

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Vayakhel

Betzalel's Wisdom

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רְאוּ קָרָא ה' בְּשֵׁם בְּצֻלָּאֵל בֶּן אֹרִי בֶן חוּר לְמִטֵּה יְהוּדָה

Moshe said to Bnei Yisrael, "See, Hashem has appointed by name, Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur, of the tribe of Yehudah" (35:30)

A Standard – and Unusual – Introduction

With these words, Moshe introduces the individual charged with overseeing the construction of the *Mishkan* and its vessels as well as the manufacture of the bigdei kehuna – the priestly garments.

It is interesting to examine this *pasuk* and consider whether there is anything unusual about the way Betzalel is introduced.

On the one hand, it is common for the Torah to mention which tribe a person comes from. What is uncommon, however, is for the Torah to mention the person's father and grandfather – normally the father alone suffices.

In this instance, the Meshech Chochmah explains that the mention both of the grandfather and the tribe are significant and, indeed, they both represent the same idea.

The Roots of Wisdom

After introducing Betzalel, the following *pasuk* relates that Hashem filled him with “חכמה – תבונה ודעת – wisdom, understanding and knowledge,” all assets that he would need for

the items he needed to make. We may ask, from where did Betzalel merit this level of wisdom and understanding? The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, lies in his roots, for Betzalel's wisdom derived from an attribute which was embodied both by his tribe in general and one of his forbears in particular.

The tribe from which Betzalel came was Yehudah. Chazal¹ relate that when Bnei Yisrael stood at the banks of the *Yam Suf* and saw that they were being pursued by the Egyptians, it was representatives of the tribe of Yehudah who risked their lives and entered the sea even before it had split, thereby sanctifying Hashem's name.

This same attribute of *mesirus nefesh* was exhibited much later on by a scion of the tribe of Yehudah, namely, Chur – Betzalel's grandfather. The Gemara² recounts that when the people were constructing the Golden Calf, Chur publicly opposed them and was killed as a result.

The quality of *mesirus nefesh* demands – among other things – a suspension of one's faculty of *daas*. If one were to employ one's *daas*, it is possible to rationalize avoiding offering one's life in almost any situation. Indeed, most telling in this regard is the observation of R' Yosef Yaavetz,³ known as the Chassid Yaavetz, who states that in the times of the Inquisition, it was generally the unlearned Jews who remained steadfast in their faith, even to the point of sacrificing their lives, while it was the more scholarly and philosophically inclined who were prepared to rationalize and justify an abdication of their religious beliefs under pressure.

This, then, is the background to Betzalel's extraordinary wisdom. It derives from the Divine system of *midah keneged midah* – measure for measure. The tribe of Yehudah generally and Chur specifically were prepared to suspend their faculty of *daas* in order to offer their lives *al kiddush Hashem*. In response, the Source of all wisdom rewarded the heir of such sacrifice – Betzalel, with an abundance of *daas* such as would allow him to build the *Mishkan* through a profound understanding of the cosmic significance of each of its component parts.

Betzalel and the Aron

Indeed, bearing in mind Betzalel's unique background, the Meshech Chochmah explains what appears to be an anomaly in the *pesukim* describing the construction of the *Mishkan* and its vessels.

Having introduced Betzalel in our *pasuk*, the Torah proceeds to describe him constructing – or overseeing the construction of – the various aspects of the *Mishkan* with the word “וַעֲשֶׂה” – he made,” with the word “he” referring to Betzalel. This is true in almost all case, with one exception. With regards to the construction of the *Aron*, the *pasuk* states⁴

1 *Tosefta Berachos* 4:16.

2 *Sanhedrin* 7a, quoted in *Rashi* to *Shemos* 32:5.

3 In his work *Ohr HaChaim*, chap. 5.

4 37:1.

Betzalel made the Aron

Why is the Torah prepared to refer to Betzalel with the pronoun “he” with regards to every aspect of the *Mishkan* and its vessels except for the *Aron*?

The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, is that whereas with regards to the other parts of the *Mishkan* it is sufficient for Betzalel to be involved generally in a supervisory capacity, when it came to the *Aron*, Hashem insisted the he be involved personally. The reason for this is that the *Aron* contains an element which only Betzalel could be relied upon to approach with absolute integrity.

The Gemara⁵ informs us that the *Keruvim* which were on top of the *Aron* functioned as an indicator as to whether or not Bnei Yisrael were fulfilling Hashem’s will properly. If the nation was acting as they should, the *Keruvim* faced one another; while if the people were not acting as Hashem desired of them, the *Keruvim* faced away from each other.

The benefit of this indicator is that it provided direct and compelling evidence of Bnei Yisrael’s spiritual state. The potential danger, however, is that with such a visual response on the part of the *Keruvim*, the People could come to ascribe to them independent judgment – as well as other attributes. As we have seen,⁶ part of what was behind the making of the *Egel* was the people’s propensity to ascribing independent qualities and power to physical objects. Without clarity of vision and correct perspective, the fashioning of the *Keruvim* could potentially bear the very same risk!

There was, however, one individual who could be relied upon to fashion the *Keruvim* with purity of intent and clarity of vision, and that was Betzalel. Being descended from Chur, the very person who stood up to those who sought to make the *Egel*, and sacrificed his life in the process,⁷ Betzalel would surely have none of the tendencies which led to the *Egel*.⁸ Hence, while he may have been involved in most other parts of the *Mishkan* generally, the Torah insists that when it comes to the *Aron*, Betzalel construct it personally. That is why the *pasuk* mentions his name explicitly in connection with making the *Aron*.

Indeed, in this regard, the Meshech Chochmah points out that whereas prior to the *Chet ha’Egel*, Betzalel s introduced as someone who is qualified “לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכָל מְלָאכָה” – to perform all

5 *Bava Basra* 99b.

6 See essay on *Parshas Ki Sisa*.

7 *Sanhedrin* 7a, quoted in *Rashi* to *Shemos* 32:5.

8 The Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 64a) relates that when the Jewish People returned under Ezra to rebuild the Beis Hamikdash, the *Anshei Knesses Hagedolah* prayed that the inclination towards *avodah zarah* be removed, whereupon fire in the form of a lion-cub emerged from the *Kodesh Hakodashim*. The Meshech Chochmah suggests that with these words Chazal are indicating that the potential for *avodah zarah* existed within the *Kodesh Hakodashim* as well, with relation to the *Keruvim*. Hence, when the inclination towards *avodah zarah* was removed, it exited the *Kodesh Hakodashim* as well. [Perhaps we may add that since Betzalel personally undertook the construction of the *Keruvim*, his purity of thought ensured that they would never become the actual object of *avodah zarah*. Hence, the fire representing the inclination toward *avodah zarah* which emerged from the *Kodesh Hakodashim* had the form, not of a full-grown lion, but of an [undeveloped] lion-cub.

manner of labor,”⁹ in our *Parsha* he is referred to as one who is qualified “לְעֹשֹׂת בְּכָל מְלָאכָתָּהּ – מִחֲשָׁבָה – to perform all manner of thought-out labor.”¹⁰ The added element of correct “thought” within the construction of the *Mishkan* became an essential requirement in light of the potential pitfalls that were revealed at the time of the *Egel*.

Thus, Betzalel, grandson of Chur who sacrificed his life while opposing the making of the *Egel*, was the one whose God-given wisdom led Bnei Yisrael in their recovery from that episode and whose efforts were rewarded in the *Shechinah* once again residing among the Jewish People – to which the *Mishkan* was living testimony. 📖

9 *Shemos* 31:5.

10 *Ibid.* 35:33.