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Balancing the Books of Life

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered February 23, 1963)

The prolonged New York City newspaper strike has adversely affected not only the economy of our community, but also the democratic process which requires an informed citizenry intelligently to decide upon its course. It constitutes no less than a national disgrace.

Yet, as with everything else, we must be able to see the silver lining about the cloud. There is a redeeming feature to this otherwise intolerable state of affairs. We moderns have an insatiable appetite for constant stimulation by dramatic, world-shaking events. Our emotions feed on headlines, and our minds like to be jarred by exciting news of colossal proportions. Now, for several weeks, we have learned that life can be quite interesting even without these external stimuli. We have learned to fall back upon our own inner resources, without being incessantly pricked and shocked by big threats, terrible scandals, imminent attacks which usually do not materialize. We actually can get along without those big headlines which, in but a few hours, are valueless, surpassed by newer "extras" that shriek at us from the newsstands. Life, we have discovered, has its own justification in the little things that occur to us every day.

This same idea is contained, in somewhat different form, in a Midrash quite appropriate for the Sabbath on which we read of the shekalim, Moses collected from the Children of Israel for the purpose of the construction and maintenance of the Tabernacle. The Midrash relates (Yalkut, Pekudei) that when Moses completed the building of the Tabernacle, he turned to the Israelites and said, now I shall give you a report of the shekalim you gave me. When Moses completed his accounting, however, he discovered to his dismay that his books did not balance. Tradition records with fine precision that the deficit was exactly 1,775 shekalim. Moses was deeply concerned by this discrepancy. He was distressed and perplexed. Now, he thought, *Yisrael motz'in yedechem lomar Mosheh natlan* – the Israelites will have reason to say that Moses took the

money, that he dipped his hand into the till and helped himself to communal funds. It would not have been the first completely unfounded suspicion or accusation against Moses, who was by no means a popular leader. But then, *he'ir Ha-Kadosh barukh Hu et enav ve'raah otam asuyim vavim la-amudim*. The Lord illuminated his eyes, and he realized that he had honestly and honorably spent the missing shekalim on the *vavim* or hooks which kept the Tabernacle together; for the Tabernacle was a portable, prefabricated Temple, and the parts were connected to each other by means of these small metal hooks. When Moses told this to the Israelites, *nitpiestu al she'asu et ha-mishkan*, they were appeased and satisfied that they had undertaken the whole project of the building of the Tabernacle.

What is the essence and the moral of this story? It is that even a Moses can overlook the plain, the simple, the unassuming. Yet there can be no *nitpietu*, no inner or communal peace, unless we account for that which the *vavim* symbolize: that which is vital and necessary, but not always glamorous and exciting. Even a Moses can sometimes forget that life is made not by the headlines, but by the stuff that usually does not even appear in the back pages of the newspapers.

Is that not true of all of life? A career or profession is a success or failure not because of the rare triumphs or glaring disappointments that come forcibly to public attention, but because of day to day conduct and gradual progress. In fact, the big achievements are usually no more than the result of long, patient plodding. This is no less true of domestic life. The happiness or sorrow of husband and wife are mostly not the result of the big windfalls or the great tragedies, as much as what we do with the countless little irritations or minor opportunities and satisfactions that come our way.

It is so with all human relations. The test of loyalty

comes not in the dramatic moments, but in the dull years; not in how you handle the crisis of a lifetime, but in how you handle yourself in a lifetime of crisis; not in the singular moments, when heroism is expected of you, but in the endless hours when nothing is expected of you because no one seems to care very much. It is not on the peaks of joy or in the valleys of grief, but on the plateaus that roll on endlessly, day by day, that the business of living is carried on; it is there that a man can gather for himself hope, or that the bones of his destiny can be left to parch in the merciless glare of despair. Unless we can learn to see the thrilling in the ordinary and the exciting in the routine, the thrilling and the exciting soon appear to us quite ordinary and routine. If we enter into the ledger of life only the sensational, the scintillating, the breathtaking, then, like Moses, we shall discover a deficit in our accounts, and find that the books of life do not balance.

I do not deny that life requires high points and low ones, excitement and pageantry, in order to relieve the dullness and monotony which can become the death of the spirit. But it is a sign of immaturity to live only for the heroic and the histrionic and the headlined, as if life were a show that must constantly entertain us, as if we agreed with Shakespeare that “all the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players”; for then we must also agree with the bard that “life... is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Part of what troubles our Jewish life in America is our tendency to accept as valid that dubious thesis that it is only the dramatic and extraordinary that counts. As a result, the typical program for synagogue courses for adults is something built around birth, Bar Mitzvah, marriage, and death – as if Judaism had little to say about the prosaic events that come in between. We have taken to heart the brilliant dictum of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch that the “catechism of the Jew is his calendar” – and we have conveniently forgotten that the calendar has 365 days, not just a dozen fasts and feasts. But this string of colorful holidays is not yet Judaism. Our authentic faith is expressed through Halakhah, by means of which our sublime ideals are put into practice in the everyday life of the individual, and the judgment of Torah permeates every aspect of the human enterprise.

Perhaps most representative of the *vavim*, the significant but unspectacular hooks, is education, especially Jewish education. *Hinukh*, let it be admitted, is at best a dull undertaking – even with the latest techniques of programmed instruction. You cannot “show results” in

education as you can in other fields. Progress is slow and requires patience. Yet without it, nothing else is very meaningful.

The Tabernacle has been compared, in the Jewish Tradition, to Knesset Yisrael, the Congregation of Israel. Indeed, all parts of the Tabernacle symbolize the various agencies that constitute the Jewish community. There were the *yeriot* or curtains which keep the hostile draughts from penetrating within: these are the “defense” organizations that seek to protect us against the anti-Semites. The roof symbolizes the social service agencies which offer shelter and succor to the poor, the lonely, and the homeless. There is the *mizbeah* or altar – on which we offered up as sacrifices the flower of our youth for the State of Israel. There is the Ark, symbol of the synagogue. And there are the *vavim*, the hooks – the sign of Jewish education. How unattractive these functional little objects are compared with all the rest! Yet – take these “hooks” away and all else collapses like a house of cards! Perhaps that is why we are always making appeals for the *yeshivot* – because regular Torah study is unappealing to a generation accustomed to dramatic stimulation, to shocking need, to pitched battles. Jewish education can offer no moving pictures of a Sinai battle or a new pipeline to the Negev, no gripping story of a forlorn and hungry orphan, no stirring photo of the aged and sick in need of a hospital.

Indeed, sometimes educators and sponsors of Jewish schools begin to feel the same concern Moses did: perhaps we are wrong. With all these legitimate requests and needs pressed on our fellow Jews, do we have the right to agitate for support for Jewish education? Maybe we are mistaken in siphoning away funds for something so prosaic.

At such moments God illuminates our eyes too, and we behold those *vavim la-amudim*, the hooks which connected the pillars with all else. Then we draw inspiration and courage and we realize that if there is no Jewish education, there can be nothing else. Fail to educate our youth today, and in fifty years the American Jew will have no feeling at all left for the State of Israel; he will be totally unimpressed with the U.J.A. Stop teaching our youth, and the hoary Jewish tradition of *Tzedakah* must come to an end – even as, unfortunately, the Jewish tradition of sobriety and modesty has begun to ebb where Torah living has been abandoned. Without *hinukh* there will be no Jewish heart to which a Federation will be able to appeal. Unless we teach Torah to our young and old, there can be no synagogues worthy of the name. And as for the defense agencies – if there will not be increased and

more extensive Jewish education, supported by the Jewish community, there will sooner or later be no Jews left to defend against the anti-Semites! Let the federations in the various communities throughout the country, those who have refused to support their day schools, remember that well. Only by considering the *vavim* can there be a thriving Jewish community: *nitpietu Yisrael al she'asu et ha-mishkan*.

