

Short Comments on Vayakhel
Rabbi Eliot Malomet February 26, 2022 25 Adar I 5782 Shabbat Shekalim

שמות ל"ה:א' וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת-כָּל-עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר
אֲלֵהֶם אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר-צִוֵּהוּ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אִתְּכֶם:

Exodus 35:1 *Moses then assembled the entire community of the Children of Israel and said to them: These are the words that YHWH has commanded, to do them...* Context is important. If we follow the flow of the story, we understand that this convocation takes place after the cataclysm of the Golden Calf and the shattering of the tablets. Having descended with a second set of tablets, we learn that Moses' face was "beaming" requiring him to wear a veil when he spoke with the people. With the mayhem and turmoil fresh in their minds, the purpose of this convocation not only sets forth the basic rules of Shabbat and links the Sanctuary with Creation, but it also offers the people an opportunity for unity and healing following their trauma. The message to us: the most healing and unifying force in Judaism is Shabbat. That message is timeless.

ל"ה:ג' לֹא-תִבְעֵרוּ אֵשׁ בְּכָל מִשְׁבְּתֵיכֶם בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת:
35:3 *You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the sabbath day.* Why this specific prohibition on Shabbat? Traditional commentaries focus on the necessity of fire for cooking, lighting and heating; all of those activities that need to be completed before Shabbat. But the fire prohibition may speak to deeper themes. We moderns take fire for granted. If we need fire, we light a match, flick a lighter, or ignite a gas stove. Creating fire, fueling fire, controlling fire, required tremendous effort and skill. Anyone who has ever camped understands the effort that is necessary for making and keeping a fire going. Kindling and maintaining fire is the focus of the week and the home; it organizes time and space. But deeper than that is the idea that we human beings owe our existence to fire. The anthropologist Richard Wrangham theorizes that it was our ability to control fire that made us human. Fire enabled us to cook, giving us the ability to meet our nutritional needs more efficiently. Fire enabled us to protect ourselves from predators and build social structures. Fire creates and destroys; comforts and terrifies. By not kindling or

doing anything with fire for the duration of Shabbat, we temporarily cease being masters over creation. Unencumbered by all the necessities which fire requires, Shabbat enables us to be completely free. And here is a lovely interpretation from the author of *Shnei Luhot Habrit*:¹
לא תבערו אש בכל מושבותיכם ביום השבת רומז לאש המחלוקת ואש הכעס שצריך האדם ליוזר שלא לבער אותו עולמית, ומכל שכן ביום השבת קודש שאין בו ערבוּת גיהנם. והכועס בשבת או עושה מחלוקת ח"ו גורם להיות חמת הגיהנם בו ערבוּת בו בר מינון:

You shall not kindle any fire in all your habitation on Shabbat hints to the fire of mahloket-arguments, and the fire of anger. A person always has to be careful about kindling this fire, especially on the holy Shabbat, during which the fire of hell does not burn. And one who gets angry on Shabbat or one who makes arguments, causes the fire of hell to burn in him, -may that not happen to us!

ל"ה:כ"א וַיָּבֵאוּ כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׂאוֹ לִבּוֹ וְכָל אִשׁוֹ וְדָבָהּ רִחוּזוֹ אִתּוֹ הֵבִיאוּ אֶת-תְּרוּמַת ה' לְמִלְאֶכֶת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּלְכָל-עֲבֹדָתוֹ וּלְבִגְדֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ:

35:21 *and then they came, every man whose mind uplifted him, and everyone whose spirit made-him-willing brought God's contribution for the skilled-work on the Tent of Appointment, for all its service [of construction], and for the garments of holiness.* There is something gorgeous about this phrasing: **one whose heart lifts him up, one whose spirit made-him-willing.** Generosity is a form of connection. People give of themselves, when they are moved to give. The best fundraisers (and marketers!) know this. When people become emotionally involved in a cause, a project, or a goal, generosity becomes the medium of expression, and it flows freely.

