

The Sanctity of the Schoolroom

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In the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962) highlights the importance of the home for each of us: “The house, even more than the landscape, is a “psychic state,” and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy” (72). This week’s parashah speaks about building a home—a home for God. Reading the description of this process underscores for me, an educator and a scholar of the arts, the importance of aesthetics and beauty in what we study, the manner in which we study, and above all, the spaces where we study. A new wave of architects has realized that learners spend more than half their waking hours in schools and that the structures should be beautiful not only on the outside but on the inside as well. These architects have created spacious, well-lit rooms; beautifully designed corridors to facilitate movement between spaces; and used bright, cheerful mood-enhancing colors to impact attitudes towards learning and working in these spaces.

The parashah begins with three commands that God wants Moshe to convey to the Israelites. The first is a recapitulation of the command to keep the Shabbat holy: “Six days shall tasks be done and on the seventh day there shall be holiness for you, an absolute shabbat for the Lord” (Exod. 35:2). The second is to collect donations from each member of the community, “whose heart urges him, let him bring it, a donation to the Lord” (35:5). The third command, to build the Tabernacle, echoes one given earlier that was interrupted by the story of the Golden Calf and the shattering of the tablets of law. Here, with the divine order reestablished, the command emphasizes the generosity of the people and the abilities and qualities of the mission’s leaders. “And every wise-hearted man among you shall come and do all that the Lord has charged: the tabernacle and its tent and its cover and its clasps and its boards, its bolts, its posts and its

sockets” (35:10–11). In great detail, the narrative underscores the essential materials needed for the construction of the Mishkan, and two leaders nominated to spearhead the task: Bezalel and Oholiab. As I was reading the portion, I wondered about the proximity of the three commands to each other in the beginning of the portion: keep Shabbat, collaborate as a community, and build a beautiful home for God. Why do we encounter a repetition of the Shabbat commandment as well as a call for the whole community to participate in this undertaking?

Rashi suggests that the command to keep Shabbat precedes the commandment to build the Mishkan to clarify to the Israelites that the construction of the house of God does not override the Shabbat even if keeping Shabbat delays construction. I wonder if the juxtaposition of the commands also points to the sanctity of place following the command of sanctity of time. As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg proposes, Shabbat represents sacred time, while the Mishkan represents sacred space. These two phenomena are closely related. They are parallel to each other, and they play an identical role in the ecology of Judaism. Every Friday here in New York, I recall how in Israel we brought fresh flowers into the house each week before Shabbat. We strive to make Shabbat beautiful and sacred in our practice and behavior, as well as in the way we prepare for it in our dwellings and in our houses of worship.

Why the emphasis on communal participation, under the leadership of Bezalel and Oholiab? Looking at the narrative from the perspective of an educator, I would like to highlight the importance of aesthetically pleasing, well-designed space not only for worship but also for learning. The aesthetics of a learning space not only impact brain function, they also positively influence how students feel at school and cultivate

an environment that supports students' success. John Seely Brown, a scientist and innovator, posits in his book (coauthored with Douglas Thomas), *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*, that if we can design physical space, social space, and information space to enhance collaboration, the whole environment turns into a learning laboratory—one in which people will love working, and where they will start learning with and from each other. Interior design for the learning space should take students' needs into consideration in order to provide the optimal setting not just for academic achievement, but for social edification as well. The classrooms that follow the "sage on the stage" model—that is, a layout with a central platform where the teacher stands and chairs facing it—no longer work.

Additionally, let's recall the collaboration of Bezalel, Oholiab, and the people of Israel who generously donated to build the Mishkan. According to Robert Alter, God not only endowed Bezalel with the wisdom and skill to execute the required tasks and construct the Mishkan, but also allowed Bezalel to appoint Oholiab as his chosen assistant. God recognized Bezalel's ability to instruct the people of Israel, the craftsmen who will carry out the work. This biblical story introduces the idea of collaboration. A person does not need to be expert in everything and work alone. Far from it, collaboration is productive and creates a better work environment and greater prospects for success.

It is our responsibility to care for the next generation as a collective and not only as individuals; to educate them and care for them not just in houses of prayer but also in houses of learning. What would happen if we took this commandment to build beautiful structures and implemented it for schools? How would it change the face of education? Would it allow for more experiential education? Would it enhance learners' spirituality, their quest for beauty? We have a glimpse of the answer in JTS's own recent initiative to provide students with new learning spaces. These spaces were designed by esteemed architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien with a clear eye toward the aesthetic, the inclusion of private and public space, the infusion of nature and light indoors, and for the goals of

personal contemplation and artistic exploration. We as a community are fortunate to have these new spaces. This morning, as I stepped into the light court, I was pleased to see small groups of students sitting around tables with their professors learning texts. Being able to see the garden, slowly beginning to turn green and bloom, encourages all of us to look ahead to the new season and the return to our old ways of being together. Let's welcome the spring with new hope for joyful learnings in a healthy, beautiful, welcoming and safe space. Shabbat Shalom.