



A Special Kind of Wisdom

Rabbi Andrew Pepperstone

Rabbi-in-Residence

apecperstone@grossschechter.org

Growing up, I found the Torah portions that deal with the descriptions and building of the Mishkan to be excruciatingly dull. Do I really need to hear about the yarns, animal skins, planks, curtains, loops and rods more than once? There are four weeks of Torah reading that deal with these matters. I was at a loss to find personal meaning among all of these design-filled details. Every year, I experienced these readings in some way, minimally as a reminder that they were waiting to be explored by some older, wiser version of myself. Sometime between college and the middle of my time in rabbinical school, all of the pieces of the Mishkan came together for me, and I see both the big picture and the small details at the same time. I became fascinated with these readings, in particular with the people who are involved in their manufacture.

In Shemot 35:30-34, Moses tells the people that Betzalel, and not Moses, is going to be in charge of building the Mishkan:

“And Moses said to the Israelites: See God has singled out Betzalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. The spirit of God has filled him with **wisdom**, with **understanding** and with **knowledge** and with every kind of craft, and **to think thoughts** to work with gold and with silver and with copper, and with cutting stones for setting and to carve wood – to work in every kind of designer’s craft, and **to teach with his heart**, him and Oholiav son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan.” (Shemot 35:30-34)

Both in this week’s Torah portion and in Parshat T’rumah, where we first hear of Betzalel, God tells Moses that Betzalel has three essential qualities that will enable him to build the Mishkan: wisdom, understanding and knowledge. These same qualities God uses to create the universe:

“With wisdom God founded the earth, set up the heavens with understanding. With God’s knowledge, the depths were split and the clouds dripped dew.” (Proverbs 3:19-20)

Just as God used Divine Wisdom, Understanding and Knowledge, Betzalel uses an earthly version of these qualities to oversee the work of the Mishkan. He has a diverse array of creative knowledge that will enable him to work with gold, silver, copper, fabrics, skins, wood and stones. According to the Midrash, it was a miracle to have such a person in their

midst, since B'nai Yisrael had not engaged in such work in hundreds of years. Last time we heard about the artisanship of B'nai Yisrael, they were working with mud and straw.

However, in Parshat Vayakhel, the Torah describes Betzalel as possessing two additional qualities that were unmentioned in Parshat T'rumah: the ability to think thoughts and to teach. In addition, now that the Torah has gotten down to brass tacks and is describing the actual building of the Mishkan, there is an increased focus on his partner, Oholiav, and the other skilled artisans and weavers who are all part of the Mishkan building crew.

No longer is Betzalel one person working alone, but rather the head of a large group of skilled people who need guidance and training to complete this daunting project. This is why the Torah focuses on these final two qualities: to think and to teach. It is not enough for Betzalel to have all these fine skills for himself, and it is not enough for him to be able to envision the various pieces and parts of the Mishkan with excruciating detail. In order to build the Mishkan, he needs to be able to articulate his thinking, to make plans, and, most importantly, he needs to be able to communicate those thoughts and plans effectively to his co-workers. Betzalel is more than a master artisan; he is a teacher. We can all recall a teacher who made difficult math or science concepts clear to us, or lit a fire within us for a particular subject. Every day in our school, our teachers use their abilities to plan and communicate to teach our children at the highest levels on both sides of the hallway. Lest you think that I am only talking about teachers in a formal school, parents are the most profound teachers that children have throughout their lives.

The Torah teaches us that all of these talents are gifts from God, and at the same time, teachers and parents have a huge responsibility to their students and children:

“Avtalyon said: Sages! Be careful with your words, let you be exiled, and they send you to a place of evil waters, and the students who follow you drink from them and die, and you find the Name of Heaven profaned.”
(Pirkei Avot 1:11)

This statement comes from a time Jews lived under Roman rule, and teaching Torah was controversial and could get you into serious trouble. Even though we do not live in such times, this teaching still hits home that truth that what we say to our students and children matters and has profound effects on them both in the short term and long term.

When we draw upon our wisdom, understanding and knowledge to build up our world, we are channeling God's spirit into the world. When we use our expertise to create and develop new ideas, we are benefiting from one of God's gifts. When we devise complex plans to achieve amazing things, we use our divinely bestowed talents. When we help someone else understand something that had eluded them, but was obvious to us, we are teachers like Betzalel.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Pepperstone

AS A FAMILY:

1. Since Shabbat is the opening focus of this week's Torah portion, talk to your kids about the concept of purposeful resting every seventh day, emphasizing "just being" over having.
2. Talk with your family about teachers who made a difference in your lives.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTIONS VAYAKHEL - PEKUDEI, ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

Vayakhel Questions

1. In Vayakhel, what is the first commandment that Moses announces to the children of Israel?
2. Who was designated to be the head of all the artisans in the building of the Holy Ark (as well as the other items commanded by God), and what was his tribe?
3. Who was designated to be Betzalel's second-in-command and what was his tribe?
4. When Moses told the people that they could come and make an offering to God, what happened?
5. What was this kind of offering called?
6. Who were the three groups who brought the free will offering?
7. What type of wood was the Holy Ark made of and what was it covered with?
8. How was the Ark constructed so that it would be relatively easy to carry?
9. What were the staves made of that were used to carry the sacrificial altar?
10. What was the *menorah* (candlestick) made of? How many branches were there, and how were they laid out?

Pekudei Questions

1. Who was responsible for the accounts of the tabernacle?
2. The silver accumulated and described in this week's parashah came from the headcount or census of whom and how many half shekels were collected in the census?
3. The ephod was made of blue, purple, scarlet, and gold threads. How did they make the gold threads?
4. Was there more gold or silver used in the building of the sanctuary?
5. By whom was the tabernacle to first be erected and when?
6. When the cloud of Glory covered the Tent of Meeting and the glory of God filled the Tabernacle, Moses was unable to enter. When the cloud was raised, it was time to do what two things?
7. Besides the cloud of Glory, what else protected the Tabernacle and when did it come into play?