

Artistic Talents as Divine Gifts

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Parashat Ki Tisa

The miracle inherent in the fabrication of the Tabernacle and the clothing of the Priests:

The latter portion of the book of Shemot is almost entirely devoted to aspects of the construction of the Tabernacle as well as the fabrication of the clothing of the priests who are to enact the Divine Service within it. RaMBaN on 31:2 lists three compelling reasons why the ability of the people in general, and that of Betzalel, the orchestrator of the entire project, in particular, to be able to manufacture the various articles mandated by God, should be considered as nothing short of miraculous:

- a) The occupations of the Jews in Egypt exclusively involved heavy manual labor.¹ Yet the skills needed for constructing the Tabernacle and the priestly garments involved high levels of skilled artisanship, including delicate carpentry,² casting, sculpting, and constructing various implements out of both precious³ and ordinary metals,⁴ preparing and incorporating various jewels into articles of clothing,⁵ weaving patterned cloth from wool, cotton and linen,⁶ dyeing these cloths various colors,⁷ and working with furs and leather.⁸ Where and when did anyone among the Jewish people have the opportunity to learn and perfect these various skills, given that they had been enslaved for 210 years⁹ before being redeemed?
- b) Furthermore, 31:4, 5; 35:31-33 do not allow us to assume that different individuals served as the master craftspeople for each of these areas of skill. The Tora insists that at least Betzalel, if not also Ohaliav, was astute in ALL of the plastic arts required to transform the Mishkan from a Divine

¹ (1:11) the Jews were commandeered to build the storage cities of Pitom and Ramses; (1:13, 14) they were commanded to perform backbreaking work that included making mortar and bricks, as well as working in the fields; (5:7) Pharaoh makes the tasks assigned to the Jewish slaves even more daunting by demanding that they additionally gather their own raw materials for their brickwork, without decreasing the amount of overall work accomplished.

² E.g., 25:10, 13.

³ E.g., 25:11-13, 17-20.

⁴ E.g., 26:1, 11; 27:2, 3.

⁵ E.g., 28:9, 17-20.

⁶ E.g., 28:6.

⁷ E.g., 26:31.

⁸ E.g., 26:7, 14.

⁹ See RaShI on Beraishit 42:2.

Command into a material reality. How could a single individual be such an extraordinary “Renaissance man”? Betzalel seems to have had neither predecessor, nor anyone after him who has replicated such a collection of talents.

- c) The commentator adds that even were we to assume that these skills had been known to the Jews prior to their enslavement by the Egyptians, once people engage in the type of manual labor described in the Tora as being assigned to the Jews, hands ordinarily thicken to the point where the requisite dexterity necessary to execute these fine motor skills disappears, and the work becomes impossible to be carried out. So who were the individuals that in the end fabricated the various parts of the Mishkan according to the guidelines set out by Betzalel and Ohaliav?

The artisans came from all of the tribes.

According to the Rabbinic tradition that the tribe of Levi was not required by the Egyptians to work throughout the Jewish servitude,¹⁰ in deference to their priestly and scholarly status, it might have been understandable if the artisans for the Tabernacle came exclusively from the Levites. However, the Tora specifically states that Betzalel derives from the tribe of Yehuda (31:2; 35:30; 38:22), Ohaliav, his assistant comes from Dan (31:6; 38:23), and everyone else engaging in making the various implements and clothing are not designated as belonging to any specific tribe (31:6; 35:10; 36:1,2,4,8), suggesting that they at least could have come from any and all of them.

The artisans were not gender-specific.

Another possibility to attempt to account for at least RaMBaN’s questions a) and c), would be to posit that Jewish women, who most likely were excused from the brutal physical labor expected of the men,¹¹ became, by default, the artisans of the Tabernacle. But when we note that women are specifically mentioned as the weavers and furriers (35:25-26), it would seem to imply that those who worked with wood, metal, and jewels were men.

The artisans were drawn from the Jewish people rather than the Eiruv Rav.

A final possibility might be that the artisans originated from the “Eiruv Rav” (the mixed multitude) who accompanied the Jews out of Egypt.¹² While on the one hand, we see that at least some of them were capable of working with gold when it came to manufacturing the infamous Golden Calf,¹³ and that Shlomo certainly

¹⁰ See Shemot Rabba 5:20; RaShI and RaMBaN on Shemot 5:4.

¹¹ According to Shemot Rabba 1:12, the women were tasked to take water and food to the men working in the fields.

¹² Shemot 12:38; BaMidbar 11:4.

