

Parashat Ki Tissah: Bezalel & Wisdom of the Heart

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin



Shabbat Shalom, dear friends,

Parashat Ki Tissah is an unusually dramatic parasha - it relates the events of the Golden Calf. But this year I will resist the temptation to discuss this juicy topic. Instead, we will meet an extraordinary man: Bezalel Ben Uri Ben Hur. He was personally chosen by God to be the master artist responsible for the construction of the Tabernacle:

“And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying: 'See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise skillful works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass.’” (Sh'mot 31, 1-4)

Our Sages explained that Bezalel's wisdom was the result of his being Bezel-el, meaning “in the shadow of God”, as his name indicated.

What was this wisdom and how did it express itself? Our Sages attributed to him knowledge of the mysteries of Creation. “Bezalel knew how to join the letters with which heaven and earth were created.” (Yalkut Shimoni)

Joining letters - how wonderful! A good author knows how to create an entire reality in our minds through his ability to join one word to another, one sentence to the following one. The better the connection, the smoother the sentence, the more real it is in our minds.

Bezalel's skill was even more refined: he joined one letter to another! This ability, at a metaphoric level, is the ability to actually create reality! This was Bezalel's great wisdom, and it continues to be the wisdom of the Bezalels of our day: to know how to bring letters together, to understand how everything in the world can be woven together successfully in an organic way, creating a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts; to be able to comprehend the big picture in which each element has its own unique place.

If you don't appreciate Bezalel's skill, look around: we can see how difficult it is to connect people to each other, from long-term, stable relationships through a functioning coalition in the Knesset, or the rather pathetic United Nations, which is meant to resolve conflicts between its members.

But the ultimate challenge does not begin with intimate relationships. It begins with the individual person. Each person is made up of many particles and parts. It is difficult, perhaps even impossible, for a person to connect all the parts of his being into a single, whole, synergetic entity. The heart pulls in one direction, the head in another, and we have stopped listening to our body altogether. Most of us live with these significant splits in our lives. Most of us are not even aware of the depth of the chasms within us, nor of the prices we pay for them.

Western culture is rife with knowledge which, rather than connect, often splits things up into minute categories (medicine is a fine example of this, with specialists for each part of the body).

Bezalel knew that knowledge is not the point; the connection of all of the elements is. He is a master of the holistic approach, and knows the deep connection between the whole and the holy.

Next week the construction of the Mishkan will come to an end. There will be great suspense. Everyone knows that the final test will be whether or not God's presence will descend and fill up the Tabernacle. If there has been a mistake or even a minute inaccuracy in its assembly, the Divine presence will not enter. The Cloud that fills Ohel Mo'ed in the next parasha will be proof that Bezalel and his assistants - all of them wise of heart, understanding and knowledge - did a perfect job.

It is so baffling that the construction of the Tabernacle is described in such minute detail and that it is the only thing discussed between Moshe and God on Mount Sinai. But if we understand that the Tabernacle is a metaphor for all of Creation and for each individual - the Sages, having told us that each person in a microcosm of the entire universe - we will be able to appreciate the great wisdom that is hidden within the five parashot that deal with its construction, and of the utensils which will be used in it. This is the wisdom of connection, joining, and creating complete harmony.

There is no greater or holier wisdom than the art of connecting parts - between people, and especially within us - to create a single, organic, coherent entity. The next two weeks will be devoted to this holy art.

Should you think to yourself "I am not Bezalel, I have two left hands," you will not be absolved, because the call here is not for artists or artisans; it is most definitely for those who are wise of mind and of heart, to join Bezalel in his holy task. We can all join and connect, but we are being asked to do so by listening carefully - to notice and to honor every part of Creation. Not magnify and not reduce, just listen, observe and respect all that is around and within us: sadness, empathy, joy, pain, curiosity, disappointment... Every emotion and every breath has its own unique sound, and they are all being summoned to join in constructing a Tabernacle for God.

This is the wisdom of the heart. It is time to learn this holy art. The world is in desperate need of this wisdom.

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha