

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Nediv Lev

Michael Summa, The Rabbinical School of JTS

We often think of love as something comfortable, something comforting. The truth is, it can be the exact opposite. True, unbounded love from another source can cause us to confront parts of ourselves with which we are uncomfortable: our vulnerability, our self image, our passive role as the recipient of care rather than as a caregiver.

In Exodus 35:5, Moses relates the Eternal's commandment to bring offerings to build portions of the Mishkan, directed specifically at *kol nediv libo*, all whose heart is inclined toward giving freely (this adjective is repeated several times in the chapter). It is a rare occurrence that the people listen, so obediently—but here, they do just that. They give so freely that those who were wise of heart (*hakham lev*) tell Moses that the people have brought more than enough (36:6).

But how much is too much? For a people who had such trouble with physical attachments, even desiring re-enslavement in Egypt for the sake of a variety of foods, this act of free love could have been a liberating step in the Exodus story. Moses stops the people—and they listen. The verb (*vayikale*) is almost harsh—it's the same root (.א.ל.כ) that we use in Modern Hebrew for “prison”—when perhaps we were moving toward perfection.

When love becomes overwhelming, our discomfort with our vulnerability or our rational mind (*hakham*) can cause us to run away. But the effects are potentially damaging. Once the door is closed, it may never open again.

To hear “Nediv Lev”, a musical composition by Michael Summa, about the vulnerability and rational discomfort we can experience in love—and the frustration of the soul which desires the mind to take the righteous risk of diving into that love without fear, visit learn.jtsa.edu.

learn.jtsa.edu

To receive *Torah from JTS* by email,
visit jtsa.edu/subscribe



Parashat Vayak-hel-Pekudei 5775

פרשת ויקהל-פקודי תשע"ה



The Artist's Insight

Rabbi Lilly Kaufman, Director of the Torah Fund Campaign of Women's League for Conservative Judaism, JTS

From October of last year until mid-February, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, in collaboration with Tate Modern in London, featured a comprehensive exhibition entitled *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs*. It was a reassessment of Matisse's colored paper cut-outs, which, according to the program notes, “reflect...a renewed commitment to form and color, and . . . inventiveness”. Matisse himself said, “For me, a colour is a force. My pictures are made up of four or five colours that collide with one another, and the collision gives a sense of energy.” (Sooke, *Henri Matisse: A Second Life*, pp. 97-98.)

If we could read Vayak-hel-Pekudei thinking only about the color palette of the ancient tabernacle, we would contemplate the deep, saturated colors of the purple, blue and crimson tapestry yarns; the shiny gold, brass and silver fixtures, vessels and ornaments; and pinpoints of 12 deep gem colors emanating from the high priest's breastplate; all displayed against the off-white, modest priestly linen garments; the whites, browns and grays of goat, ram, and dolphin skins; and the tactile earthiness of wood. If we had the imagination of a child or of an artist, we might notice the Matisse-like “force” of color in each brilliant bit of yarn and each gem, and the sheer visual energy of all these deep, rich colors acting in concert. We might experience awe.

The artist whom God commanded to work with color to build the sanctuary was Bezalel, whose name means “in the shadow of God”. He is described in parashat Ki Tissa as “filled with the spirit of God, with wisdom, insight and with knowledge” (Exodus 31:7). Rashi explains each type of awareness. Wisdom means what one learns from other people; insight means what one understands within his own heart from what he has learned; and knowledge refers to the *ruah hakodesh*, the holy spirit.

We tend to think of Bezalel as an obedient craftsman, rather than as an original artist. He did not originate the tabernacle design, he merely interpreted God's plan and executed it with precision. On the surface, he could not be more different from the brashly charming giant of 20th and 21st century advertising, George Lois, on whose career *Mad Men* was loosely based (a comparison which he rejects.) Lois wrote a small, hilarious and serious book, *Damn Good Advice (for people with talent!)*. It is a guide for "creative types" in the advertising business. In it he vigorously defends the creative mandate of the art director against forces in business that try to suppress what he calls The Big Idea. The flavor of his book is captured in one chapter heading, "Why just be a Creative Thinker when you can be a Cultural Provocateur!" It would be hard to think of a personality less similar to the gifted and obedient Bezalel, of the latter chapters of Exodus. But the Talmud suggests that Bezalel could stand up for himself and his work when he had to, and his artistic defiance of Moses actually defines his wisdom, according to one midrash.

The Talmud (Berakhot 55a) relates that Moses conveyed God's explicit instructions to Bezalel (in Exodus 31:7) out of order, telling Bezalel that God wanted him to fashion the holy ark, then the sacred utensils, and then the sanctuary. Bezalel answered Moses saying, "Moses our teacher, the way of the world is to first build a house and then to bring in the utensils, but you tell me to build the ark, the utensils and then the house?! Where will I put the utensils? Rather, God told you, 'the sanctuary, then the ark, and then the utensils'." Moses acknowledged, "rather You exist in the very shadow of God, and [therefore] you know [what to do]."

In Moses's version of God's instruction (a rabbinic invention), he switches oddly from medium-size objects (ark) to small (utensils) to large (sanctuary.) It would have made more sense to move from large to small, or the reverse. Bezalel relied on his general knowledge of how the world usually works in his argument. His common sense, rather than any greater mastery of Scripture, allows Bezalel to best Moses at knowing God's will.

I like to think that Bezalel's argument also hints at his spiritual artistic wisdom. Moses himself acknowledges that Bezalel is close to God, noting that his very name is *betzel El*, in the shadow of God. Is there something about the artist which outshines our greatest law-giver at this moment, according to the rabbis?

Perhaps they wished to teach us something that I learned anew at MOMA last month. A great artist, sublimely in tune with the Creator, senses a deep order and a great, joyous energy in Creation, and seeks to capture these in his own work. Bezalel knew that Moses could not be presenting God's views correctly because he was an artist in tune with God. Matisse aspired to a vibrant harmony with Creation in his bold and joyous cut-outs. He may even have aspired to a dialogue with the Creator, in his magnificent stained glass windows for la Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence. His magnificent gift to the worshippers there creates a space where I would be thrilled to pray (minus the Christian iconography). While I am biased, I believe the Women's League Seminary Synagogue at JTS, with its stunning stained glass windows, achieves something of this level of inspiration.

It is a little surprising that the midrash in Berakhot assigns scriptural accuracy to the artist Bezalel rather than to Moses. Perhaps its author was very fond of Bezalel, the meticulous craftsman, deeply acquainted with natural materials, with the artisans who shape them, and the people who bring them to God. Perhaps they sensed that Bezalel parallels their own work, which engages the many gifts—of skill, wisdom, volunteer effort, and monetary contributions—brought with love by God's people. Perhaps great art and great rabbinic thought are not so far apart after all.

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