It is a worthwhile lesson to take home with us from today's reading of the portion of Shekalim: If sometimes we feel that the ledger of life shows a deficit we cannot account for; if the books of our life do not balance, and the expenditures of effort and emotion are not compensated for by an income of joy and peace and satisfaction – it may be because we have been overlooking the obvious and the routine, and paying a bit too much attention to the sensational and the dramatic which, in the long run, often prove ephemeral and transient.

Let us remember that, as we say every morning, we are and can be happy: *ashrenu mah tov helkenu, mah na'im goralenu, mah yafah yerushatenu*. How happy are we that

Not Just Words

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

After Moshe tells the people which items are needed for the construction of the mishkan, the various groups among them bring their contributions towards this end. The Torah tells us that "every man whose heart inspired him came : and everyone whose spirit generously moved him brought.... The men came along with the women ... every wise woman spun with her hands : and they brought the spun yarn...All the women whose heart inspired them with wisdom spun the goats... The princes brought the shoham stones and the filling stones for the Ephod and the Choshen" (Shemos 35:21-28). In the verse concerning the princes, the word for princes - *nesi'im* - is written without any '*yud*,' even though we would usually expect the word to have at least one '*yud*,' or perhaps two. Rashi, citing the midrash, explains that the *nesi'im* made their contribution with the wrong attitude. They decided to wait until everyone else had brought their contribution - which, according to the Ohr HaChaim, is why they are mentioned last among all of the contributors - and bring whatever was missing. Because they acted in such a lazy way, says Rashi, the letter '*yud*' is left out. My teacher, Rav Aharon Soloveichik, zt"l, explained the significance of the letter '*yud*,' albeit in a different context. Rav Aharon said that the letter '*yud*' indicates the possessive. *Shulchan*

we have a faith which teaches such great and good ideals, inspires us to the martyrdom of *kiddush ha-Shem*, offers us beautiful and dramatic ceremonies like a Seder or Neilah. But happier still are we that all of life is holy for us: *ashrenu she'anahnu mashkimim u-maarivim v'omrim paamayim be-khol yom, shema Yisrael...* we are doubly happy that we can recite every day the words of the Shema, and bring God into every aspect of life.

Life may seem dull – but it need not be so. Life can be a poem. And the poem of a man's life is not written all at once, in a sudden frenzy of inspiration. It is carefully composed of the little verses contributed by every day nobly lived; by the rhyme of the Shabbat concluding the stanza of every week; by the rhythm of a consistent aspiration for a life made beautiful by Torah. Then indeed – *ashrenu*, happy are we. And on this day that we welcome the happy month of Adar, may we be happy – we, our families, all Israel, and all the world.

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

means 'a table', while *shulchani* - with a *yud* at the end - means 'my table'. Thus, the '*yud*,' when added to a person's name, as when the name Hoshea was changed to Yehoshua by adding a '*yud*' at the beginning, represents the personal element of the individual. In our context, what the *nesi'im* did was not merely a consequence of laziness, but of a failure to infuse the personal element into their contribution to the construction of the mishkan. We have discussed the significance of this personal element in regard to the mishkan in the past, but I would like to add an additional dimension, based on an explanation of the *nesi'im*'s mistake given by Rav Moshe Tzvi Neriah in his *Ner LeMeah*.

Rav Neriah writes that a *nasi*, or prince of a tribe, is supposed to elevate the spirit of the members of the tribe, helping it to actualize its material and spiritual potential. That is what the word *nasi* means - to lift up. The *nesi'im*, by waiting until everyone else had made their contribution before they made their own, failed to energize the inner desire of the nation to serve God in their own unique way. The *nesi'im* were given the task of elevating the members of the nation by recognizing their sense of dedication to God and guiding them in bringing it to fruition, and, in this instance, they failed to do so. Rav Neriah illustrates

this approach to the role of the nasi through the story of how Hillel became the nasi of the Sanhedrin after bringing a source for the halacha that when Pesach eve falls on Shabbos, it is permissible to slaughter the Pesach sacrifice in the Temple. Without going through the entire story, as Rav Neriah does in his commentary, we will only mention what Hillel said when asked how the Jewish nation would manage to slaughter the Pesach sacrifice on Shabbos once they discovered that it is permissible to do so. How would they be able to bring their knives to the Temple? Hillel answered, 'Let (bnei) Yisroel alone. If they are not prophets, they are the sons of prophets.' In other words, Hillel was confident that they would find a way to bring the knives in a way that was consistent with halacha, which they, in fact, did.

Rav Neriah shows, from the wording of the text of the Tosefta, that it was this sensitivity to the inner spirit of the people, rather than his ability to show that the Pesach offering can be brought on Shabbos, that gained the position of nasi for Hillel. Hillel understood their inner essence, their devotion to serving God, and concluded that they would find a way to slaughter the Pesach sacrifice. It was the failure to have this kind of sensitivity to the inner spirit of the people and to help them actualize it that was at the core of the failure of the nesi'im in the time of Moshe. Perhaps according to this explanation, we can explain the significance of the 'yud' as being the first letter in God's four-letter name, as pointed out by Rav Moshe

Shternbuch in his *Ta'am Va Da'as*. The failure of the nesi'im consisted in not bringing out the inner devotion to God that the members of the nation held within them. The 'yud,' alluding to the name of God, was left out of their name when they brought their own contributions.

Based on Rav Neriah's explanation, we can understand why the verse describing the contribution of the women immediately precedes the verse describing the contribution of the nesi'im. The Torah tells us, as we have seen, "All the women whose heart inspired them with wisdom spun the goats." Rashi, citing the gemara, tells us that it was an especially difficult task to spin the hair of the goats into curtains, as it had to be done while the hair was still attached to the body of the goats. Rav Aharon Soloveichik explained the phrase 'whose heart inspired them' - *asher nesa'am libam* - to mean, literally 'whose heart elevated them,' meaning, whose spirit elevated them to go beyond their natural abilities and be able to perform the difficult task of sewing the hairs while they were still attached to the goats. In other words, their single-minded devotion to God enabled them to increase their previous potential and perform this task. In contrast, the nesi'im, whose contribution is described in the following verses, failed to tap into the inner devotion of the people and thereby raise them to greater heights in their service of God. Because of that, the 'yud,' alluding to God, was left out of their names, to allude to the fact that they had failed to bring out the people's inner devotion to God.

Tocho Ke-Baro

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally entitled, Parsha Bytes – Vayakhel-Pekudei 5778, and presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on March 9, 2018)

In this week's Parsha, we learn about the building of the Mishkan and all its keilim, including the Aron. There are several keilim in the Mishkan made of gold. The Aron is unique in that it is gold-plated *mi-bayis u-mi-chutz*—both the inside and the outside are golden. And Chazal ask: It is obvious why the outside is golden—so it should look fancy. But why is the inside also made of gold? And they famously answer in the Medrash that just like the Aron is the repository of the Torah, the Talmid Chacham serves as a repository of Torah knowledge. It teaches us that a Talmid Chacham must be *tocho ki-baro*, just like the Aron. A Talmid Chacham should not be a hypocrite. He should not just act to impress people. And he should live up to his standards—even internally—when no one is watching, just like the times when everyone can see. And

this is a basic and particularly important mussar.

