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Moses as Prophetic Psychologist

The notorious centerpiece of Parashat Ki Tissa is the episode of the Golden Calf. The Israelites, at the base of Mount Sinai, grow impatient, imagining the worst vis-à-vis Moses's fate. They turn to his brother Aaron and demand, "Come, make us a god who will go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him" (Exod. 32:1). Aaron collects gold rings, wantonly creates a molten calf, and declares a "festival" of burnt offerings to the Lord. Upon hearing the commotion from the Israelite camp, God commands his servant to return to the people. In a fierce moment of Divine anger, God verbally disowns the Israelites, turning to Moses and calling them "your people." Indeed, God vows to destroy them. Moses, however, rises to the occasion to masterfully intercede on behalf of the people. Rhetoric wins the day as Moses declares, "Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that God delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth'" (Exod. 32:12). How may we understand and learn from this Mosaic appeal to Divine pride?

Samson Raphael Hirsch explains in Moses's voice:

According to Your own words, Pharaoh and Egypt were to learn that there is a personal, absolutely free God, who, as Lord and Master, directs the world with almighty power in justice and in love. God recognizes even the most despised and mishandled slave as God's child . . . Why then should You now wish to reverse the intended effect of Your redemption to the very opposite by the destruction of those whom You have redeemed? Instead of teaching them to know better, it would only strengthen the Egyptians in their fallacy of denying the directing power of a just and loving merciful God . . . In the ignominious fall of their previous slaves, they will see an extenuating confirmation of their own treatment of a human race, which was evidently worth no better fate. In the exodus, they would see not the liberating work of an Almighty God but the malicious work of a Providence enticing people to their ruin. (Commentary on Exodus, 614–615)

Hirsch underscores Moses sacred role as prophetic psychologist. Moses knows well he must serve as both a messenger of God and as advocate of the people. He must learn to play both sides and both roles effectively. In the absence of such juggling, he will surely fail as prophet and as leader. More than that, he has mastered the art of appealing to Divine emotion. To destroy the people now would essentially vindicate the Egyptians; it would vindicate these taskmasters, and embolden the institution of slavery. Hirsch succeeds in filling out the compelling argument employed by Moses. God, at the prodding of Moses, needs to learn patience with this newly freed people. The slave mentality will eventually give way to a mature and enlightened freedom, but it will take time. Moses learns this well as the people's earthly leader; and God, as their heavenly guide, must also take this lesson to heart. Truly, Moses's empathy of God and profound ability to be a sounding board for Divine emotion saves the day.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.

PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Dr. Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies and Provost, JTS

Arts and Crafts: Commentary on Parashat Ki Tissa

There are aspects of the Bible's account of the construction of the Tabernacle in the wilderness that seem incredible; so much so that early critical commentators tended to reject its historical accuracy out of hand. While more recent scholars, citing possible ancient and modern parallels, have taken a more cautious approach, two questions occur immediately to most readers: where did the wilderness wanderers find the precious and exotic materials required for the edifice; and who among the "mixed multitude" of ex-slaves and hangers-on would have possessed the skills necessary to assemble those materials into the Tabernacle and its accoutrements?

A conservative estimate of the material requirements would include an unspecified amount of acacia wood (what the Septuagint calls "wood that does not rot"), more than a ton of gold, more than three tons of silver, and at least two and a half tons of bronze, along with considerable quantities of dyed fabrics, animal hair, skins, hides, precious stones, oil, and spices.

Concerning the wood, acacias do grow sporadically, if not abundantly, in Sinai wadis. My fifth-grade Bible teacher claimed that prior to the Exodus, the Sinai had been a veritable forest. The depredations of the Israelites and subsequent denizens of the region, he claimed, had denuded it, leaving behind the few remaining groves. The Bible accounts for the gold and silver, and possibly for the fabric (although not the red, blue, and purple dyes), by describing them as "borrowed" or "stripped" from the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus (Exod. 12:35–36; cf. 3:22 and 11:2). The midrash offers a convenient explanation for the gemstones: "precious stones and gems would descend along with the manna" to be collected and stored away for future use (Exodus Rabbah 33:8).¹

This week's parashah answers the second question, announcing the divine appointment of the principal artisan who will carry out the grand project. God says to Moses, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have imbued him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, insight, knowledge, and all manner of craftsmanship" (Exod. 31:2–3, adapted from the Judaica Press translation).

The phenomenally gifted Bezalel is exactly the right person for the job, and he is a marvel in more ways than one, as Rabbeinu Bahya² (following Ramban) observes:

Ordinarily it would have been impossible for there to be an expert Israelite craftsman. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, consigned to hard labor, and experienced with bricks and mortar, so there hardly would have been anyone skilled in fine craftsmanship. They had neither observed it nor apprenticed in it, so no one was trained. Even someone skilled in a single craft would have forgotten it while preoccupied with the labor of bricks and mortar. How much more so one who had been perfectly skilled in all manner of craftsmanship, with precious metals, stone, wood, and textiles! It is a great wonder that there was a person perfectly “imbued . . . with wisdom, insight, and knowledge” as was found in Bezalel.

