



## Artisan and Architect

**Dr. Barbara Mann, Chana Kekst Professor of Hebrew Literature, JTS**

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.

*This commentary was first published in 5776. Our new campus is now mostly complete and we hope you will be able to visit it soon.*



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ויקהל-פקודי תש"ף



## Those Whose Hearts Lift Them

**Rabbi Nicole Wilson-Spiro, PhD Candidate in Rabbinic Literature, JTS**

When I lived in South Philly, I fell in love with the Mummers, an annual parade and show on New Year's Day and part of the fabric of the neighborhood throughout the year. Mummers dress in elaborate costumes and "strut" down Broad Street, while playing music and handing out beaded necklaces and New Year's greetings to enthusiastic crowds. While some Mummers merely enjoy the opportunity to cavort in silly costumes in various stages of drunkenness, other Mummers clubs are intensely competitive, guarding the secret of their yearly themes with a vengeance and working throughout the year to prepare a spectacle.

Since the 17th century, when immigrants from Sweden and Finland brought with them a tradition of working-class street celebrations, Mummers celebrations have been chaotic, iconoclastic, irreverent—and sometimes vulgar and racist. The City of Philadelphia has a complicated relationship with the Mummers, at times attempting to suppress the parades unsuccessfully and at other times working to co-opt their popularity and enthusiasm to benefit the City. Racism, in the form of blackface and other unacceptable behaviors, is undeniably a stain on the history of mummery, and some small number of Mummers persist in perpetuating this shameful tradition. Accordingly, even today, some people in Philadelphia dismiss Mummers as drunken nuisances and racists.

These critiques of Mummers are valid, but they do not tell the whole story. Mummer clubs are important social organizations that help to create cohesive communities in South Philly and beyond. Sons, as well as daughters more recently, march in the same clubs as their fathers and grandfathers. They hold fundraisers for children with special needs and people who are sick in the community. Some Mummers are so devoted to their clubs that they get buried in their costumes.

In addition to building community, Mummers also create unbelievable art with sequins, feathers, paint, and musical instruments. In particular, the “Fancy Brigades” create Broadway-caliber entertainment with phenomenal costumes, dancing, and sets. The fact that the Mummers are not professional painters, dancers, or musicians makes their achievements all the more impressive. The Mummers’ passion for their art strengthens their sense of community, while in turn their commitment to community makes their art so inspiring.

Our Torah teaches us that communal passion can indeed be dangerous because it is nearly impossible to control—the Israelites’ fervor to build the golden calf nearly destroyed their community. But our Torah teaches us this week that the same passion can also yield a unique beauty that can never be achieved by one artist, no matter how talented or well-trained. Given my fascination with the Mummers, I was reminded of the beauty of communal art when I read the first part of this week’s double Torah portion, Vayak-hel.

In Vayak-hel, the Israelites cooperate to craft the Mishkan, a dwelling place for God’s presence, and simultaneously strengthen their community. As one might expect, the Mishkan was made with the finest materials: gold, silver, precious stones, and fine wool. The craftsmanship was of the highest artistic and technical standards. So it may come as a surprise that both the biblical text and later commentators emphasize that the building of the Mishkan was a communal enterprise. “Moses stated to the entire community of Israelites, ‘This is the thing God has commanded [me] to tell you’” (Exod. 35:4, per Rashi’s explanation).

Moses goes on to explain how the entire community can participate in the building of the Mishkan: everyone whose heart is inclined (“*nediv libo*”) should contribute financially, and everyone who is skilled (“*hakham lev*”) should participate in the work (35: 5 and 10, per Ramban’s explanation).

The Israelites heed Moses’s command. In fact, they bring so many donations that Moses is compelled to ask them to stop. Women are explicitly included among those who contribute both financially and artistically. Interestingly, the established leadership, the chieftains of the tribes, do not appear to contribute at all.

In addition to those groups Moses has invited to participate, another group joins in: “*kol ish asher nesa’o libo*,” literally “everyone whose heart lifts him”

(v. 21). Ramban, a 13th-century commentator, notices this new category of contributors and suggests that they are different than those who donate monetarily. Perhaps they are also different than the experts (“*hakham lev*”) Moses has invited. Ramban points out (on Exod. 31:2 in last week’s portion) that very few of the Israelites would have had the opportunity to develop as professional artisans who worked with fine metals and precious stones, since they had been slaves in Egypt confined to working with bricks and with mortar. He writes of the men and women “whose hearts lift them,” “None of them had studied these crafts from instructors, nor had they trained at all, but rather they found that they knew what to do intuitively.” In other words, they were enthusiastic amateurs.

Similarly, God chooses Betzalel and Oholiab to lead the construction of the Mishkan. A wonderful midrash explains why Moses could not lead the construction himself. Apparently, Moshe Rabbenu (“Moses our teacher”) was not particularly gifted mechanically, struggling to understand how to create the menorah for the Mishkan, even after God has explained several times and even demonstrated with a menorah of fire (Bemidbar Rabbah 16:10-11). We all have our strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps to compensate for Moses’s weakness, God endows Betzalel with a divine spirit that allows him to excel at every craft.

So why does God need to appoint Oholiab as well? Ibn Ezra, a 12th-century commentator, suggests that while Betzalel was skilled in every craft, it was hard for him, as it is for many creative geniuses, to teach others. Since Betzalel descended from Miriam and enjoyed distinguished social standing, while Oholiab was from the more modest tribe of Dan, I would add that Oholiab’s upbringing also may have made it easier for him to relate to “everyone whose heart lifts him.” Oholiab’s great contribution to the Mishkan was his ability to instruct these untrained volunteers, to channel their enthusiasm towards artistic beauty.

Perhaps Oholiab is the unsung hero of this week’s portion. Perhaps he understood that amateurs can create vibrant art together, exciting because it is the product of an outpouring of communal love. Even more, as our Torah specifies, he may have also understood that shared pursuit of beauty and joy, whether for the Mishkan or the Mummers parade, causes people “to draw near” (Exod. 36:2) to their art, to each other, and to their Creator.