But some of the Darshanim, and even Pashtanim, question this Medrash: If it is so important that the repository of the Torah be completely authentic inside—as he appears on the outside—why does the Aron need to be wood between the two layers of gold? Why not make it entirely of gold to teach you that the Talmid Chacham must be through and through in every fiber of his being and live up to the highest standards?

Rav Tzadok ha-Kohen answers that you should not think one can be a Talmid Chacham only if he is 100% up to the highest standards. It is simply not true. He even goes so far as to say that perhaps the name of the wood, which makes up the inner part of the Aron—*atzei shitim*—is analogous to the word *shtus*. And *shtus* is the opposite of

the Torah. The Torah leads you to mitzvos, while ruach *shtus* leads to aveiros.

Rav Tzadok ha-Kohen says: We see here that even if someone is imperfect—even if they are not all gold through and through—as long as they learn Torah, and strive to live up to it and act on the inside the way they do on the outside, the koach of Torah will overpower any koach of *shtus*. And therefore, the Torah davka said it should be gold *mi-bayis u-mi-chutz*—but not gold in the middle—to show that if someone really strives to be a Talmid Chacham and to be consistent in what he is doing—even if he is not perfect—the Torah will help him gradually overcome his imperfections.

A number of the newly published perushei Baalei Tosafos and Chizkuni (found in some Mikraos Gedolos) say a very simple pshat. It could not be all gold because gold is exceedingly dense and heavy. If you would make the whole thing of gold, it would be too heavy for the Leviim to carry. And therefore, you need a little gold on the outside and a little gold on the inside. But most of it must be made of wood. Wood is not so light either, but it is not as heavy. We all carry things made of wood all the time, even large things like bookshelves, etc. Two men can carry a dresser made of wood. Therefore, they say that the Aron must be made of wood because the Torah did not want to impose too heavy a burden on the Leviim—even though the Aron is *nosei es nosav*. We know that the Aron miraculously

carried itself. Nonetheless, we do not rely on miracles and just wait for the Aron to levitate, since we have a rule *ein somchin al ha-neis*. We still say the Leviim must come and lift it on their shoulders, and only then will it carry itself. Perhaps we can darshen this pshat of Chizkuni as well. A Talmid Chacham is the source of brachah for the entire world. All brachah and goodness in the world comes from the Torah—and in my humble opinion, both *be-derech ha-teva* and *be-derech ha-sod*. *Derech ha-teva*, the values and ideals of the Torah, are the source of all goodness in the world. And *derech ha-sod*, mystically, as well, the learning of Torah and fulfillment of mitzvos of the Torah brings all the *brachos min ha-Shomaim* down to this world. And one could easily think that just like the Aron is *nosei es nosav*, a Talmid Chacham should not feel uncomfortable being a burden on others, because he is bringing all the brachah to the world anyway. Who cares if he is a bit of a burden on other people and imposes on them in order to further his agenda of being a Talmid Chacham? Perhaps we learn from here that even when we deal with the Aron and the Torah, we must lighten the burden on others. And even though the Aron is *nosei es nosav*, we should not expect everyone to be *somech* on a *neis*. And once you strive to become a Talmid Chacham, do it in a way that lightens the burden on everyone else as much as possible. And *im yirtzeh Hashem*, every Jew should grow to be gold *mi-bayis u-mi-chutz*, and everything in between. Shabbat Shalom.

Motivated Action

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Despite its heavily technical, famously repetitious, and externally focused descriptions, Parshat Vayakhel is deeply concerned with the inner dimensions of the human psyche. The verses are saturated with heart, as the word *lev* appears a dozen times. *Lev* connotes not just emotion, but indicates many psychological constructs such as thinking, memory, inclinations, desire, and motivation. In Parshat Vayakhel we encounter hearts that are lifted, generous, and wise.

Many commentators focus and elaborate on these internal descriptions, portraying the Israelites as virtuous volunteers who are inspired and committed to both donate generously and dedicate their time and energy to build the Tabernacle.

Some commentaries accentuate the importance of the inner world over the external manifestations. Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski argues that God asked for donations

solely so the giver can be uplifted and perfected. The entire goal was development of virtue. Likewise, according to Malbim, the essential aspect of the contributions wasn't the act of giving, but the passionate desire to donate, the generosity of spirit, and the accompanying character growth. In the language of 20th century mussar master Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, "the essence is the heart that accompanies the mitzvot." God wanted them to bring their hearts along with the gifts. This required the cultivation of proper thoughts, intentions, emotions, and motivations before contributing.

While inner motivations are no doubt important, focusing too much on intentions can backfire. Rashi, quoting a Midrash, critiques the princes for contributing last to the Tabernacle (Ex. 35:27). Even though they had noble objectives to provide whatever was needed after everyone else donated, their ultimate lack of expedient

action was problematic.

Questioning the repetitiveness of Parshat Vayakhel when compared to the previous descriptions of the Tabernacle in Parshat Terumah, Rabbi Avraham Pam notes that the fundamental difference between the two is that in Terumah there is a command to make the Tabernacle (“ve’asita”), and Vayakhel describes the follow through (“ve’asu”). It was worth repeating the entire narrative just to emphasize that they executed the tasks.

Rabbi Aaron Levine, known as the Reisha Rav, also emphasizes the importance of quick commitment and performance of action. This is why, he contends, Moses appeals to the skilled laborers to “come and make,” the emphasis on the exuberant commitment and expedient follow through (Ex. 35:10). These enterprising

A Constructive Partnership

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Is the Mishkan Divine property, a celestial embassy among humanity? After all, Hashem refers to the miz-beiach (altar) as “My mizbeiach” and the building as “My sanctuary;” see Shemot 20:23 and Vayikra 19:30. More, we are commanded to treat the Mishkan and Beit HaMik-dash with awe, dressing and conducting ourselves there in a reverent way (Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 254). It seems to be Hashem’s creation and property.

Or is the Mishkan our construct, our generous dedication of earthly space for Hashem? Didn’t we build the Mishkan? Didn’t we dedicate the material ourselves? And didn’t Hashem say explicitly to Dovid HaMelech that He never asked for a house (Shemuel II 7)? It seems to be our initiative.

In a comment on our parshah, Ramban expresses a mystical view that supports both of these positions. Moshe states regarding the materials for the Mishkan, “All who are of generous spirit will bring the materials, et the terumah of Hashem. (Shemot 35:5)” The word *et* allows for two translations, and Ramban brings both:

- “All who are of generous spirit will bring the materials, which are the terumah for Hashem.” We consecrate our own, generous gift, for Hashem. According to Ramban, this is the peshat layer of the text.

characteristics, writes Rabbi Yeruchom Levovitz, are key to both entrepreneurial and spiritual success. This was the trait of “everyone whose spirit was moved” to work on the Tabernacle (Ex. 35:21). Even though they had yet to learn the craft, they made a bold commitment to an important undertaking. Generating drive, taking initiative, and implementing ambitious action can lead to exponential achievement.

Ideally, these two different emphases are ultimately complementary. Perfecting our internal thoughts, emotions, and motivations should engender tangible constructive expressions. Our goal is to produce sanctified actions that are infused with virtuous intentions, spiritual striving, and a burning desire to connect to the Divine.

- “All who are of generous spirit will bring the materials, with the terumah of Hashem.” There are two gifts. The second gift comes not from us, but from Hashem. As Ramban explains here and on Shemot 25:3, Hashem gives Himself as a contribution toward the Mishkan. Ramban describes this as the mystical truth behind the text.

