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## Today's Torah

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### Shabbat Parashat Vayakhel March 2, 2019 - 25 Adar I 5779



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### “Those Who *Can* Do, Teach”

Torah Reading: Exodus 35:1 – 38:20

Haftarah Reading: 2 Kings 12:1 - 17

This derasha is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Deborah Labovitz, but you will have to read on if you want to know why.

There is a passage in this parashah, which has a very interesting parallel with a passage in Ki Tissa, last week's reading. Both concern the appointment of Betzalel as the lead artisan in the building of the Tabernacle, and they are worded in nearly identical fashion. The main difference between them is that the earlier passage, Ex. 31:1-6 (p. 527 in *Etz Hayim*) is God's speech to Moses, and the latter passage, 35:30-35 (p. 555) makes only those changes necessary for Moses to convey God's words to the Israelites. Thus, 31:1-3 and 35:30-33 compare as follows:

31:1-5

1 The Lord spoke to Moses

2 See, I have singled out by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah.

3 I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft  
4 to make designs for work in gold, silver and copper  
5 to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of craft.

35:30-33

30 And Moses said to the Israelites: See, the Lord has singled out by name Betzalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah.

31 He has endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft;  
32 and has inspired him to make designs for work in gold, silver and copper,  
33 to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of designer's craft—

What is so important about Betzalel's role in the building of the Mishkan? In his commentary to 30:2, the medieval commentator, the Ramban, notes that the Israelites performed hard labor in Egypt; they were not trained as artisans. He also notes that Betzalel is also unique in being skilled in many crafts:

“See, I have singled out by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur”: Hashem said to Moses, “See, I have singled out by name,” and Moses said to Israel, “See, the Lord has singled out by name” (35:30). Moreover, the reason is that in Egypt the Israelites were oppressed with the work of mortar and bricks; they did not learn to work silver, gold, or bronze or gemstones, and never saw these [arts] at all. Therefore, it was wondrous that there should be found among them a wise man, great in silver, and gold, and the cutting of stone and wood, and embroidery, and weaving. For even among those who learn before wise men, one does not find an expert in all of the crafts, every one of them...

Betzalel, then, is a man gifted far beyond the usual, and his skills are of essential importance to the task of building the Mishkan.

Ramban takes up the theme of the Israelites prior lack of skills in again in this parashah also, in a comment to 35:21: “And everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit moved him came, bringing to the Lord his offering for the work of the Tent of Meeting and for all its services and for the sacral vestments.” (p. 554). He (among other commentators) notes that there are two ways in which the people who come to help build the Mishkan are described here:

1. “*kol ish asher n'sa'o libo*” -- Etz Hayim translates this as “everyone who excelled in ability,” but in fact this actually anticipates what the Ramban (and other commentators) will say. More literally, the phrase means “every person whose heart stirred them up”;
2. “*v'kol asher nadvah ruho*” -- “everyone whose spirit moved him” or perhaps “everyone whom his spirit made willing” (*nadav* having the sense of to give voluntarily – *mitnadeiv* in modern Hebrew means volunteer).

This might look like a kind of poetic parallelism, but according to several commentators, these are actually two distinct (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) groups. Those “whose hearts stirred them up” are the people who came to participate in the actual building, and those “whom the spirit made willing” were those who contributed materials for the building project.

So why are those who participated called described as ones “whose hearts stirred them up”? Because, says Ramban, what was stirred up in their hearts was the capacity to do work they had never before learned to do – and more than that, what was stirred up was their confidence that they could do the work needed:

“And everyone who heart stirred them up came”: It says this about the wise persons who do the work... and the meaning of [the phrase] “whose heart stirred them up” is to bring [the heart] near to the work, because there wasn't [anyone] among them who had learned these works from a teacher, or had performed them at all, yet each found in himself that he knew how to do so, “and his heart was lifted in the way of the Lord” (II Chron. 17:6), to come before Moses to say to him, “I will do all that the Lord says”...

Clearly, according to the Ramban, the ones “whose heart stirred them up” got their skills and confidence through an act of Divine intervention.

I want to note a complimentary possibility, however. As it turns out, the passages in 31 and 35 are not completely identical. Let us look at 31:6 and 35:34:

31:6

Moreover, I have assigned to him Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan...

