

## A TASTE OF TORAH

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS

### Wisdom of the Heart

In many ways, Parashat Vayak-hel repeats the instruction of previous parashiyot. Moses assembles the entire community and urges them to bring gifts. More than that, Bezalel and Ohaliav are singled out as the artisan architects that will bring the vision of the Tabernacle to realization. They are identified as individuals endowed with “Godly spirit, wisdom, insight, and knowledge” (Exod. 35:31). In addition, Torah speaks of another quality gifted to them as well as to a select group of Israelites: “wisdom of the heart.” Indeed, the notion of “heart” appears repeatedly in the instructions concerning the Tabernacle. How are we to understand the central role of the heart? What is Torah expressing in underscoring this concept?

Professor Ze’ev Falk explains,

[T]his quality is expressed in the verses that follow in connection to both Bezalel and Ohaliav: “God filled them with the wisdom of the heart” (Exodus 35:35) as well as “Let Bezalel and Ohaliav and all those wise of heart that God has endowed with wisdom and understanding in all of these things execute the sacred work of the sanctuary . . .” (Exodus 36:1–2). Similar to this is the description given of Solomon’s wisdom in I Kings 10:24 where “God places wisdom in his heart.” Perhaps there is a connection between the ability of the heart to direct the works of the Tabernacle and the Prophet Ezekiel’s vision on the teachings of the sanctuary, “Set your heart carefully to everything that I tell you regarding the laws of the Temple of the Lord and all the instructions regarding it” (Ezekiel 44:5). And there is also a connection to the Torah found in the heart: “The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom . . . The teaching of his God is in his heart . . .” (Psalms 37:30–31).” (Divrei Torah Ad Tummam, 230)

With regard to the heart, Ze’ev Falk truly enriches our understanding. Wisdom of the heart is a knowledge gifted to artisans and those who are exceptionally wise. Ezekiel’s words reinforce this notion, connecting the heart to the sacred home of God. Accordingly, the heart adds a dimension of depth and way of seeing. For artists, it allows them to see differently and bring their vision to fruition. For truly wise people, the heart allows them to sense nuances in a way that is challenging at best to the normal layperson. Ezekiel also explains that the heart must be joined to the head in the House of God. The Divine may not be experienced in two separate and distinct realms. Only by joining the heart and the head can we, as a Jewish community, create a harmonious dwelling place for God and for ourselves.

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## PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Dr. Eitan Fishbane, Associate Professor of Jewish Thought, JTS

### Preparing Ourselves to Receive Shabbat

"On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord . . ."

So begins the speech of Moses to the Israelites in Parashat Vayak-hel. But the text almost immediately shifts to discuss the intricate details of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and its construction at great length, neglecting any elaboration on the opening commandment. This move leaves the reader wondering why Shabbat was mentioned here at all! Indeed, this strange juxtaposition is remarkably similar to last week’s parashah (Ki Tissa). In that case, the Shabbat commandment is placed after remarks about the Mishkan—though there too its mention is brief and seemingly out of place.

Ever attentive to the subtleties of Scripture, the ancient Rabbis naturally were curious as to why the text made such a prominent link between these two commandments. Was the Torah seeking to teach us something implicit by setting the commandments of Shabbat and Mishkan together in the text? Given that the Bible is relatively sparing in its detail about the observance of Shabbat (in contrast to the astounding degree of extrapolation and elaboration in rabbinic law), the ancient Rabbis sought to found their reasoning for the positive and prohibitive Shabbat commandments on this intriguing, if remarkably sparse, biblical evidence.

In building the edifice of Shabbat as we know it, the Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud argued that the melakhot (labors) that are prohibited on Shabbat derive from the various melakhot that were involved in the construction of the Mishkan and in the ongoing maintenance of its sanctity. This the Rabbis accomplish by linking the use of the word melakhah in Exodus 35:2 (as the prohibited action on Shabbat) to the extensive use of the same word throughout Exodus 35 and 36. The Rabbis themselves were aware of their bold act of interpretive justification for what was to become a massive array of legal arguments about the ritual practice of Shabbat. In the words of the Mishnah in Tractate Hagigah (1:8): "The laws of Shabbat are like mountains hanging by a hair, for they are based on a small amount of Scripture (mikra mu’at) and there are a great many laws (halakhot merubot)."

This correlation between the Mishkan and Shabbat influenced generations of Jewish teachers, and I suggest that it has something profound to teach us about the spiritual life in our own day.

Abraham Joshua Heschel famously argued that with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jews replaced sacred space with sacred time. "The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals," Heschel said. And even though the holy spaces of synagogue, home, and

homeland retain their power as zones of the Divine Presence, it is the cyclical return to Shabbat—the great holy center of our weekly existence—that dominates the Jewish religious imagination and experience.

The *melakhot* are the behaviors and actions of the six days of the week; they are the ways of being in ordinary time; they must not be reenacted within the boundaries of sacred time. But just as these *melakhot* are the means by which the ideal sacred space is constructed (the Mishkan), so too are they the tools with which the holiness of time is built.

Let us pause to absorb that paradox.