The mystical layer speaks to a truth expressed by King David in Tehillim 127:1, “If Hashem will not build a house, its builders work in vain.” We are responsible to contribute our part; Hashem expects it of us. But Hashem is the Builder whose collaboration determines the success of the project.

Looking ahead, our Sages have presented two visions for the third Beit HaMikdash. Ramban (Hilchot Beit HaBechirah) detailed laws for us to follow when we build the Beit HaMikdash. On the other hand, Rashi (Succah 41a) stated, “The future Temple, for which we long, will be revealed constructed and fully formed, and it will come from Heaven.” Ramban’s mystical comment suggests that both of these are correct. We will be obligated to bring our materials and make our contribution, and Ha-shem will contribute as well. יחד ננצח, together we will build an eternal House.

Two Halves, One Whole

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

This Shabbos, Parshas Vayakhel, Mevorchim Chodesh Adar, we will lein from a second sefer Torah in honor of Parshas Shekalim. This special Torah reading (Shemos 30:11-16) is the first of four special Shabbasos that lead up to Chag Ha'Pesach. Before Purim, we read Shekalim and Zachor (Devarim 25:17-19), and before Pesach, Parah (Bamidbar 19:1-22), and Ha'Chodesh (Shemos 12:1-20).

Why do we read Parshas Shekalim to coincide with Rosh Chodesh Adar? When the BHM"K stood in Jerusalem, each Jew contributed an annual half-shekel to the Temple. The funds raised were primarily used to purchase cattle for the communal sacrifices, korbanot tzibbur. The leftover monies were used for a variety of communal purposes, including providing salaries for the judges and maintenance of the Temple, its vessels, and the city walls. This annual tax, known as the machatzit hashekel, was due on the first of Nissan. One month earlier, on the 1st of Adar, the courts began posting reminders about this Biblical obligation. In commemoration, the Torah reading of the Shabbat that falls on or before Adar is supplemented with the verses that relate G-d's commandment to Moshe regarding the first giving of the half-shekel (https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/644308/jewish/Shekalim.htm).

The first half-shekel donation was given by the nation (all males ages 20-60 years old) in the desert, at the time that the Mishkan was built. While the contributions of materials for the building of the Mishkan itself were voluntary (Shemos 25:2), the half-shekel donation was a mandatory contribution. Through these half-shekels the nation was counted, and the silver was used for the purchase of the annual communal korbant (see Rashi to Shemos 30:15). What if a wealthy person wanted to give more, and a poor person wanted to give less? The Torah is very exacting: *הַעֲשִׂיר לֹא יִרְבֶּה וְהַדֵּל לֹא יִמְעִיט מִמִּחְצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל לְתֵת אֶת תְּרוּמַת ה' לְכַפֵּר עַל נַפְשֵׁיכֶם. The rich shall give no more, and the poor shall give no less than half a shekel, with which to give the offering to the Lord, to atone for your souls (30:15).*

Each Jew had to give the exact same amount: only a half-shekel, no more and no less. The question remains: why only a half-shekel? Why not a whole shekel donation per person? The well-known answer is a reminder for all times in our national destiny, but especially now, in a world

after October 7. A Jew is incomplete when he is alone as a 'yachid', a lone individual, the Jew remains only "half." But just like two halves make one whole, when two Jews come together, we have a complete, whole, united unit.

Hence, each Jew was commanded to give ONLY a half-shekel, and no more, to remind him - and all of us - that only when we come together, and bind our destiny up with that of our brother, are we whole and complete.

Perhaps this is another, and deeper, reason as to why this special parsha is read on, or right before, Rosh Chodesh Adar, the month in which we celebrate Purim. Haman, ironically, understood that we are all one nation. Our enemies - in every generation - understand that we are one nation. To the enemy, there is no difference between head coverings, levels of religiosity, hashkafot, and dress. I recently read something powerful: "On Oct. 7, the terrorists did not say, 'Kill the Israelis', they said, 'Kill the Jews.' A Jew is a Jew - united, bound up and connected (one whole shekel) to his brother. It is, sadly, only us, who oftentimes cannot see that we are one. Where we see division, they see cohesion; where we see disparate ways, they see one religion; where we see halves, they see a whole.

Haman's original charge to Achashvairosh was: *יִשְׁנוּ עִם-אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפָּרֶד בֵּין הָעַמִּים, בְּכֹל מְדִינֹת מְלְכוּתְךָ; וְדָתֵיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל-עַם - there is one nation scattered and dispersed throughout the nations, in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their religion is different from all other nations (Esther 3:8).*

When Queen Esther was afraid to go to the King on behalf of her nation, afraid for her life as she had not been summoned by the king, Mordechai sends her a powerful and timeless message: *אַל-תִּדְמִי בְּנַפְשֶׁךָ, לְהַמְלִיט בַּיַּת-הַמֶּלֶךְ: מִכָּל-הַיְּהוּדִים - Do not imagine that you can escape to the king's palace from the fate of all the Jews (Esther 4:13).* Mordechai was reminding Esther that we are one nation, one people, and the fate of one is the fate of the other. Do not think, Queen Esther, that your life will be spared in the palace, when the life of the Jew is taken in the ghetto. What happens to one will happen to all, for like the two half-shekels that make a whole, Am Yisrael - each person on his own incomplete - is ultimately bound together as one.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav, zt'l, teaches: "Our fate does not distinguish between aristocrats and common folk, between rich and poor, between a prince garbed in royal purple and a pauper begging from door

to door, between a pietist and an assimilationist. Even though we speak a plethora of languages, even though we are inhabitants of different lands, even though we look different - one may be short and dark, the other tall and blond - even though we live in varying and unequal social and economic conditions - one may dwell in a magnificent palace and the other in a miserable hovel - we still share the same fate. If the Jew in the hovel is beaten, then the security of the Jew in the palace is endangered. 'Do not imagine that you can escape to the king's palace from the fate of all the Jews.' Both Queen Esther, garbed in royal apparel,

and Mordechai the Jew, clad in sackcloth, were caught in the same web of historical circumstances. 'Chaverim kol Yisrael, All Israel are knit together' - we will all be pursued unto death or we will all be redeemed with an eternal salvation" (Megillat Esther Masoret HaRav, p.87).

As G-d had mercy on the Jews in 127 provinces, and overturned the edict of annihilation, may He have mercy on His children, scattered and dispersed to the four corners of the earth. May we merit, together as one who klal, to witness the ultimate redemption, immediately and in our days.

Rav Soloveitchik on Vayakhel: A Reflection of One's Beauty

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023)

He made the laver copper and its base copper, with the mirrors of the women who thronged at the opening of the tent of meeting" (Exodus 38:8). Rashi fills us in on the Midrashic backstory of the latter half of the verse:

*The daughters of Israel had mirrors in which they would look when adorning themselves. Even those [mirrors] they did not refrain from bringing as a donation to the Mishkan. Moshe was disgusted by them since they were made for the evil inclination. The Holy One said to him, "Accept, because they are dearest to me of all."*¹

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explicated that Moshe could not make peace with the fact that mirrors used for pleasure and beauty would be incorporated into the laver, since it was located right next to the altar, where Jews opened their hearts and offered innumerable confessions in search of atonement.

*Given that the altar and the laver seem to represent two mutually exclusive motifs, the physical proximity of these two items seems strange. How can the beauty of the mirrors harmonize with the sensation of self-criticism with which the road of the altar is bound?*²

God said to accept the mirrors because in the darkest exile of Egypt, the women were able to comfort and strengthen their husbands. Their inner resolve and resilience were the key ingredients to withstanding the degradation and humiliation they all underwent daily. After being beaten down they would not stay down, they would get up and carry on.

