment or gift that he possessed for the arts, when his parents chose the words "in the shadow of God" to be his reference for life. One midrash claims that he was only thirteen years old at the time of his professional appointment. It certainly didn't hurt matters when you could claim Miriam as your grandmother. But the Bible itself cites none of these facts in its recording of God's selection, and the approval of Moses and the people who rallied behind him.

What the Bible seems to be telling us is that *Betzalel must have been* a very gifted individual in his ability to envision the Divine in the world. He must have been extremely talented as a craftsman, showing exceptional skill in engraving precious metals, stones, and in wood-carving, as well as having a good eye for fabrics. More important than his own skill, the Bible also emphasizes his ability to convey these skills to others who apprenticed with him in the construction of the tent of meeting and its sacred furniture along with the preparation of the priestly garments.

The sages confirm his abilities as a general contractor in their own statement when the Talmud tells us in **Tractate Berachot 55a** "There are three things that the Almighty Himself proclaims – famine, abundance, and a good leader." As a proof-text for this statement of fact, the Talmud quotes from this week's Torah portion in which Moses says to the Children of Israel: "*See, God has singled out by name, Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur, from the tribe of Yehudah (Judah).*" (**Exodus 35:30**)

The question that I have to ask of the text, however, is: "What makes *Betzalel* such an effective leader for this particular assignment, outside of his artistic abilities? Has he demonstrated the skills necessary to being an effective general contractor, such as finishing the project under budget and on time? Granted, what he was building may not have been as complicated as the blueprints for the Big Dig. However, look at who he was working for? Are these qualities that I have outlined in passing enough to be endowed with such responsibility, and to be called by the sages of the Talmud as "*parnas tov*, a good leader"?

Perhaps the answer that I am looking for does not reside in his own abilities per se. Rather, the characteristic that we seek in an effective leader is in knowing when to delegate authority and to share the power of leadership. What distinguishes *Betzalel* is his decision to enlist the support of *Ohali'av* son of *Achisamakh*, from the tribe of Dan, who would become his partner. Surely, *Betzalel* could have done the work himself, without help from another individual or tribe! Yet, the text is very quick to tell us that *Betzalel* had a partner in the construction of the *Mishkan*, which was for the purpose of bringing the people together, more so than establishing a focal point for God to dwell. Maybe this is the

Torah's way of teaching us that leadership is not meant to be in the hands of one, but to be shared by several, in the same way that *Jethro* instructed Moses to diversify and establish a system of legal enforcement and judgeships.

What is it that God ultimately seeks from those who are wise of heart? God wants individuals who are not interested in serving their own egos. Rather, God wants individuals who are open and receptive to those who are willing to take on partners in this world. Male and female, God created human beings, so that neither should be alone – is what we are taught in Genesis. Even the leaders that we choose, especially our leaders, are to be endowed with the spirit of knowing when they need help to accomplish various tasks. May this Shabbat become an opportunity for us to dwell upon what it means to be a partner in this world, to affiliate with others, to connect with one's inner being, as well as to link up with God.