

**Parshat Ki Tissa:
The Artist Who Stood in the Shadow of God
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Do you know any Modern Orthodox artists? I don't mean people who are artistically talented and dabble in artsy projects in their free time. I mean people who feel driven to produce art, whose life is devoted to their art, for whom art is an intrinsic part of their souls. I'm guessing you probably don't know very many - if any at all. They are a rare breed. In this week's parsha, we meet one of those artists: Betzalel the son of Uri the son of Hur. God singles Betzalel out to Moshe as the person who will be responsible for the building of the Tabernacle. In describing him, God tells Moshe:

*“And I have filled him with the spirit of G-d, with **wisdom, understanding, and knowledge**, and with (skill in) all work.” (Shemot 31:3)* וְאֶמְלֵא אֹתוֹ רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בְּחָכְמָה וּבְתוּבוֹנָה וּבְדַעַת וּבְכָל-מְלָאכָה: (שמות לא:ג)

Those are impressive qualities even standing on their own, but they become even more striking when we realize where else we have seen that combination of qualities. In Mishlei Chapter 3, we read:

*“The Lord founded the earth by **wisdom**, by **understanding** established the heavens. And by God's **knowledge** the depths were split and the skies dropped dew.” (3:19-20)* ה' בְּחָכְמָה יִסְד־אָרֶץ כּוֹנֵן שְׁמַיִם בְּתוּבוֹנָה: בְּדַעַתוֹ תְּהוֹמוֹת נִבְקְעוּ וּשְׁחָקִים יִרְעֹפוּ-טל: (ג:ט-כ)

The same three qualities - wisdom, understanding, and knowledge - that God has infused into Betzalel are those that God used to create the earth. The creation of the Tabernacle is the human version of the creation of the earth. Just as God created a world for humankind, so too Betzalel, a mortal human, will create a home for God.

Who was this amazing Betzalel? The Talmud (Sanhedrin 69b) tells us that he was a mere thirteen years old when God tapped him to build the Tabernacle. As if his young age were not enough, Betzalel knew what to do despite the fact that the Jews had been slaves in Egypt and had no knowledge of the kind of fine metal-, stone-, and woodwork entailed in building the Tabernacle. Clearly, his talent was innate and God-given. In fact, earlier in Shmot, in Parshat Trumah, when God gives Moshe instructions on how to build the Menorah, the midrash tells us that when Moshe struggled and could not follow God's directions, God told Moshe to go to Betzalel who immediately and effortlessly made the Menorah. Moshe was amazed and said, “How many times did the Holy One Who is Blessed show me and I struggled to make it, but you who never saw it, you make it from your thoughts! Betzalel, you were standing in the shadow of God [b'tzel e] when the Holy One Who is Blessed showed me how to make it.

[Bamidbar Rabba 15:10] Betzalel's very name reflected his deep connection to God. His creative spirit came from the standing in the shadow of God.

Betzalel was not only amazing in his own right; he came from impeccable lineage as well. The Torah tells us that he was the son of Uri, the son of Hur. Why tell us his grandfather's name as well as his father's? Rashi tells us that Hur was the son of Miriam the prophetess, sister of Moshe and Aharon. Miriam also had the spirit of God within her. The rabbis tell us that it was only through her vision, and her partnering with God that the Jewish people were saved from slavery in Egypt. Miriam prophesied that her mother would give birth to the savior of the Jewish people. Then, when Pharaoh decreed the death of all Hebrew male children, and Moses was set in the Nile in a basket, Miriam went to watch and see, as the rabbis tell us, how God would bring her prophesy to fruition. When Pharaoh's daughter saved Moshe from the river, Miriam ran to get Yocheved to be his wet nurse, allowing him to literally drink attachment to the Jewish people through his mother's milk. Miriam's ability to not only receive God's messages, but to help actualize them on earth was transmitted to her great-grandson Betzalel.

When I meet an artist whose drive to create art is a cry from his or her soul, I think of Betzalel. Just as nothing is more Godly than God's creation of the earth, so too nothing is more human than artistic creation that leads us to understand ourselves and our world on a deeper and more profound level. We have all been touched by such art, whether in the form of visual arts, performance art, or literature. Such art is transcendent - like Betzalel's creation of the Tabernacle, it can help us find a home for God here on earth.

Three years ago, Rabbi Elli Fischer wrote a column in the New York Jewish Week that argued that the high cost of Modern Orthodox life acts to discourage its members from pursuing their passion in the arts. Since hundreds of thousands of dollars of income per year is often necessary to support the Modern Orthodox lifestyle of expensive yeshiva day schools, summer camps, trips to Israel, and ultimately college, following one's passion to live as an artist can seem foolhardy at best. But, we need artists in our community. They bring God to live among us in a way no one else can. They help us see ourselves and our world through a Divine light. As Elli Fischer writes:

Modern Orthodoxy is, or ought to be, a rich and challenging lifestyle that profoundly engages a broad range of thick Jewish experiences. It has a great deal to offer the Jewish world and the broader religious world. But without a vibrant creative class, there is no communal unpacking of that experience, no collective expression or catharsis, no mirror to show the community how it looks from the outside, no legacy of the community's unique contributions.

Woe unto us if we cannot figure out how to sustain the artists in our midst. The flourishing of art allows all of us to flourish. As we think and strategize about the future of our Orthodox community, we must remember Betzalel and the nurture those whose place in the shadow of God allows us to see God's light.



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