Self-criticism and Self-transcendence

The same kind of tension existed in the psyche of the

sinner approaching the altar, seeking to make amends for their wrongs with the holiest sacrifices, the chatat (sin-offering) or asham (guilt-offering). The offeror would confess over the sacrifice, an exercise in self-criticism, wracked by feelings of inferiority and unworthiness. On Yom Kippur, we declare, "I am like a vessel filled with shame and humiliation," and "You are just regarding all that befalls us, for You have done what is true and we have abetted wickedness."³ The outer altar itself was built from unwrought stones—since metal tools could not be used (Exodus 20:22)—which reflected back at the sinner his imperfections and faults.⁴

At the same time, repentance is predicated on the capacity for self-transcendence. We have the ability to be better than we were, to turn our lives around in the blink of an eye. The laver reflects the inner beauty of an individual, the ability to reform oneself. One cannot leave the past behind, committed to a new and improved future, without faith in one's inner talents and creative potential.

This, then, is the majestic symbolism expressed by the proximity of the laver to the altar. Here is how the Rav articulated it:

*Every confession of sin expresses itself in the outcry, "I am black and I am beautiful, daughters of Jerusalem" (Song of Songs 1:5). When we do not see the "beauty," we cannot discern the "blackness." The sinner must view himself from two antithetical viewpoints: the nullity of being, and the greatness of being.*⁵

All of this still applies today in our Temple-less world. On Yom Kippur we search our souls and criticize ourselves. This fulfills the requirement of charatah, remorse, that is part of repentance. But we must not forget that resolving

to change, kabalah al he-atid, is also a prerequisite to repentance, which can only be sustained with a healthy dose of self-confidence and conviction in one's self-worth.

“Confessing” Good Deeds

Characteristically, the Rav revealed this duality at play in Halachah. In the fourth and seventh years of the sabbatical cycle, we make a declaration that we have properly fulfilled the mitzvot of taking and apportioning tithes. We say:

I have removed all of the holy from the house, and I have also given it to the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. In accord with all of Your commandments that you have commanded me, I have neither transgressed any of Your commandments nor forgotten. ... I have hearkened to the voice of the Lord, my God; I have done according to all You commanded me. (Deuteronomy 26:13-14)

This is a statement of proud accomplishment; with much effort we have gotten it right. Why, then, is the ritual referred to in rabbinic literature as vidui ma'aser, when vidui is a term usually reserved for confession of wrongdoing?

The Rav explained that accomplishment and failure are two sides of the same coin. By underscoring our success in this area, our shining “beauty,” we call to mind the train of errors that still blots other areas of our observance, our inky “blackness.” When we recognize our accomplishments, we can improve our less-than-stellar record on other scores. Taking pride in our achievements, even the small gains, helps us make even larger strides.⁶

Exploring the Rav's Insight

Alongside the brotherly love for which Chassidut is known, there is a salient strand of thought that espouses self-love. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov expressed this in his unique way in his celebrated teaching, Azamerah lelohai be-odi, based on the verse, “I shall sing to my God as long as I am” (אֲזַמְרָה לַאלוהֵי בְעוֹדִי) (Psalm 146:2). The rebbe urges his readers to find the good in themselves:

*Just as we must judge others favorably, even the wicked, to find in them good elements... so must a person do for himself, to judge himself favorably, and to find some element of good, in order to strengthen himself so he does not completely collapse. On the contrary, he will revive himself, and gladden his soul with the modicum of good that he finds in himself.*⁷

Rebbe Nachman reinterpreted the verse on which he is meditating to mean “I shall sing to God with my od,” my little ounce of goodness. It is imperative not to lose sight of this goodness, so that a person can serve God with joy and song. In the same way the songwriter strings together beautiful notes to create a melody, so must we string together the high notes within us to sing our song to God. Elsewhere, Rebbe Nachman pithily captured this sentiment: “If you believe that you can ruin, believe you can repair.”⁸

Rebbe Nosson Sternhartz of Nemirov, Rebbe Nachman's main disciple and much more, adapted his rebbe's teaching in explaining the very first law in the Shulchan Aruch. How one rises in the morning is not only a question of how we physically get out of bed, but how we get up when feeling down. How does one shake off the spiritual grogginess of feeling disappointed in oneself and distant from God? His answer is that one must seek out the bright spots to remain encouraged and in good cheer.⁹

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, spiritual leader of Aish Kodesh Congregation in Woodmere, New York, adds to this lesson from Rebbe Nosson. According to some rishonim, the washing of our hands in the morning (negel vasser) symbolizes our use of the laver. This means that our day begins with positive reinforcement. At dawn (שַׁחַר), as the new day begins, we must look for the light, even if outside everything still appears black (שְׁחֹר).¹⁰

1. Rashi on Exodus 38:8.
2. Lustiger, Chumash Mesoras Harav, 2:333.
3. From the prayer Elohai ad she-lo notzarti at the end of the Yom Kippur Amidah, and from the paragraph Sarnu mi-mitzvotcha following the short confession, respectively.
4. Holzer, The Rav Thinking Aloud: Shemos, 155–158.
5. Lustiger, Chumash Mesoras Harav, 2:331.
6. Soloveitchik, Shiurei HaRav, 30.
7. Likutei Moharan, 1:282.
8. Ibid., 2:112. See further Parashat Ki Tisa, “Believe You Can Repair.”
9. Likutei Halachot, Orach Chayim, Hashkamat ha-Boker, halachah 1.
10. Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, “Finding the Good Within,” <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/831642> (accessed March 10, 2021).

Bezalel's Artistic Legacy

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

When this week's parasha, parashat Vayakhel, lists the abundant talents of Bezalel, the architect of the Tabernacle, we encounter one of the very few instances (cf. parashat Kee Tisah, Exodus 31:1-6) in which the Torah reveals Judaism's attitude toward art and artistry. As we shall see in the following verses, the Torah's positive attitude toward Bezalel, the Tabernacle's master craftsman, is clear and unequivocal.

In Exodus 35:30, Moses speaks to the children of Israel, and declares: ראו קרא השם בשם, בצלאל בן אורי בן חור למטה, יהודה, See, that G-d has called by name, Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur of the tribe of Judah. Bezalel is not simply appointed by Moses, he is “called by G-d by name” to be the architect of His Tabernacle. This “calling” clearly indicates that Bezalel is no ordinary artisan. This, of course, is confirmed by the verse in Exodus 35:31, in which Moses says of Bezalel: וימלא אתו רוח אלקים, בהקמה בתבונה ובידעת, ובכל מלאכה, G-d has filled him [Bezalel] with His G-dly spirit, with wisdom, insight, knowledge and with every craft.

Indeed, the range of Bezalel's talents are stunning. He is a master craftsman and a knowledgeable designer. He is a skilled worker with gold, silver, copper, and knows how to cut precious stones, carve wood and weave tapestry.

The Ramban points out that the expression used by the Torah (Exodus 35:30) ראו קרא השם בשם, בצלאל... , attests to the fact that G-d has called Bezalel by “name,” and implies astonishment. G-d, in effect, declares: “Let everyone see Bezalel's prodigious talents!” After all, says the Ramban, the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt for more than one hundred years. The one “skill” they were to master as slave laborers was the ability to make bricks and mortar. The Israelites surely never learned to work with gold, silver or precious stones. In fact, during their back-breaking slavery they, most likely, rarely saw these valuable materials. And so, it is clear that Bezalel's endowments are not natural, but rather the result of רוח אלקים, the Divine spirit that rested on him. His talents were undoubtedly a gift of G-d.