ל"ה:ל' וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רְאוּ ה' קָרָא ה' בְּשֵׁם בְּצַלְאֵל בֶּן-אוּרִי בֶן-חֹרִי לְמִטָּה יְהוּדָה:

35:30 *And Moses said to the Israelites: See, God has singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah...* To be **called by name** is quite unique. Amazingly, this phrase usually works in the reverse, to God: individuals or communities call God **by name**. The Psalmist

¹ Isaiah ben Avraham HaLevi Horowitz 1555-1630

תורה שבכתב, ויקהל, פקודי, דרך חיים, שני לוחות הברית . ב.

says, *Let us praise God, let us call out by His name:* קראו בשמו. הודו לה'. In this manner, the Torah signals to us that this artisan, Betzalel, is special.

ל"יה:ל"יא וימלא אתו רוח אלהים בהקמה בתבונה ובדעת ובכל-מלאכה:

35:31 ...endowing him with a **divine spirit** of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft...

What makes him special is that he is filled with the *divine spirit* רוח אלהים. Where else do we find this phrase? At creation, the **spirit of God** hovered over the waters, and as a description of Joseph. Pharaoh turns to his advisers and says, *Have you ever seen such a person who possesses the spirit of God?* The Torah signals to us that Betzalel is endowed with the creative force of the universe, and the extraordinary talent of a Joseph.

ל"יה:ל"יב ויחשב מחשבת לעשות בנתב ובבסר ובנחשת:

35:32 and inspiring him to **make designs** for work in gold, silver, and copper.. Creative work begins in the imagination. The artisan experiences thoughts in the form of ideas מחשבת which are then articulated in metal.

ל"יה:ל"יד ולהורת נתן בלבו הוא ואהליאב בן-אחיסמר למטה-דן:

35:34 ...and to **give directions**. He and Oholiab son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan. Not only does Betzalel possess extraordinary artistic abilities but evidently, he knows how to mentor others and also how to lead a team of artisans. He has artistic genius and social genius.

ל"יו:ה' ויאמרו אל-משנה לאמר מרבים העם להביא מדי העבודה למלאכה אשר-צוה ה' לעשות אתה:

36:5 ...and they said to Moses, "**The people are bringing more** than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work that God has commanded to be done." Overwhelmed by the emotional pull of the project, the centrality of the mishkan and the idea that they could be part of a collective project that would enable no less than God to well among them (!), they gave overwhelmingly. It is truly remarkable that they have to issue an order to stop bringing gifts. It demonstrates responsibility and prevented anyone involved in the campaign, from being tempted to keep the excess for themselves. ל"ז:א' ויעש בצלאל את-הארן עצי שטים אמתיים ונחצי ארבו ואמה נחצי רחבו ואמה נחצי קמתו:

37:1 **Bezalel made** the ark of acacia wood, two

and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high.

The Ark of the Covenant is the only item of the mishkan that mentions Betzalel *by name*, a textual "signature" if you will. With regard to all of the other appurtenances the text simply says, *and he made*. Our interpretation: the person who was designated as chief artisan was **singled out by name, by God**. Here he is "honored" as **the text (ie. the people) singles him out, by name**, when fashioning the most important item of the mishkan, the Ark. The Torah "honors" Betzalel for his creativity, his skill, his organization and his lasting imprint on the culture of the people. Betzalel never says anything, and apart from this passage, we never see or hear from him again. His name means, *in the shadow of God*, בעל אל, but it could easily be an acronym for another expression: בעלם אלהים = בעל"אל *in the image of God*. In other words, this extraordinary individual, is both somewhat enigmatic, a shadow, despite the fact that we know his pedigree and his tribe, and also a living exemplar of what it means to be in the divine image, that is, capable of creating things of everlasting beauty. It is fascinating to note that in antiquity the privilege of fashioning temples was accorded to the gods. Pagan mythologies imagined that the temples to the gods were constructed by the gods and that humans were not part of the creative process. Thus, the presence of an extraordinary human Israelite, engaged in the construction of the sacred area for the God of the Israelites, is a polemic against the pagan idea. In this rather lengthy description of the sanctuary - spanning 5 parashas! - the Torah is presenting a fascinating, and revolutionary idea. The sanctuary is a reflected image - a **צלם** - of Creation. The sanctuary is constructed by a man who is, in his creative ability and possibly by his very name(!), a **צלם**, an image, of God.

Interesting pieces of data: the root עשה - to do - occurs over 70 times in this passage. The account of the construction of the Ark of the Covenant is located virtually at the center of this passage.

Shabbat Shalom!

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