¹³ Melachim I 7:13-14. Did Chiram, the individual who was Betzalel’s counterpart in the building of the First Temple, have two Jewish parents? The description of his

relied on non-Jews in order to construct the Beit HaMikdash,¹⁴ wouldn't one have expected the Biblical text to be more forthright in noting such a reality, rather than shrouding the issue in ambiguity? Can and should a distinction be drawn between the Jewishness of the individuals required for fabricating the Mishkan, as opposed to the Temple? But it must be noted that in this regard, as opposed to the hypotheses concerning whether those working on the Tabernacle were Levites or women, the involvement of members of the Eiruv Rav is not something that can be obviously refuted using Biblical references.

The biblical text attributes to the artisans a type of "Ruach HaKodesh".

A manner in which the RaMBaN's queries can be directly addressed from a "Peshat" (literal rather than homiletical) approach, becomes apparent when we pay careful attention to the Tora's oft-repeated assertion that the individuals who built the Mishkan were literally Divinely endowed with "Ruach Elokim" (the Spirit of God), (31:3; 35:31) and/or "Chachma" (wisdom) or alternatively "Chachmat Lev" (wisdom of the heart) (28:3; 31:6; 35:26, 35; 36:1,2). Consequently, the manufacture of the Mishkan and the priestly garments can be attributed to a partnership between God and humanity not only in terms of man fulfilling a series of Divine Commandments, but God enabling individuals to be able to physically perform the actions that such artisanship requires, which otherwise, under normal circumstances they would be incapable. The talents of these people could be understood as a particular form of prophecy—R. Adin Steinsaltz¹⁵ has suggested that Shimshon's feats of strength were a form of physical prophecy—Shimshon's actions certainly speaking as loudly if not louder than the words of many others, including legitimate prophets—and therefore the fashioners of the Mishkan would qualify as "artistic prophets."

Viewing artists as "possessed".

Artistic activity on the part of humanity has always been cause for wonder and speculation. The ability to create as well as carry out and perform works of classical beauty in the realms of art, music, dance, literature, and design have fascinated thinkers throughout history. What allows particular individuals to stand head and shoulders above others who have striven to produce similar works of beauty? Can such talents that appear to be manifestations of a certain genius, be understood to nevertheless be entirely a function of a mortal sensibility and ability? Is there anything supernatural, theologically significant about these aspects of ostensibly human endeavor and accomplishment?

father is open to question. 5:15 implies that the other workers on the project were most probably not Jewish.

¹⁴ RaShI on Shemot 32:4.

¹⁵ Biblical Images: Men and Women of the Book, Basic Books, New York, 1984, pp. 111-12.

Such a question is particularly striking when one recognizes that the arts have not only been harnessed for ethereal, spiritually inspiring endeavors. They have also been used to create repulsive, immoral, shocking contributions to culture and civilization. If “Ruach Elokim” and Divine “Chachma” are the means by which the Mishkan was constructed, what is to be said for the talents that allow human beings to produce art that is idolatrous, licentiousness, and deeply offensive? The first reference to music in the Tora is the innovation of Yuval ben Lamech, who is described as (Beraishit 4:21) “the father of all that handle the lyre and the flute,” and whom RaShI immediately accuses of applying his artistic talents to idolatry. Is the ability to produce art therefore an inherently neutral human quality, much as is intelligence, strength, courage, diligence, etc., and it is a function of free choice when one decides to create something holy or profane, or does the artistic endeavor, at least from time to time, benefit from a unique “Siyata D’Shmaya” (Assistance from Heaven), as apparently it does in the case of the Tabernacle, where the product of the art transcends normal artistic activity, and even the fabricator/artisan is transformed, at least temporarily,¹⁶ into a type of “Keli B’Yad HaShem” (an instrument in the Hand of God)?¹⁷

Human abilities of all types as Divine Endowment.

While the “intelligences”¹⁸ of Shlomo and Betzalel are clearly extraordinary, Jewish liturgy calls upon us to recognize that all talents and abilities that we have, be they intellectual, artistic, organizational, culinary, etc., should be attributed to

¹⁶ It is interesting to consider why these talented people disappear—at least we are not told about them in the biblical text—once the Mishkan is completed. Did God Remove His Divine Inspiration from these individuals so that they no longer were capable of making additional creative contributions to the Jewish people? Ironically, Chur, Bezalel’s father, also disappears from view, after being listed as someone comparable to Aharon—see 17:10 and 24:14, as well as Sanhedrin 7a.