According to the rabbis in Tractate Sanhedrin 69b, Bezalel was only 13 years old when he was chosen to supervise the tabernacle's construction. His tender age also underscores the fact that his talents were hardly natural, but rather the result of a Divine gift. The Be'er Mayim Chaim maintains that the verse, Exodus 36:1, לְדַעַת, אֶת כָּל מְלָאכֶת עֲבֹדַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ, לַעֲשׂוֹתָ, אֵת כָּל מְלָאכֶת עֲבֹדַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ, which states that Bezalel was endowed with the talents that were necessary for all

the “holy works”—implies that Bezalel's talents were only valid during the time that he worked on the sacred “holy works”—the Tabernacle furnishings. In fact, according to the Gaon of Rogatchov in his work Tsofnat Pa'aneach, as soon as the Tabernacle was completed, Bezalel's talents vanished. Bezalel's assistant, Oholiyav, however, whose talents were natural, did not lose his skills, and continued to pass them on to succeeding generations.

The rabbis also note that in Exodus 35:30, the Torah text not only identifies Bezalel as a descendent of Uri, but also mentions that he was the grandson of Hur of the tribe of Judah—noting three generations, something most unusual in the bible. Oholiyav, on the other hand, is only identified as the son of Achisamach of the tribe of Dan—noting only the usual two generations. The commentators indicate that Bezalel's distinction points to the long history of commitment and sacrifice on the part of Bezalel's family. It was, after all, according to tradition, Bezalel's grandfather, Hur, who lost his life attempting to stop the people from sinning with the Golden Calf. And now, his grandson has similarly chosen to devote his life to G-d, by building G-d's sanctuary.

Judaism has a long history of valuing aesthetic beauty, as demonstrated by the religious concept known as הַדוּר, מִצְוָה, hidur mitzvah—which encourages Jews to make the mitzvot more and more beautiful. Nevertheless, Judaism's attitude toward art has been, at best, ambivalent. Despite the fact that the Torah in parashat Vayakhel seems to give a clear endorsement of the wonderful works of Bezalel and Oholiyav, the Torah generally appears to be apprehensive about art. This reticence is primarily due to the fear of violating the Second of the Ten Commandments that prohibits making images of other gods. Two-dimensional art, although tolerated, was often considered too distracting to display in the synagogues. Nevertheless, handwritten manuscripts of religious books were frequently adorned with lovely artistic figures and letters. Similarly, spice boxes for havdalah, menorot for Chanukah have been common objects of art in Jewish homes for many hundreds of years.

Even though, from the context of the biblical passage, it would seem that the prohibition against certain art forms would only apply when the image is made for the purpose of worship, sculpture is frowned upon. Therefore, three-dimensional art (e.g. sculpture) was out of favor for much

of Jewish history, for fear that it would lead to the worship of images. The Code of Jewish Law—the Shulchan Aruch (Yorah Dayah 141:4-7) rules that it is permitted to paint, draw or weave figures of human beings in a tapestry, but not to make statues of the complete human form. It is, however, permitted to sculpt an incomplete human figure, for example the head alone or the torso alone. Basically, Judaism is absolutely determined to avoid anything that may smack of idolatry.

In light of Judaism's historic ambivalence toward art, the admiration in which Bezalel was held, is particularly unique. In the Middle Ages, when art was dominated by the Christian church and almost all of art was of a religious nature and included many icons, any Jewish passions for artistry were surely diminished. Except for very personal

art, almost all forms of art fell out of favor. Since the enlightenment and the emancipation, however, art has started again to play a more dominant role in Jewish life. In fact, it seems, at times, as if Bezalel himself has come back to life once again!

Bezalel was not only unique because of his multiple talents and varied skills. In Exodus 35:34, after the Torah lists his many skills, it also says of Bezalel, וַיְהוֹרֵת נְתַן בְּלִבּוֹ, that G-d gave Bezalel the ability to teach, to be able to pass on his skills to others, to other artisans in his generation. Indeed, when we behold the beautiful contemporary artwork that emanates from Israel and from other Jewish artisans, we must remember to say “thank you” to Bezalel for transmitting those artforms to others and keeping them alive.

Achdus Takes Work

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Parshas Vayakhel begins with Moshe assembling the people – ויקהל משה את כל עדת בני ישראל – and announcing: זה הדבר אשר ציווה ה' לעשות אותם – “This is the matter which God has commanded to do.” He then proceeds to convey them the prohibition against performing melacha (work) on Shabbos.

The question arises as to why Moshe would introduce the mitzva of Shabbos with the announcement, זה הדבר אשר ציווה ה' לעשות אותם – that this is what Hashem commanded the people “to do.” Shabbos observance is not what we “do,” but rather what we don't do, as we refrain from the 39 categories of melacha. It is specifically about not doing, about abstaining. Why, then, does Moshe tell the people that Shabbos is what Hashem commanded לעשות אותם – “to do”?

The Chiddushei Ha'Rim therefore explains this pasuk differently, claiming that Moshe here refers not to the mitzva of Shabbos, which is presented in the next pasuk, but rather to the beginning of the pasuk – ויקהל משה את כל עדת בני ישראל. He tells the people that this assembly, the coming together of all Am Yisrael on that day, is something that we should strive to do on a regular basis. He urges them to always join together with achdus (unity), without jealousy or hostility. We must constantly strive for ויקהל, to be together and mutually devoted to one another.

Rav Yisroel Meir Druck, in Lahavos Eish, notes the implication of the Chiddushei Ha'Rim's insight. If, indeed, the phrase לעשות אותם is referring to ויקהל, to the goal of achdus, then this means that achdus is something we need

to work for, to create, to produce. It doesn't happen on its own. It's not automatic. Our default condition is one of disunity, not unity. Without a concentrated effort to create achdus, we will naturally be selfish, self-centered, resentful of people who act and think differently, and focused solely on our own personal interests without concerning ourselves with the needs of other people.

This message is vitally important and relevant on several different levels. First, it is relevant to families. Families need to work to stay together and to remain close. This is not going to happen by itself. I know a person who stipulated in his will that a special fund be set up for the purpose of yearly family gatherings, so that members of the family cannot give the excuse that they cannot afford the travel expenses to visit the rest of the family. It takes effort – and, yes, money – for families to achieve ויקהל, to stay together and maintain close bonds.

This is true also of a community. Small basement minyanim are convenient, but they do not create a community, they do not bring people together. In order to attain the lofty goal of ויקהל, of coming together and forming a cohesive unit, we need to sacrifice certain conveniences. We cannot insist on davening only in a minyan that precisely suits all our personal preferences, that davens at the right speed, with the right ba'alei tefila, at the right time, and with the right people. Building and maintaining a community requires work and it requires sacrifice.

Finally, this is true also on the national level. After

Simchas Torah, in the wake of the horrific terror attacks, and as a result of the ensuing war effort, and the sharp rise in antisemitism, the Jewish People naturally joined together. We witnessed an inspiring wave of *achdus* overcoming our nation. We came together to mourn, the grieve, to pray, to protest, to donate, and to help out. However, this sense of *achdus* cannot run on autopilot. Indeed, we already see this unity starting to unravel. If

we are going to stay united, we need to put in the work and make a consistent effort to transcend our differences and join together with all our fellow Jews. If *achdus* is important to us – which, of course, it must be – then we cannot assume that it will just happen. We must all be prepared to invest time, thought and effort to reach out to, and connect with, other Jews to build a strong, unified nation.

