



Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei/Hachodesh 5781: I Am Not a Robot

R. Judah Kerbel ~ Queens Jewish Center

In the world of online transactions today, there is often something you have to do besides putting in your contact and/or credit card information: you might have to check a box that says “I am not a robot.” The necessity behind this function results from internet bots that can be programmed by hackers to jam and crash electronic commerce. They are bad for business and government. These bots do not create, but they are intended to destroy. So whenever we make a transaction online, we have to confirm that indeed, we are not robots, but rather real humans intending to use the product with which we are interacting.

When seeing this box pop up a few days ago, I was thinking about how this statement, “I am not a robot,” is the bumper sticker of *avodat Hashem*, of serving God.

After many detailed verses and three *parshiyot* about how the Mishkan was designed to be built, it is finally time to build it. The very first verse introduces the *parasha* well – “And [Moshe] said to them these are the things that God commanded that you should do them” ([Exodus 35:1](#)). There is a command to be followed by action, and that seems to be the essence of Parashat Vayakhel-Pekudei. Indeed, we have a repetition of God’s instructions for the Mishkan, then the people brought the materials, God talks about the individuals who are to actually build the Mishkan, and then the majority of the verses in Chapter 36-39 use the root עשה – do – they did as God commanded.

The structure for the *parasha* appears to be very simple, with one exception. I would have expected the command to transition immediately into action. Why does the Torah discuss Betzalel and those who helped with the production of the Mishnah, with the emphasis on the trait of having *chochmat lev* – a “wise heart?” Why does this section separate the command from the action? Doing, in Judaism, cannot take place without a heart.

One of the Torah’s consistent messages is that a Jew is supposed to act. A few weeks ago, in Parashat Yitro, we read that B’nei Yisrael said, “all that God commands we will do” ([Exodus](#)

19:8). In Parashat Mishpatim, we find the famous declaration of *na'aseh v'nishma*, “we will do and then we will listen (perhaps ‘understand’)” (Exodus 24:7). Since B’nei Yisrael left Egypt, however, we have seen episodes of at least a few individuals disobeying commands – they collected the *mahn* on Shabbat against God’s command and they built the Golden Calf, for example. However, in our *parasha*, when God provided the instructions for building the Mishkan, there is a repetition of action. They just did it. Towards the end of Pekudei, the Torah says that B’nei Yisrael succeeded in doing exactly what Moshe had commanded through God (Exodus 39:32).

But in our *parshiyot*, before we get to the “doing,” there is a powerful lesson about the inspiration behind the action. What qualifies Betzalel to craft the Mishkan is his “wisdom, insight, and knowledge” (Exodus 35:31). Likewise, in any arena, to follow Torah requires wisdom, insight, and knowledge. But it is not just that Betzalel had a high IQ. He was a **לִב חָכָם**. He was not only a mathematical, architectural, and artistic genius; but he brought one of the most necessary skills to his work, which was soulful passion. His spiritual success was paramount for his success in creating the spiritual meeting point between God and B’nei Yisrael.

Sometimes, when we think of what it means to follow a command, we may think of robots that merely mimic the desired action. However, the life of an *eved Hashem* is much more than that. We are not robots who happen to utter the words of Shema, put on *tefillin*, and tell the story of the exodus from Egypt on the night of Pesach. Even if there is a mechanical action involved in each of these *mitzvot*, each *mitzvah* is enhanced by what Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik referred to as **קיום שבלב** - the fulfillment of the heart. Our lives as Jews are about action, but that action stems from our personal emotions and investments in the *mitzvah*. Today, when we speak of intelligence, we do not speak about just a “general intelligence,” implying one kind of intelligence; we speak of multiple intelligences, reaching many different areas of talent. That is because each person brings a unique wisdom and talent to the realm of Judaism and to the Jewish community. Each person performing a *mitzvah* comes with their own experience and touch. We are also aware in the contemporary era of emotional intelligence. Bringing awareness to the manner in which we perform *mitzvot* by definition means we are in touch with our emotional relationship with God in that moment, which only serves to enhance the wisdom with which a *mitzvah* is performed. We need the **לִב חָכָם**.

But the חכמת לב, wisdom of the heart, still requires חכמה. Why is it that Judaism puts so much emphasis on learning Torah? That תלמוד תורה כנגד כולם, studying Torah is equivalent to performing all of the mitzvot? The answer lies in the dispute between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon (Kiddushin 40b). They argued about whether learning, תלמוד, or deed, מעשה, is greater? Rabbi Tarfon thought that deed is greater. But Rabbi Akiva says learning is greater *because it leads to action*. Usually, in reading this discussion, I think of the fact that by knowing the relevant *halachot*, one can perform *mitzvot* properly. But it is more than that. Even if we know the basic actions to perform, there is a deeper learning that must take place. One can learn the “kitzur,” basic need-to-know how to do a *mitzvah*. And then there is the in-depth learning, where you explore the topic in its rich complexity that gives one a much more profound understanding of God’s will. It is this type of learning that elevates the spiritual experience.

This is an important insight as we read Parashat Hachodesh and enter the month of Nissan, leading up to the celebration of Pesach. It is on this holiday that we celebrate education. The central *mitzvah* that we spend the most time performing is והגדת לבנך, and you shall explain to your son. Yet the *halacha* is that we do not just tell the story to children, but we also tell the story to each other and ourselves. We are all “children” on the night of Passover because we need to constantly educate ourselves. With that said, the goal is not just knowledge of itself; instead, it is to reach a state of לראות את עצמו כאילו יצא ממצרים, to see ourselves as if we left Egypt. This *mitzvah* is not an action but an awareness. In order to achieve this mindset, we need חכמת לב. A robot cannot fulfill this *mitzvah*. A robot may have the information, but a human being learns the story in an emotional fashion that leads to a powerfully subjective experience.

If the *mishkan* were to be built today, in 5781 - or God-willing soon when the Beit Ha-Mikdash will be rebuilt - will we hire robots to perform this task? God forbid. A structure can be built by a robot, but God’s sanctuary needs to be built by the חכם לב. While we may not all be a Betzalel, each one of us can aspire to be a חכם לב in the way we carry out God’s commandments.