On Shabbat we are instructed to refrain from all the labors that we perform during the week. We set aside our wallets and our to-do lists; we take a break from our cell phones and the frenzy of our workdays; we breathe deeply from that transformed air of rest. On Shabbat we seek to return to the simplicity of being—we step outside of the hustle of buying and striving, we come home to the peace beyond the roar of the marketplace. And yet, our lives during the six days of the week are critical to the construction of holiness—the work we do in the world is that which prepares us, as individuals and as a community, for the wonder and mystery of Shabbat.

Like the *melakhot* that built the Mishkan, the labors of ordinary time may themselves be seen as dimensions of a spiritual process, a sacred task and discipline in which the vessel of Shabbat is built in our souls again and again; the *melakhot* of the workweek are an integrated effort aimed at the *tikkun ha-kli* (fixing and completing the vessel) of Shabbat. And just as the labors of the Mishkan sought to provide a fitting dwelling place for God in this world, so too are the labors of our workweek aimed at making us (and our community) ready to receive the sublime glow of Shabbat.

All week long we go about the tasks and behaviors of ordinary time. How might we bring a new Shabbat-consciousness into that daily life? How might we understand the challenges of work and family as an ongoing process of spiritual development? In what ways do our everyday actions prepare us to come before God on Shabbat?

The Hasidic masters teach us that this vessel of holiness is to be found in our innermost hearts, the sacred place where an enduring spark of Divinity lies beneath the surface of perception. It waits there for us to ignite the devotional fire in our souls, to transform our experience of life as mundane with the flames of spiritual *hitlahavut* (the fiery love of God). When the *melakhot* of our workweek become not just burdens to be borne, but openings into spiritual discipline; when these labors of the ordinary are infused with a mindfulness of their sacred goal, then we truly prepare the vessel of our hearts to receive the influx of Shabbat and its sacred light. As R. Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin asserts, if a person prepares the self to serve as *akli mahzik ha-kedushah* (a vessel that holds holiness), that person will experience the indwelling of Divine blessing in a fundamentally different way. The life of *melakhah* thus serves as a mode of spiritual preparation and direction—all week long we must work at constructing the *kli* of our selves so that Shabbat can be received as the true gift of Presence that it is.

Seen this way, the sacred space of the Mishkan has been internalized as the chamber of Shabbat holiness contained in the human heart and soul. Such is the way that R.

Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger (the Sefat Emet) transforms the prophecy of Ezekiel regarding the future restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. This text, drawn from Ezekiel 45 and 46, is the special haftarah for this week-Shabbat ha-Hodesh. This is the Shabbat that anticipates the coming of Rosh Hodesh Nisan, the month in which we will celebrate the holiday of Passover.

Speaking about that reconstructed space, the prophet states (Ezek. 46:1): "Thus says the Lord God: The gate of the inner court (*sha'ar he-hatzer ha-penimit*) which faces east shall be closed on the six working days; it shall be opened on the Sabbath day (*u-ve-yom ha-shabbat yipateah*) and it shall be opened on the day of the new moon (*u-ve-yom ha-hodesh yipateah*)." The Sefat Emet radically reinterprets the vision of Ezekiel to be a reflection of the inner spiritual life; the Hasidic teacher asserts that this "inner court" is a reference to the innermost point of Divine Light and Presence in the human heart. The sacred space of the envisioned Temple is transferred to the inwardness of the person, and ready access to that sublime place of Divine indwelling is only opened on Shabbat and Rosh Hodesh (the first of the month).

During the six days of ordinary time, we often experience that inner courtyard of the heart as closed and difficult to penetrate; the Sanctuary of our innermost soul is obstructed by the distractions of mundane concerns, by our obsession with the superficialities of materiality, vanity, and excessive pride. It is a struggle to overcome that feeling of distance from the sacred, from the vibrant Presence of God. But it is not insurmountable, and indeed if we seek to cultivate a spiritual consciousness during ordinary time, if we engage in the process of *tikkun ha-kli* (preparing the vessel of our selves to receive the influx of sacred Shabbat energies), then we will be able to open the gates to our inner soul, to transform ourselves into sanctuaries and vessels worthy of the Divine Presence. The Mishkan and the Mikdash of old thereby become the mysterious dimensions of Divine indwelling within us—the human heart is recast as the Temple renewed.

It is in this spirit that we might reinterpret the meaning of Exodus 35:5. Immediately following the brief mention of Shabbat in verses 2 and 3 and the opening remarks about the building of the Mishkan, Moses delivers this command to the people: "Take from among you gifts to the Lord (*kehu mei-itkhem terumah*); everyone whose heart so moves him (*kol nediv libbo*)." To be sure, the literal meaning of the text exhorts the Israelites to bring heartfelt gifts to beautify the Mishkan. But let us read this verse as a kind of spiritual direction: *kehu mei-itkhem terumah*—bring forth the gift of your heart in service to God, lift the essence of your self up (*mei-itkhem*) in complete devotion. These are the gifts of self that build the Mishkan, and they are also the efforts and labors of the workweek with which we build the vessel of Shabbat. The ordinary actions that we undertake during the week—whether they be efforts to improve our community and society, or whether they be labors to sustain our families—if they are performed with a pure and loving heart, with a wholeness of heart and soul (*kol nediv libbo*), these make us ready to enter before God in holiness, to receive the *kedushah* of Shabbat.

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