The Mishkan as Therapeutic Healing

Rabbi Johnny Solomon

Parshat Vayakhel informs us that the chief architect of the Mishkan project was, ‘Betzalel, son of Uri, son of Chur, of the tribe of Yehuda’ (Shemot 35:30), with the deputy-chief being ‘Oholiav, son of Achisamach, of the tribe of Dan’ (ibid. 35:34). Yet we find an interesting expression when Betzalel’s name is first mentioned: ‘See (*re’u*), God has called by name Betzalel, son of Uri, son of Chur, of the tribe of Yehuda.’ The question posed by our Sages is: what is the significance of the word ‘See’ (*re’u*)?

The Gemara (Brachot 55a) answers this question and, in doing so, derives an important principle that a community leader may only be appointed once the community has been consulted:

‘Rabbi Yitzchak said: Do not appoint a leader over a community unless the community has been consulted [prior to their appointment], as it says: ‘See (*re’u*), God has called by name Betzalel, son of Uri, son of Chur, of the tribe of Yehuda’ (Shemot 35:30). [It is as if] the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moshe: “Moshe, is Bezalel suitable (*hagun*) to you?” [to which] Moshe replied: “Master of the universe! If he is suitable (*hagun*) to You, then all the more so he is suitable to me!” [God] said to him: “Nevertheless [I want you to] go and consult [the people]”. [So Moshe] went and said to the people: “Is Bezalel suitable (*hagun*) to you?”. They said to him: “If he is suitable (*hagun*) to the Holy One, Blessed be He, and to you, then all the more so he is suitable to us.”

It should be noted that while both Betzalel and Oholiav are appointed, the word ‘See’ (*re’u*) is only used with respect to Betzalel. Consequently, the Gemara only speaks about a consultation process in relation to Betzalel’s appointment. Of course, a simple reason as to why this is the case is the fact that, as Shemot 35:30-34 implies, Betzalel was appointed as the chief architect, while Oholiav was appointed as deputy chief. However, I believe that embedded in the lesson taught by Rabbi Yitzchak about

consulting the community before appointing leaders is a deeper lesson relating specifically to Betzalel and as expressed by the question: ‘Is Betzalel suitable (*hagun*)?’

So far, I have translated the word ‘*hagun*’ as ‘suitable’, but if we wish to be a little more precise, what this really means in this context is: ‘Is Betzalel a sensible and capable person who is well-matched for this task?’ Given this definition, we must now consider why this question needed to be asked, and to begin our answer, we must reflect upon the association between the Mishkan and the Egel HaZahav.

Numerous rabbinic statements inform us that the Mishkan was an atonement for the Egel HaZahav. For example, the Sifrei (Devarim 1:18) writes: ‘Let the gold of the mishkan atone for the gold of the calf!’ Accordingly, Dr. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg explains that, ‘the atonement function of the Mishkan evokes the idea of a therapeutic project’ (The Particulars of Rapture p. 320). Yet while Betzalel was an emissary of the people by project managing the building of the Mishkan, his grandfather – Chur (who himself was the son of Miriam and Kalev) – not only firmly objected to the building of the Egel HaZahav but was, in fact, killed by the people in response to his protestations (see Vayikra Rabbah 10:3).

Given this context we now turn back to the Mishkan project and we can better understand the question: ‘Is Betzalel suitable (*hagun*)?’ Specifically, the question being asked is whether it is suitable, sensible, and a well-matched appointment for Betzalel, the grandson of Chur, who was killed for trying to stop the building of the Egel HaZahav, to be the chief architect of the Mishkan whose purpose is to atone for the Egel? Perhaps Betzalel may be too emotionally invested in this project? Or perhaps he may carry resentment for the murder of his grandfather?

Of course, we can never quite know how another necessarily feels. Consequently, rather than Moshe simply replying ‘Yes!’ to God’s question, he replies by saying,

“If he is suitable (*hagun*) to you, then all the more so he is suitable to me!” – as if to convey the fact that if God believes that Betzalel is up to the task, then Moshe will support this decision. So too, when the people are asked their opinion, they respond by saying, “If he is suitable (*hagun*) to the Holy One, Blessed be He, and to you [Moshe], then all the more so he is suitable to us.”

Having explained the complex emotional associations between Betzalel and the Mishkan, we now have a further reason why Rabbi Yitzchak doesn’t make reference to Oholiav. As mentioned, a simple reason for this omission could be because Oholiav was appointed as a deputy to Betzalel. But a further reason may be because the whole question of whether Betzalel was ‘suitable’ was not a relevant consideration to Oholiav’s appointment.

Broken Tablets

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

The Jewish people do not go out to battle alone. When setting out for the battlefield, we are commanded to take along the Aron Kodesh, the holy ark of the covenant, carrying within it the luchot, inscribed with the Ten Commandments given by God at Mt. Sinai (Rashi, Bamidbar 10:33). The Aron generally resided in the inner sanctum of the Tabernacle; however, at times of war and crisis, it is removed from its sacred abode in order to accompany the Jewish people. When the Aron was stationary, as noted by the Sefer Hachinuch (Mitzva #96), the poles had to stay in place, perhaps so that if war were to break out, the Aron could be immediately carried to join the Jewish army, even at a moment’s notice. What’s more, perhaps this symbolizes that the Torah is always with us – always carrying us and guiding us, ever on the move with us and governing our behavior, and with us even in our most difficult moments in battle. There were times that the Israelites did not fully appreciate the function of the Aron in wartime. In the days of the Judges, before the beginning of Jewish monarchy, the Jews fought a war against the Philistines, suffering heavy losses. Fearful for what lay ahead, the elders decided to go to the town of Shilo, where the Mishkan stood, to bring the Aron to the battlefield, “so that [God] will be present among us and deliver us from the hands of our enemies” (Shmuel I 4:3). Yet despite the palpable excitement among the people at the arrival of the Aron, the Jews once again suffered losses, and the Aron itself was seized by the Philistines (ibid 4:10,11). In his commentary, Malbim (Shmuel I 4:3)

Our Sages (see Brachot 55a) have noted that the name Betzalel literally means ‘in the shadow of God’, and this is generally understood to refer to the spiritual wisdom shown by Betzalel. However, there is another way to understand Betzalel’s name, which is that he lived under the shadow of the *mesirut nefesh* (self-sacrifice) of his grandfather Chur who was murdered for speaking up for God.

Of course, this shadow could have made Betzalel bitter and negative. Instead, Betzalel channelled his wisdom to enable the people in their atonement process for the sin that led to the murder of his grandfather. As such, the Mishkan was not only a therapeutic project for the people. It was also a therapeutic project for Betzalel himself.

questions how the story came to unfold the way it did. Shouldn’t the presence of the Aron have brought merit to the Jewish people? The answer lies, Malbim argues, in the perspective held by the Jewish people, who believed that as long as they had the Aron along with them, God would certainly save them, even if they were idol worshippers, a belief Malbim describes as ‘a faith of folly.’ For in reality, “the covenant of the Ark is not an end in itself, but is only so they (the Jewish people) will observe what is written within.” The Aron does not go out to battle as an elaborate amulet, securing the protection of those around it. On the contrary, the Aron comes to the battlefield as a reminder, to ensure that even in the face of the pressures of war, when fear and anxiety are high and danger is present, we mustn’t lose sight of the great moral and spiritual expectations the Torah demands of us.