35:34

and to give directions. He and Oholiab son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan...

In the opening of 35:34, Moses adds three critical words: “*u'l'horot natan b'libo.*” Etz Hayim translates as “and to give direction,” but (once again) a more literal translation would be “and has put in his heart to teach.” “*L'horot*” is, after all, from same root as the word *moreh/morah*, the common word for “teacher” – and from the same root as Torah, our most precious Teaching. What I want to suggest, then, is that equally – if not more – important to Betzalel’s talent, as an artisan was his ability to teach others. As another commentator, Ibn Ezra, remarks, not every wise person or skilled artisan is also a skilled teacher of others, (he also notes that Oholiav was Betzalel’s full partner in this ability)

And what is the result of Betzalel’s (and Oholiav’s) teaching? Over and over again in this parashah we hear about the things the people – all the people, men and women – did to help make the Mishkan. I am not the first to note, for example, that there may be no other place in the Torah (with the possible exception of the celebrations after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds) where women are such fully active participants in a communal enterprise. According to the Talmud (Shabbat, 74b and 99a), they were even so gifted in their skills that they were able to spin wool while it was still on the goats!

Here is where my mother comes into this story (no, she never learned how to spin wool while it is still on the goat). My mother was an occupational therapist. Many people do not know what occupational therapists do. In brief, OT’s (as they call themselves) use productive activities, that is, occupations, as a form of therapy for people suffering from mental or physical illnesses and disabilities; similarly, they work with their patients to help them find ways to perform productive and necessary activities in spite of their disabilities. My mother firmly believed in the importance and efficacy of OT for all patients in need and it was one of her missions in life to make OT better known and understood (among the many other things she did professionally to promote her field, she edited the book *Ordinary Miracles*, in which a number of OT’s contributed stories about successful and/or inspiring cases they were involved in). Therefore, when she went back into the workforce after my brothers and I were all in school, she did not go to work in a hospital or a rehabilitation center. What did she do instead? First, she went back to school to get her doctorate. Then, for twenty-plus years, she was the chair of the OT department at New York University. And when you asked her about that career choice, she would tell you something like this: “I could be one OT somewhere, and each year I’d help x number of patients, and that would be important and good. But here at NYU, each year I train y number of OT’s, and put them out into the workforce, and each one of them treats x patients.”

This is what is so significant about Betzalel’s ability to teach. His artistic skills were indeed amazing, and he was able to create many beautiful things. However, with the talent to teach, he insured that others would be able to create beautiful things too. The ability to share one’s skills means that more OT’s will help more patients – and more artists will produce more works of beauty – and more rabbis will serve more congregations and Hillels and community organizations, and that more scholars will produce more knowledge and train more new scholars, and so on and so on. The importance of teaching is also emphasized in *Pirke Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers: in the very first paragraph of the very first chapter, one of the things we are told is that the Men of the Great Assembly said three things, and one of them is “raise many students.” Moreover, in the book *Avot de’Rebbe Natan*, an early rabbinic commentary to Pirkei Avot, we find the following response to this advice:

The House of Shammai say, a person should only teach to one who is wise, humble, of good parentage, and wealthy.

But the House of Hillel say, one should teach every person, for there were many sinners among Israel, and they became attached to Torah, and righteous, and pious, and worthy people came from them.

May we all be blessed by God with skills that bring wisdom and beauty into the world. But more, may we additionally be blessed with ability to share our skills, and may knowledge, beauty, and worthy people come from our teaching.

Shabbat shalom.

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**Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD**, is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and former Chair of the Department of Rabbinics for the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also enjoys serving as the Ziegler School's faculty advisor for "InterSem," a dialogue program for students training for religious leadership at Jewish and Christian seminaries around the Los Angeles area. Dr. Labovitz formerly taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York. Prior to joining the faculty at AJU, Dr. Labovitz worked as the Senior Research Analyst in Judaism for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, and as the Coordinator for the Jewish Women's Research Group, a project of the Women's Studies Program at JTS. Rabbi Labovitz is also preparing a teshuva (rabbinic responsum) for consideration by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur.

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