



Sanctuaries of the Heart:
Torah Reflections on *Parashat Vayakhel* (Exodus 35:1 – 38:20)

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The pulse of *Parashat Vayakhel* carries a message about the holiness of time, the power of faith, and the importance of living from one's heart. As we read yet another call to observe Shabbat and instructions for building the portable Sanctuary in the wilderness, we may note the repetitive nature of this narrative and the frequent reappearance of particular words.

From the rhythms of our heartbeats and breathing to the replications of nature's shapes and vibrations, our world is filled with recurring sounds and images. We are surrounded, inside and out, by repetitions of one kind or another. On a personal level, the words and messages that appear, or that we cultivate, in our thoughts can direct us to different spiritual spaces. Depending on their nature, the repetition of particular words or ideas may aid, or undermine, the healing process.

The text in *Vayakhel* identifies and reiterates a character attribute possessed by those who helped construct the Sanctuary: "wise-hearted" (*hohmat lev*). The words, "wise-hearted", appear five times in the text, the word, "heart" (*lev*), appears 13 times, and the word, "wise" (*haham*), appears 11 times. Rabbi Abraham Twerski explains that the many references to wise and inspired hearts in *Vayakhel* allude to an emotional intelligence that some of the Israelites possessed.¹

Those who had this "heart" quality found themselves transformed into highly skilled craftspersons endowed with the wherewithal to make the vessels, garments and curtains for the Sanctuary. The medieval Spanish Rabbi, Nahmanides, explains that this was not because God suddenly imbued them with miraculous skills, but rather, it was because their emotional fervor, faith, and desire enabled them to tap into previously unknown reservoirs of talents that were buried within them.² Their strong desire made it possible for them to discover hidden abilities within themselves. According to Rabbi Twerski, "the Torah repeatedly refers to the 'wise-hearted' to indicate the overriding influence of emotion over the intellect. Only when one's emotions permit can one implement the powers of the intellect."³ In contemporary culture this is referred to as the power of intent and of positive thinking.

The opening lines of *Vayakhel* instruct us to observe the Sabbath. Teacher Nehama Leibowitz explains this reminder to the Israelites: that Judaism is more concerned with the holiness of *time* than it is with the holiness of physicality and *space*.⁴

When the Israelites built the golden calf they were in the midst of a faith emergency. In the wake of this great spiritual crisis they were commanded to build a dwelling for the Divine Presence. This sequence of events can guide us in constructing and in finding sanctuaries within ourselves and within others.

It is often after we “hit bottom” that we experience spiritual breakthroughs or epiphanies. Unexpected crises may lead us to discover our unknown strengths and may also enable us to see new constructs of holiness inside and outside of ourselves. *Vayakhel* teaches us about the power of faith. Layers of sanctuaries and of potential sanctuaries exist within each of us. The paths leading to these places of spiritual peace are illuminated by our heart-wisdom, and we access them through faith in the Divine and through faith in ourselves. In the words of the writer Peter Weiss, “The important thing is to pull yourself up by your own hair, to turn yourself inside out and see the whole world with fresh eyes.”⁵

The fact that Judaism assigns holiness to time before it does so to space⁶ is especially relevant when one is ill or when one is involved with *bikur holim*, visiting the sick. Those of us who are in need of healing are acutely aware of the preciousness of time. We often cherish each minute of our lives and each minute that others share with us, be it through listening, helping to make our lives easier, or just by being present. We are accustomed to measuring time in minutes, but time can also be measured in how many heartbeats or breaths of our life we choose to share with others. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why time was accorded the first reference to holiness in the Bible.

May we be blessed with wise-hearts whose beats touch the lives of others, and may we have faith in our abilities to discover, again and again, the strengths and sanctuaries that lie deep within our souls.

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¹ Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D., Twerski on Chumash, Shaar Press, New York, 2003, p. 182

² *Ibid.*, p. 183

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Shemot, Haomanim Press, Jerusalem, 1986, p. 656

⁵ Peter Weiss, from the play, The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, As Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Monsieur de Sade, written in 1963.

⁶ Leibowitz, quotation of Rabbi A.J. Heschel’s The Sabbath, its Meaning for Modern Man, op.cit. p.657. Cf. Genesis 2:3

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