Similarly (and more pithily), Abraham Ibn Ezra observes that Bezalel and his companion Oholiab (Exod. 31:6) “were chosen because there was no one in Israel like them.”

For Ibn Ezra, singling out Bezalel “by name” indicates the honor accorded to him for his capabilities: “it would be unfitting for anyone to undertake the crafting of the Holy of Holies except for one imbued with wisdom.” For Bahya, the summoning of Bezalel by name also carries mystical significance. Bahya analyzes God’s declaration to Moses thus:

“See” this great wonder, that I summon the generations from the beginning,³ and “I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur,” to discern the secret of the Tabernacle and its vessels and to be immersed in its craftsmanship. “By name” refers literally to Bezalel’s own name, but also alludes to the Divine Name . . . This hints that BeTZALel (בצלאל) was emanated/נאצל (ne’eTZAL) by the Great Name, as is the rule for all prophets.⁴

Bahya observes that Bezalel’s creative gifts are of a particularly godly character:

The sages expounded (B. Berakhot 55a): Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which heaven and earth were created. Here it is written, “I have imbued him with the spirit of God, with wisdom (hokhmah), insight (tevunah), and knowledge (da`at),” and elsewhere it is written, “The Lord founded the earth by wisdom (hokhmah); He established the heavens by understanding (tevunah); by His knowledge (da`at) the depths burst apart, and the skies distilled dew” (Proverbs 3:19–20).

The artist who “creates” the Tabernacle—a world in microcosm—possesses the same metaphysical attributes by which God created the world (hokhmah/tevunah/da`at, according to Proverbs). God’s gracious gift of those attributes to Bezalel effectively turns the artisan into a Creator, one who is “qualified to transform inert, profane matter into a semblance of the celestial.”⁵

Note also that the metaphysical gifts alone are insufficient. Ibn Ezra observes that Exodus 31:3 augments the list of three divine attributes with the words “and all manner of craftsmanship.”⁶ He comments, “[Bezalel] exceeded all his contemporaries in knowing ‘all manner of craftsmanship,’ for there are many intellectuals who do not know a single craft; that is why Scripture says ‘and all manner of craftsmanship’ with the additional word ‘and.’” In another version of his commentary, Ibn Ezra notes that there are individuals endowed with great wisdom who are

devoid of practical skill, unlike Bezalel, whose wisdom is complemented by incomparable technical facility. Is that remark a mild criticism of unworldly intellectuals? (The polymathic and well-travelled Ibn Ezra was anything but unworldly himself.)

Even professedly nonreligious people often invoke religious language when encountering an amazing artistic gift, calling it “divine” or “inspired.” Those descriptors are natural responses to the uncanniness, the *otherworldliness* of that rare combination of imagination and technique at the heart of creative genius. How could an uneducated slave have become one of the greatest artisans the world has ever known? One might ask, similarly, how could the autodidact son of a clerk from a village in India, described as “a short uncouth figure, stout, unshaven, not over clean . . . miserably poor,” have become one of the world’s great mathematicians?⁷ Or, how could a blind African-American slave, too incapacitated for fieldwork, have turned out to be one of the most successful musicians of the 19th century?⁸

Those are all great stories—of geniuses who transcended their unpromising beginnings and achieved greatness by dint of sheer talent. The more unbelievable their stories seem—even when we know that they are true—the more reasonable it is to accept the biblical notion that such individuals must be “imbued with the spirit of God.” Meet Bezalel, whose artistic genius enabled him to build the Tabernacle and fill it with beauty and holiness. He is God’s gift to the Jewish people, and while no physical trace of the Tabernacle survives, his genius has been perpetuated in innumerable Jewish contributions to the arts from his day to ours, manifesting “wisdom, insight, knowledge, and all manner of craftsmanship.”

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1. It is difficult to explain how the Israelites could have had the flocks of animals necessary to provide skins and hides (not to mention Tabernacle sacrifices), while at the same time they complained about lack of meat and required manna for sustenance.
 2. Bahya ben Asher (Spain, ca. 1255–1340), a student of a disciple of Ramban.
 3. That is, God decides which individuals will be born in which generations. This is Bezalel’s moment.
 4. Bahya adduces additional wordplays in his commentary in order to demonstrate Bezalel’s divine affinity. On being instilled with the Divine Name, see Exodus 23:20–21 with Bahya’s commentary.
 5. William H. C. Propp. Exodus 19-40 (Anchor Bible; 2A; New York: Doubleday, 2006), 487.
 6. The JPS translation of verse 3, in contrast to the above-cited Judaica Press rendering, assimilates the final phrase (ובכל מלאכה) to the three attributes: “I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft.” That translation misses Ibn Ezra’s point.
 7. Srinivasa Ramanujan; see Robert Kanigel, *The Man Who Knew Infinity: A Life of the Genius Ramanujan* (New York: Washington Square, 1992). With thanks to my friend Mark Chodrow for the reference.
 8. Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins; see Henry Louis Gates and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *African American Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 84–86.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.