¹⁷ In the same manner that God uses Pharaoh, Sancheirev, and Nevuchadnezar to further His Grand Plan for humanity in general and the Jewish people in particular, could the same be said about artisans like Betzalel and Chiram? And when HaShem specifically Endows Shlomo with Chachma—see Melachim I 2:12; 5:9—to what extent does the king retain his free choice as opposed to thinking that those choices were taken away, or at least somewhat modified, by his supernatural gift? Why don’t we view the three books traditionally attributed to Shlomo, Shir HaShirim, Mishlei and Kohelet, as Divine Artistic creations rather than controversial works, two out of three of which were almost excluded from the biblical canon?

¹⁸ Howard Gardner has developed an approach to education that posits that multiple intelligences can be detected among various people. These intelligences include: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. (See Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice, Basic Books, New York, 1993). Consequently, the kind of intelligence that Shlomo may have had would be fundamentally different from that of Betzalel. But it is a difference in kind, not in degree.

God, rather than to ourselves. In the first blessing of the middle portion of the weekday Silent Devotion, when we request that God enhance our intellectual capacities, we recite, “You (God) Have Graced man with knowledge and Have Taught the human being understanding. Please Continue to Grace us from Yourself with knowledge, understanding and intellectual ability. Blessed are You, Who Graces with knowledge.”¹⁹ In this sense, it would appear that Betzalel possessed a better perspective regarding the origins of his abilities, than did Shlomo. Whereas Shlomo is criticized by the Rabbis for circumventing Tora commandments due to his sense that someone of his intelligence could decide when a particular Mitzva applies or doesn’t apply—see Sanhedrin 21b—Betzalel’s very name connotes “one who is in the shadow of God,” which according to Berachot 55a indicated that he anticipated God’s Will in the matters of the Mishkan even before being informed of It. And rather than therefore trying to supersede the Divine Directives, as Shlomo did, Betzalel felt fulfilled by deliberately and accurately carrying out the Commandments. Perhaps this is why we no longer hear of Betzalel once his tasks were completed. He did not overreach his potentials and abilities, but rather stayed within the realms for which he had been specially fortified, enabled, and particularly well-suited. In Avot 4:1, Ben Zoma comments that the truly happy individual is the person who is “Sameach BeChelko”, who is happy with his/her lot. It is worthy to

¹⁹The same idea is manifest in the blessings recited upon encountering brilliant Jews and non-Jews:

Blessing upon seeing a Tora scholar:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has Shared of His Wisdom with those who revere Him.

Blessing upon seeing an outstanding secular scholar:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has Given of His Wisdom to flesh and blood.

One wonders why upon encountering genius in other areas, e.g., culinary accomplishment, the arts, athletics, etc. comparable blessings are not required. If Tora scholars were the only group that qualified for such a religious response, it would be understandable that our amazement is limited to those whose extraordinary abilities are devoted to pursuing an understanding of God’s Revelation and the tradition that is based upon it. But once this is expanded to non-Tora pursuits, why should cognitive human excellence be the only area in which we acknowledge God’s Influence? Someone who acknowledged this type of Divine Excellence in man, although without necessarily reciting a blessing was R. Kook:

When I lived in London, I would visit the National Gallery, and the paintings that I loved the most were those of Rembrandt. In my opinion, Rembrandt was a saint. When I first saw Rembrandt’s paintings, they reminded me of the rabbinic statement about the creation of light. When G-d created the light, it was so strong and luminous that it was possible to see from one end of the world to the other. And G-d feared that the wicked would make use of it. What did He do? He secreted it for the righteous in the world to come. But from time to time, there are great men whom G-d blesses with a vision of the hidden light. I believe Rembrandt was one of them, and the light of his paintings is that light which G-d created on Genesis day.-- **Interview, Jewish Chronicle, 9 September 1935**
<http://www.orot.com/art.html>

note that this may not only apply to one's material possessions, but to one's abilities and talents as well, and Betzalel may have been a case in point.

How should one approach a particular talent with which one discovers that s/he is endowed?

Finally, one wonders what one's responsibilities are once one discovers that he possesses some sort of extraordinary talent, if we were to regard that talent as truly "God-Given". Is it one's responsibility to develop that talent even if he does not want to—perhaps he is not prepared to put in the time and effort particularly if there are other pursuits in which he has greater interest and a sense of fulfillment—since this would otherwise constitute "Bal Tashchit" (the Tora value not to let one's possessions go to waste)—see e.g., Shabbat 140b. Just as a prophet is not supposed to suppress his prophecy,²⁰ if artistic talent is just a different form of prophecy, then is it appropriate to suppress or at least not develop it? What do you think?

²⁰ See Sanhedrin 89a. Yona is the example cited by the Gemora of such a prophet.