

## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



## Artisan and Architect

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Ben Uri looked at the work of his hands and was astonished at how the ark stood firm while he himself was like an empty vessel. His soul was sad and he broke out in tears.

— S. Y. Agnon, *Agunot*

The centerpiece of this parashah is undoubtedly the elaborate and materially rich description of the Mishkan, designed and constructed by Bezalel Ben-Uri. Bezalel, in whose honor the renowned academy of arts was founded in Jerusalem in 1906, is generally viewed as an artisan—a figure of visionary imagination whose hands crafted wood, fabrics, animal skins, and all manner of fine metals, stones, and gems to create the sacred, portable site of the Tabernacle. In modern Hebrew literature, Bezalel’s aesthetic achievements have haunted the figure of the tormented artist in S. Y. Agnon’s *Agunot* (*Forsaken Wives*, 1908) and shaped the plot of Moshe Sakal’s novel *Hatsoref* (*The Diamond Setter*, 2014), which follows the postwar fate of a mysterious blue diamond as it moves from Istanbul to Damascus to Jaffa.

As we embark upon the construction of an ambitious new physical campus at 3080 Broadway, it seems right to note that Bezalel was also an architect. While we are far from putting the elegant finishing touches on the breastplate, as Bezalel does in Exodus 39:8, we have gathered to consider the figurative blueprints, discussing and imagining what JTS’s new campus will look like, and how it will continue to nurture and inspire learning and community in the 21st century and beyond.

**Note:** This commentary was first published in 2016, and we’ve come a long way since then! Please visit [21stcenturycampus.jtsa.edu/our-progress](http://21stcenturycampus.jtsa.edu/our-progress) for updates about the new campus, scheduled to open its doors this fall.



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ויקהל תשע"ט



## Bezalel and Oholiav: Models Then, Models Now

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Parashat Vayak-hel is replete with the material details of the Tabernacle and its wares. This sacred building project becomes the focus of Israelite energy in the latter part of the Book of Exodus. But more than the project itself is the quality of the people behind it. Vayak-hel pointedly and poetically reintroduces us to Bezalel and Oholiav, the master artisans responsible for the construction of the Tabernacle and its appurtenances. What makes these two individuals worthy of this sacred task?

To begin, we are first introduced to these characters in Parashat Ki Tissa: “The Lord spoke to Moses, ‘See, I have singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have endowed him with a divine spirit of wisdom, insight and knowledge in every craft . . . Moreover I have assigned to him Oholiav son of Ahisamakh.’” (Exodus 31:1-6). Rashi (French commentator, Troyes, France, 1040–1105) explains the qualifying characteristics of Bezalel remarking that “wisdom is that which a person learns from others”; “insight is that which one understands from the heart”; and “knowledge is a gift from God.” In other words, they are gifted with keen wisdom that is imparted from above them, around them, and within them. Intelligence, spirituality, and Divine inspiration are joined together in these remarkable creators. Or as we like to say in modern parlance, the Torah and Rashi have an appreciation for multiple intelligences: the intelligence of the brain (think), the intelligence of the heart (feel) and the intelligence granted by the Divine spark (transcend).

Second, Parashat Vayak-hel adds that they were endowed with the ability “to teach which was given to their heart.” Commenting on Exodus 35:34, Ibn Ezra

(Spanish exegete, Tudela, Navarre, 1089–1167) writes that “there are many wise individuals who find it challenging to impart their knowledge effectively to others. And behold, Oholiav is the assistant to Bezalel in the creative work of building the Tabernacle—and he too has the ability to impart wisdom to another.” That said, an inability to teach effectively may derive from the lack of an innate pedagogic talent, a dearth of formal training, or an unwillingness to share. Far from holding this sacred endeavor close to their chests, Torah tells us that they were given the gift of being talented pedagogues—that is to say that they transmitted their wisdom to others. Building a space for God cannot be the narrow realm of two esoteric artists. The artisans must be able to communicate and teach others to be part of this holy project. In doing so, they are quintessential teachers: precise in instruction and generous of spirit.

Finally, Rashi highlights a final important detail about this talented pair. In response to Exodus 35:34, he writes, “Oholiav is from the tribe of Dan which was one of the lowest [status] tribes [of Israel]—coming from the sons of handmaids, and yet God placed him as an equal to Bezalel in the building of the Tabernacle, and [Bezalel] is from one of the greatest tribes [i.e. Judah]. In so doing, God fulfilled the verse in Job, “God does not favor the rich more than the poor” (Job 34:19). Accordingly, Rashi is teaching us that Bezalel and Oholiav are taken from two very different social strata in Israel. As such they model inclusivity. Call it Divine affirmative action. When undertaking a project of this scope, one must be attuned to a spectrum of voices and talents that come from the rich and the poor, from students and teachers, from the affiliated and unaffiliated. Building a place of God demands totality of vision and communal embrace.

Multivalent wisdom, the ability to teach, and inclusivity make Bezalel and Oholiav the perfect choice for the construction of a space filled with God’s Presence. It is indeed an important lesson to all of us—that ultimately, the way we bring God’s Presence into our midst is through effective teaching, wisdom learned from many sources, and connecting with the broad diversity inherent in community.

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## 929 Exodus Chapter 37

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929, the number of chapters in Tanakh, is the name of a project dedicated to creating a global Jewish conversation. 929 invites Jews everywhere to read Tanakh, one chapter a day, together with a website of pluralistic interpretations from a wide range of contributors, including a JTS rabbinical student each Monday. Here is a past contribution from this week’s parashah. Visit [929.org.il](http://929.org.il) to learn more.

This chapter is one in a series that outlines the creation of the Mishkan, the Israelites’ portable shrine. Its furnishings are described in detail; the attention paid to their craftsmanship is appropriate, given their sacred purpose. Yet this acute focus also points us to a broader truth.

The Torah asserts that humankind is formed in the divine image. This bold statement is reflected in our generative potential: we have the ability to create, to make things that never existed before. Like God (or the Big Bang) we can fashion entire worlds of our own imagination—be they life-giving or destructive. The *Mishkan* was a microcosm of redemption, a place of beauty where people could stand face-to-face with the divine.

At the center of this shrine is the ark, fashioned out of acacia wood and overlaid with gold. Crowning the ark are two cherubim, angelic figures, “their wings spread . . . facing one another” (v. 9). It was from this space that God spoke to the people—and it is within this space that we are also able to encounter the transcendent. Each of us carries a unique facet of the divine image, a creative energy that only we possess. Unfortunately, we live in a world that obscures this reflection, one that emphasizes what we lack rather than what we can offer. We are taught to hide behind carefully manufactured facades, online and in person.

Yet only by standing in the presence of another person—unguarded and unedited—are we able to catch a glimpse of the divine image, because our generative potential flows from our whole selves. By asking ourselves what facet of the divine is reflected in the other, we are reminded of our own inherent dignity and inalienable worth. And like the point between the two cherubim, it is from this space of mutuality and appreciation that more holiness is brought into the world.