

Sacred Gifts and the Holiness of Diversity

Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS



Parashat Vayak-hel demands that we notice the details, recounting with exquisite specificity the ornamentation and beautification of the Mishkan and the sacred vestments. Among all of the parshiyot detailing the construction of the Mishkan, Vayak-hel is particularly notable in lifting up the sacred contributions of women and of the artists and artisans. It also expands our vocabulary of generosity and the traits essential to creating holy spaces. Because sacred texts often omit the voices of women and favor narrative and laws over aesthetic descriptions, when the latter appears we must not skim over the details but rather challenge ourselves to wonder why this focus. Indeed, at a time of great challenge for the Jewish people and for democracy, when scarcity and suffering threaten to diminish our world, it is especially significant to encounter a text that focuses on the contributions of underrepresented and marginalized members of our communities and a culture of sacred generosity.

Our parashah characterizes the people contributing their gifts to the Mishkan using some language that has become familiar to us and some that is new.

קחו מאתכם תרומה לה' כל נדיב לבו יביאה את תרומת ה' זהב וקסף ונחשת:

Take from among you gifts to 'ה; everyone whose **heart is so moved** shall bring them—gifts for 'ה gold, silver, and copper; (Exod. 35:5)

This formulation is similar to what we encountered a few weeks ago in Parashat Teruma, introducing the idea of generosity stemming from the heart.

וְכָל־הַחֶמֶלֶב בְּכֶם יָבִאוּ וַיַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' :

And let all among you who are **skilled** come and make all that 'ה has commanded: (Exod. 35:10)

This passage introduces a new term, “חכם לב” (literally, “wise of heart”), which appears only one other time in the Torah, in Parashat Ki Tissa in a slightly different form. Most translations, including JPS and Etz Hayim, opt for “skilled.” This reading is bolstered by Ibn Ezra’s explanation that the artisans who came forward to volunteer their gifts were “בקיאים באמנותם”, “expert in their craft.” So why the use of “לב”? Is this simply for the sake of symmetry with the previous phrase?

The focus on the heart demands our attention. Pure wisdom, or reason, might build a highly functional and efficient Mishkan, but it might not be beautiful. It might not awaken the spirit or welcome the indwelling of God. The Mishkan requires not only artisans with technical skill. “Wisdom of the heart” communicates the spiritual aspect of art and artists. We can also read this as emotional intelligence, a more profound and more nuanced understanding of what, and who, is needed to create deeper holiness.

As the narrative continues, it introduces two new descriptors for those who answered the call to contribute to the Mishkan:

וַיָּבִאוּ כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׂאוֹ לְבוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר נָדְבָה רוּחוֹ אֹתוֹ הֵבִיאוּ : אֶת־תְּרוֹמַת ה' לְמִלְאֲכַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְלְכָל־עֲבֹדָתוֹ וְלַבְגְּדֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ :

And everyone who **excelled in ability** and everyone whose **spirit was moved** came, bringing to 'ה an offering for the work of the Tent of Meeting and for all its service and for the sacral vestments. (Exod. 35:21)

“נִשְׂאוֹ לְבוֹ” , which is commonly translated in terms of technical skill, “excelled in ability,” can be more literally translated as “anyone whose heart was lifted or carried.” This is reinforced by the next descriptor, נְדָבָה רוּחוֹ, whose “spirit was moved.” Ramban explains that none of the people who stepped forward to volunteer had actually been formally taught these skills. Rather their hearts were lifted—they felt in their hearts that they were drawn to this work and were inspired to excel in it.

These phrases remind us to take care to articulate the value of different kinds of wisdom and different kinds of skill—emotional intelligence, inspiration, and dedication.

As citizens engaged in our Jewish and civic communities, we need to enlist not only our minds and our technical skills, but also our hearts and our spirits to become empathic and creative teachers and leaders. Like the Mishkan, which was constructed with a myriad of materials, colors, and techniques, brought by many contributors, men and women (Exod. 35:22), we must open ourselves to recognize the gifts we bring and those we need others to bring. Being called to do sacred work takes many forms. With dedication, divine inspiration, and recognizing the holiness of all of humanity, we can rise to create tremendous beauty and meaning.