



Being in the Shadow of God

R. Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

Parashat VaYakhel-Pekudei 5786

The Torah portions of VaYakhel and Pekudei describe the practical implementation of the construction plans for the tabernacle (*mishkan*), originally detailed in Terumah and Tetzaveh.

These chapters describe the making of the *mishkan*—its curtains, planks, coverings, and courtyard—as well as the crafting of its vessels, such as the ark, table, *menorah*, altars, and laver. They also detail the priestly garments: the ephod, breastplate, robe, tunic, and more. The narrative provides an accounting of the materials used and culminates in the physical assembly of the *mishkan*. This process reaches its peak with the coming of the Shekhinah (the Divine Presence) and the description of the cloud of God: “Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of God filled the *mishkan*.... For the cloud of God was over the *mishkan* by day... in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys” (Exodus 40:34,38).

Earlier, in Parashat Ki Tissa, the individual charged with this actualization is introduced: Betzalel. The text states: “See, I have called by name Betzalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Yehudah” (31:2). Betzalel, whose name means “in the shadow of God,” is described as someone whom God has filled with unique capabilities: “God has filled him with the spirit of



God, with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, and with every craft... to perform every masterful design. And God has given him the ability to teach, both him and Oholiav son of Ahisamakh... He has filled them with wisdom of heart” (35:30-35).

Throughout VaYakhel and Pekudei, the text repeatedly emphasizes the link between the divine command and the practical execution: “And Betzalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Yehudah, did all that God commanded Moshe” (38:22). This is followed immediately by: “According to all that God had commanded Moshe, so the Children of Israel had done all the work. Moshe saw all the work, and behold, they had done it; as God had commanded, so they had done, and Moshe blessed them” (39:42-43).

Ostensibly, the process is straightforward: God commands, Moshe transmits, and Betzalel oversees the implementation exactly “as God commanded.” However, a *midrash* in the Talmud Yerushalmi reads a different nuance into these verses:

תלמוד ירושלמי פאה א:א (טו, ב)

רבי תנחומא בשם רב הונא ובצלאל בן אורי בן חור למטה יהודה עשה את כל אשר צוה אותו משה אין קתיב כאן אלא אשר צוה ה' את משה אפילו דברים שלא שמע מפיו רבו הסקימה דעתו כמה שנאמר למשה מסיני.

Talmud Yerushalmi Pe'ah 1:1 (15b)

R. Tanhuma in the name of Rav Huna said: It does not say, “And Betzalel son of Uri son of Hur of the tribe of Yehudah did all that Moshe commanded him,” but rather, “that God commanded Moshe” (Exodus 38:22)—even regarding things he did not hear directly from the mouth of his teacher (i.e., Moshe), his own mind (*da'ato*) agreed with what was said to Moshe at Sinai.

The *midrash* questions the phrasing of the verse: Since Moshe was the one who gave Betzalel his instructions, why does the verse skip over Moshe and link Betzalel directly to God's original command? The *midrash* suggests there was a gap between what Betzalel heard from Moshe and what he actually produced. Betzalel did not merely follow a dictated blueprint; he also made "things he did not hear directly." Betzalel was a creative partner, who invested his own logic, intuition, and sense of order into the work—and, ultimately, there is agreement.

The expression "his mind agreed" recalls another *midrash* about Moshe himself: "Three things Moshe did from his own mind (*mi-da'ato*), and his own mind (*da'ato*) agreed to the Mind of God" (Yevamot 62b). There, too, acts done "from the mind" of Moshe are defined as agreed upon. The expression "his own mind (*da'ato*) agreed" can be understood in two different and opposite ways. As Prof. Shalom Rosenberg describes:

In one meaning, "the Holy blessed One agrees with them." Agreement here means an agreement after the fact, an act of will that accepts the will of another: "I cry to God Most High, to God who fulfills for me" (Psalm 57:3); or in the language of the *midrash*: "Blessed be the name of the Holy One, for the creatures decree and He agrees, as it is said (2 Samuel 23:3): 'The righteous rules by the fear of God'" (Shemot Rabbah 15:20).... The second meaning is opposite in its direction. The person—"his mind agreed with the Mind of God," a "Mind" that was not known to him. The expression "his mind agreed" represents here the identity of minds, even though there was no prior guidance or foreknowledge.... The correct intuition of the sage leads him to discover the halakhic truth, the action desired by heaven.¹

It seems there is a pattern here of independence of thought and, at the same time, an encounter between the human mind and the divine Mind: agreement. Here in VaYakhel-Pekudei that same language is used regarding Betzalel: a figure who has independent thought that leads to agreement. The *mishkan*—which in Parashat Terumah appeared as a closed

¹ Shalom Rosenberg, *Lo ba-Shamayim Hi: Torah she-be-Al Peh—Masoret ve-Hiddush* (1997), pp. 18-20.



blueprint²—is revealed as a space where a person who acts from their own mind (*mi-da'ato*) meets the Mind of the Holy blessed One.

In fact, as Rosenberg emphasizes, the expression harbors two meanings and two opposite movements: one describes the person conducting themselves in their world and receiving the agreement of God for their actions and thoughts, while the other describes the person conducting themselves in their world and arriving at the Mind of God. Both lead to a reality of agreement, and more than that: independent human thinking is capable of uncovering dimensions of the divine Mind, or alternatively, constituting a model for independent human thinking that receives, after the fact, a divine seal. The divine Mind and the human mind meet; seemingly, each stems from itself and meets the other.

Let us return to the verse at the heart of the *midrash*: “And Betzalel... did all that God commanded Moshe.” The audacity of the *midrash* is to read this verse—a verse that speaks of receiving tradition, a command from God to Moshe—as a verse that introduces the possibility of a creative human mind. The homilist believes that if the Torah were interested in us understanding the work of the *mishkan* as an act of listening, obedience, and nothing more, the verse would not be phrased this way. The expression “his mind agreed” radiates mutuality regarding the work of making the *mishkan*.

The Book of Exodus ends by setting up different models for connection with the other. Against the vulnerability that sometimes exists in expressing a desire for connection, there is a model of the need for a framework to which one must be attentive and precise; the framework allows a place for encounter without diminishing the other side.³ A second model is that of mutual dependence: “the absence of one invalidates the other,” Torah and Israel,

² See my essay, “The Blueprint of Intimacy,” available here:
<https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/blueprint-intimacy>.

³ See n. 2 above.



Giver and receiver, partners who are lacking without the other.⁴ And finally, creative audacity: the courage to act with independence that is met with agreement.

And perhaps the *parashiyyot* of the *mishkan* teach that closeness to the other is formed from three conditions: precise listening to the needs of the other, recognition of my mutual dependence on the other, and the daring to be a creative partner, to bring my mind and my heart and to believe that the other's "mind will agree" and there will be a meeting.

⁴ See my essay on Parashat Tetzaveh, "Who Stays Your Hand?: On Interdependence," available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/who-stays-your-hand-interdependence>.