There is no time or place, even in war, that the Torah does not challenge us to fulfill the Divine Will. The Aron does not protect us from our enemies; it protects us from our basest instincts when our moral guardrails are challenged. The Jerusalem Talmud in Shekalim (6:1) presents an argument between the Rabbis and R’ Yehuda ben Lakish regarding how many Aronot (arks) existed. According to R. Yehuda ben Lakish, there were in fact two Aronot, two arks containing the words of the Torah. The official ark, residing in the Holy of Holies, held the second set of intact luchot, tablets and a Torah scroll, while the wartime ark contained the shivrei luchot, the shattered first tablets. If we are to follow R’ Yehuda ben Lakish’s position,

adopted by Sifri (Bamidbar 10:33), Midrash Gadol (ad. loc.), Rashi (ad.loc.) and the Netziv in Harchev Davar (ad. loc.), then it strikes me as no mere coincidence that the ark taken out to battle is the one carrying the broken tablets. For wartime is inseparable from brokenness. We are all experiencing the brokenness wrought by this war: our soldiers in battle; the new widows and orphans; the soldiers who are now physically disabled; families of hostages waiting for their loved ones to return; entire communities that have been dislocated; the innocent civilians; as well as the broader circle of impact on college campuses or communities under threat in the Diaspora. The fact that the Aron with the shattered tablets was the one sent out to the battle is a recognition of the reality of war. The brokenness of war is reflected within the

brokenness of the tablets. During wartime, we all carry the ark with the shattered tablets. In this moment, our challenge is to face the brokenness created by this war and to refashion ourselves and our society. We are also reminded that this Aron must return back to its home in that Mishkan. As our soldiers make their way home, we need to work to ensure wholeness in our homes, with our spouses and children, and in our places of work and communal spaces. A great deal has been broken, but as with the shattered luchot, we find wholeness through the opportunity that has come in rebuilding anew. After all, the second, complete set of luchot are a direct result of learning from the experience of the shattered first ones. Please God we will carry and be carried by the ark with the shattered tablets, as well as the ark with the complete ones.

Haftarat Vayakhel: Coming Closer to God

Rabbi Eric Goldman (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarah, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

The haftarah for Parashat Vayakhel, otherwise known as “Neirot De-Shlomo,” has many unique characteristics. First, there is the infrequency with which it is actually read. During most years, Vayakhel and Pekudei are read together, and, following the general halakhah for double parashiyot, the haftarah for Pekudei takes precedence. Even on leap years, when Vayakhel is read on its own, its haftarah is often passed over in place of the one for Parashat Shekalim.

Secondly, whereas many haftarot require somewhat of an analysis in order to connect them to the parashah they are paired with, the connection of the haftarah for Vayakhel and the parashah itself is plainly obvious: the parashah deals with the fashioning of the vessels of the Mishkan and the haftarah deals with the fashioning of the vessels for the Beit Ha-Mikdash.

Lastly, very often the Ashkenazim and Sefardim choose noticeably different themes on which to base their choice of haftarah. However, the haftarah for Vayakhel according to the Ashkenazim is merely the second half of the perek that the Sephardim use for their haftarah. Both traditions chose to focus on the building of the Beit Ha-Mikdash and its vessels, differing only in the particular vessels on which to elaborate.

This haftarah does have one unusual factor in that it doubles as the haftarah for the second Shabbat of Chanukah, since one of the keilim mentioned in the haftarah is the menorah. However, this too is somewhat

ironic, since Chanukah is very rarely spread out over two Shabbatot. The Gemara tells us that when there is only one Shabbat during Chanukah, “Neirot De-Shlomo” is passed over once again in favor of the section in Zechariah (known as “Neirot De-Zechariah”) which also mentions the menorah of the Beit Ha-Mikdash. However, the Gemara does not explain why the haftarah of “Neirot De-Zechariah” should take precedence over the haftarah of “Neirot DeShlomo.”

The Ran explains that really we should be reading Neirot De-Shlomo because it precedes Neirot De-Zechariah. However, because the nevuah in Neirot De-Zechariah refers to the menorah that will be in the Second Beit Ha-Mikdash, the very same menorah that the miracle of Chanukah will take place with, it is this nevuah that takes precedence.

R. Yisroel Dov Lerner, in his sefer Haftarah U-Gemara, explains that the connection of the Neirot De-Zechariah to the Neirot De-Chashmonaim may go even deeper than simply being a reference. The nevuah of Zechariah came after the Jewish people had been placed under the yoke of nations of the world. Likewise, the Neirot De-Chashmonaim, the actual menorah of the Second Beit Ha-Mikdash, burned at its brightest after the harsh decrees and yoke of the Greeks had been placed upon the Jewish nation. Although the miracle of Chanukah was a momentous event for the Jewish people, it came during a time when we had otherwise been struggling to feel God’s

presence, just as in the time that the nevuah of Zechariah had been given.

Perhaps with this connection between the Neiroi De-Zechariah and the Neiroi De-Chashmonaim, we can reach a deeper understanding of the rarity with which our haftarah, Neiroi De-Shlomo, is read on Chanukah.

The only time Chanukah has two Shabbatot is if the first day of Chanukah is on Shabbat, in which case, the eighth and final day of Chanukah will also fall out on Shabbat. The eighth day of Chanukah is often referred to as “Zot Chanukah” (“This is Chanukah”). In Jewish thought, the number eight carries with it great significance. The number seven symbolizes the natural order of the world – there are seven days in a week, seven years in a shemittah cycle, seven sets of shemittah cycles in a yovel cycle, etc. On the other hand, the number eight means that something is le-ma’alah min ha-teva (above the natural order of things) because it is more strongly connected to God. For example, the Yom Tov of Shemini Atzeret is an exceptional Yom Tov because it is on this day that God tells us “kashah alai pereidatkhem” – “your separation is difficult on Me.” It is a Yom Tov that expresses an intense relationship between us and God. Therefore, it is this Yom Tov that has to take place on an eighth day (i.e. after the seven days of Sukkot).

The only other time we have a celebration on a national level that lasts for eight days is Chanukah. It is the eighth day that sets it apart from all of the other Yomim Tovim that we have. It is on the eighth day that Chanukah rises above the natural order of the world and is le-ma’alah min ha-teva, and we are thus able to feel a deeper and more intense connection to God. It is Zot Chanukah.

The gemara in Massekhet Yoma (21b) relates that there were vast differences between the First and Second Temples. The second Beit Ha-Mikdash had no Aron, no kaporet, no keruvim, no heavenly fire on the altar, and no Urim Ve-Tumim for the Kohein Gadol. In stark contrast, all of these were present in the First Beit Ha-Mikdash. The First Beit Ha-Mikdash had a more open revelation of God’s presence, which was something that was severely lacking in the Second. However, there was one time during the period of the Second Beit Ha-Mikdash that we were able to feel God’s presence more strongly than we had previously. That was during Chanukah, when we were zokheh to have God perform the neis nigleh (the open miracle) of having the menorah stay lit for a full eight days. It was during this time that we felt closest to that level of God’s presence in this world that we had been zokheh to feel during the time of the First Beit Ha-Mikdash.

Therefore, when the eighth day of Chanukah falls on Shabbat and we are given a chance to express the essence of this day, we are able to read about the Neiroi De-Shlomo. Because it was on the eighth day of Chanukah that we were given a taste of the intense closeness to God that we had during the First Beit Ha-Mikdash. We can therefore recall the days of old by reading about the Neiroi De-Shlomo, and reading about a time when God’s presence was dwelling tangibly in this world and we were able to experience such a close and intense relationship with Him. A feeling that, God willing, we should experience again shortly.