**VA-YAKHEL-3**

(3rd part of triennial cycle)

*Shemot* (*Exodus*) 36:20 - 38:20

*Eitz Hayim* 556; Plaut Chumash 670; Hertz Chumash 376

Verse 1 of the third part of Parashat Va-Yakhel reads as follows (36:2):[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let, then, Bezalel and Oholiab and all the skilled persons whom the Lord has endowed with skill and ability to perform expertly all the tasks connected with the service of the sanctuary carry out all that the Lord has commanded.

The rest of the parashah goes on to detail how they met the requirements of designing and constructing a beautiful *mishkan*--Tabernacle in English. It was likely the first artistic structure that the Israelites had constructed since they escaped from Egypt. No doubt, there are lessons to be learned from that process, but I will organize my d’var on two equally important questions: First, why was Bezalel the right person to deal with the tabernacle? Second, what were the working relationships between the two leaders of construction, Bezalel and Oholiab[[2]](#footnote-2)?

**Part One:** As great a leader as he was, Moses was not the one to oversee the building of the *mishkan*. Midrash Rabbah (40:2) tells us that God instructed Moses to delegate the responsibility, but did not say to whom. Therefore, Moses asked whom he should appoint, and it is then that God identified Bezalel, who, the Midrash adds, was identified from creation specifically for this purpose. Whereas Moses and Aaron grow into their greatness, Bezalel seems to be something of an artistic superman. Indeed, he is more than that; Bezalel is a man of God, or at least that is how Rashi sees him. Bezalel is said to be endowed with a divine sprit of, "skill, ability, and knowledge"—in Hebrew: *chochmah, t’vunah, da’at.*

It is a principle of Biblical exegesis that, if the Torah uses more than one word to make a point, each word must have a distinct meaning. Different websites offer slightly varying translations of those three words.[[3]](#footnote-3) In my looser translation, C*hochmah* is what one person can learn from another; basic human knowledge. *T'vunah* is deducing new information from that which is already known. Typically it reflects the insight captured by thinking outside the box and achieving results that are new and unexpected*.* However, it is *Da'at* that truly sets a person apart. *Da'at* is the divine inspiration that elevates any task to an act of holiness. Ramban (Nachmanides) notes that Betzalel’s abilities were in themselves a miracle. During the centuries that the Israelites lived in

Egypt, they had no access to metals such as gold, silver, and copper. The fact that Betzalel knew how to work these metals was itself something of a miracle.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Numerous scholars writing about our parashah and the previous one state that Bezalel is endowed by God with a *ruakh elohim*--a "divine spirit"--that would be breathed into Bezalel by God at the time of his creation. The phrase *ruakh elohim* identifies an individual whom we might describe as "gifted," but in the Torah, it implies more than just talent. Rather the "breath of God" singles out an individual for a specific purpose. According to Google, the phrase ruakh elohim appears only five times in the Torah; and two of those times apply to Bezalel:

* *“Exodus 31:3* - Yahweh gave Ruach Elohim to Betzalel to give him wisdom and understanding on how to create the divine instruments.”
* *“Exodus 35:31* - Moses tells the people that Yahweh gave Betzalel Ruach Elohim to make artistic designs demanded by Yahweh.”

Less formally, the purpose of Bezalel’s skill, ability, and knowledge is to design and build the Mishkan, which, if you will excuse my anthropomorphism, is God's house among the Israelites.

**Part Two:** I think that is enough to show why Bezalel was the best man for the job. Let’s therefore start comparing Bezalel and Oholiab, who were, presumably, the most skilled among all the Israelites. Skilled at what? To answer that question, we have go back just before our parashah, where Moses announces their leadership (35:30).

Both Bezalel and Oholiab are cited by their father’s name and by their tribe. However, Bezalel seems to be skilled at everything, including management. In contrast, Oholiab is

restricted in the range of his skills (38:23). Oholiab is also said to be “at the side of

Bezalel” from which I infer that Oholiab may be close to Bezalel, but second in command. Other commentators assert that the two are equal in all duties. And one modern scholar who specializes in what he calls “Queering the Text suggests that Bezalel and Oholiab are a gay couple.[[5]](#footnote-5) Maybe, but the rest of the texts indicate that they were not always a happy couple. The text changes from verse to verse.

* Presumably with intention, God has started by creating a management team consisting of one person from the strongest tribe and one person from the weakest.[[6]](#footnote-6) So far, so good, but, continuing further in the text, what should we infer from the following?
* There is no problem at the start, for the text makes it clear that Moses had asked that “every skilled person whom the Lord had endowed with skill . . . to undertake the task and carry it out” and that more artisans came out than were needed (36:4-6). In short, Bezalel and Ohaliab had plenty of help, and so the text logically has a plural opening for each sentence. Most paragraphs in Chapter 36 begin with the words, “They made.”
* In contrast, Chapter 37 begins with the words “Bezalel made . . .” and from that point to the middle of chapter 38 every paragraph begins with the words “He made.” Is Ohaliab no longer part of the team?

According to a Biblical Concurrence, Bezalel’s name is mentioned ten times in the Torah, whereas Oholiab’s name, only five times. Maybe Oholiab was just shy. Maybe the strain of the work was so great that he got sick. Maybe Bezalel was jealous and

pushed him to a subordinate role. All of this is just surmise totally free of evidence--but I do have my own suggestion, which is equally free of evidence. I suggest that Ohaliab was fired for saying that he did not care what God commanded, you don’t make the cups for a lamp out of pure gold; *they are going to melt!*

Alas, the differences between Bezalel and Oholiab continue to the modern day. Israel’s famous art school is named after Bezalel, as are a dozen other sites around the

world. I looked hard for things named after Oholiab, and, apart from an Israeli firm named Oholiab-Airmac that manufactures cast iron piston compressors, and an art gallery in Australia, I found nothing at all. Poor Oholiab! I am sure that his skills and his devotion to the work on the mishkan deserve more than the lack of modern-day recognition suggests.

Shabbat shalom,

1. All translations from *Eitz Hayim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Ahaliav” in other translations. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://torah.org/torah-portion/hamaayan-5769-bereishis/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.chabad.org/library/article_>

   cdo/aid/2483944/jewish/The-Dynamic-Duo-Betzalel-and-Aholiav.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Andrew Ramer, *Queering the Text* (2021)*,* pp. 31-33, “And They Made Sacred.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.aish.com/tp/i/wbr/48924952.html [↑](#footnote-ref-6)