

Parshas Vayakhel

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1. The Value of Merit

The Torah states, "See, Hashem has proclaimed by name, **Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur, of the tribe of Yehudah. He filled him with G-dly spirit (*Ruach HaKodesh*) with wisdom (*chochmah*), insight (*binah*), and knowledge (*daas*) and with every craft...**" to oversee the building of the Mishkan. Chazal tell us that at the age of thirteen, Betzalel (whose name means *B'tzeil Kail [in the shadow of G-d]*) understood the inner workings of existence. The Gemara at the end of *Tractate Berachos* tells us that Betzalel had the special understanding as to how to conjugate letters of the Hebrew alphabet to infuse the Mishkan with the special intent of creation. Why did Betzalel deserve being endowed with the special ability to oversee the building of the Mishkan?

The Midrash tells us that Betzalel's merit to receive this special endowment can be understood with an allegory. There was a general who fought and won many battles for his king. The general lived only to increase his king's honor and glory and the king decided to reward him handsomely for his selfless loyalty and efforts. However, before he was able to bring his wishes to fruition, his dedicated general was killed in battle. The king was unable to reward and honor his general. Therefore, he sought out the general's closest relative, his grandson, and bestowed upon him the wealth and recognition that was due to his grandfather.

The Torah traces Betzalel's pedigree to Chur, his grandfather, as the verse states, "**Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur.**" Chur was the son of Miriam. The last mention of Chur is found regarding the battle with Amalek. When Moshe raised his hands (to pray to G-d), the Jewish people were victorious against Amalek and when he lowered his hands they began losing to Amalek. The Torah tells us that when Moshe tired from raising his arms, Chur and Aaron assisted him by supporting his arms. The Midrash tells us that at the time of the Golden Calf, Chur was approached to cast the idol. He vehemently opposed and he was killed. Chur's death was a *kiddush Hashem* (Sanctification of G-d's Name). Since Hashem was not able to reward Chur for his sacrifice in this world, He bestowed upon his grandchild, Betzalel, the great gift of understanding and wisdom to oversee the building of the Mishkan and infuse it with the proper intent.

The Midrash cites a verse from *Koheles*, "A good name is better than good oil." "The good name" to which Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon- author of *Koheles*) is referring is one's reputation that comes about when one takes the proper initiative. Betzalel, whose name means *B'tzeil Kail (in the shadow of G-d)*, achieved this level only because he took the initiative to actualize his potential.

Chazal are teaching us that each person has a potential that is given to him by G-d. The potential may result from the merit of one's ancestor or for some other reason. One is given the ability to actualize his potential. Betzalel was endowed with unlimited potential because of the merit of his grandfather.

Rambam states in *Hilchos Teshuvah* (The Laws of Repentance) that each Jew could be as great as Moshe Rabbeinu. Meaning, just as Moshe actualized his potential, every Jew can actualize the potential with which G-d has endowed him. Thus, his accomplishment would be no less than Moshe's.

We must all take advantage of our potential and actualize it through the study of Torah. One gains an appreciation for whom he is only through the clarity attained by Torah study. In addition to

quantitative advancements, we must also strive for qualitative improvements. It is only through our initiative that we can succeed like Betzalel.

2. The Consequences of a Hidden Agenda<![endif]>

The Torah tells us that the Princes of Israel donated the precious stones (the *avnei shoham* and *miluim*) that were used in the breastplate worn by the High Priest and the *Ephod*. When the Torah writes the word “*Niseeim* (Princes)”, regarding their participation in the building of the Mishkan, it is written in a deleted form – meaning that the *yud*, which reflects the plural, has been omitted. This indicates that the participation of the Princes in the building of the Mishkan was deficient.

Rashi cites Chazal who say that when it came to inaugurating the Mishkan, the *Niseeim* were the first to participate with their offerings and gifts. However, regarding the construction of the Mishkan, the *Niseeim* were the last to participate since they waited until the end to give the *avnei shoham* and *miluim*. They said, “Let the Jews participate in the building to the extent that they can and whatever remains unfinished we will complete.” One would think that the claim against the *Niseeim* for waiting until the very end was that they risked not participating in the mitzvah of the building of the Mishkan for the sake of their own glory.

However, the Midrash that is cited by Rashi indicates that the failing of the *Niseeim* was that they were lazy and therefore did not take the initiative to participate immediately in the building of the Mishkan. It is because of their “*atzlus- laziness*” that the Torah deletes the “*yud*” when mentioning them in order to indicate this failing. It would seem that the Midrash is contradictory. First, the Midrash tells us that the *Niseeim* waited until the end so that they should reap the glory of completing the Mishkan; simultaneously, it tells us that their failing was due to their lack of initiative.

Chazal are teaching us that a person is only motivated when he perceives the benefit of his participation in whatever it may be. It is only when one sees the special value of his involvement that one overcomes his natural state of inertia. Since the Mishkan was the dwelling location of the *Shechina* (Divine Presence), its value was unlimited. If this was the case, why did the *Niseeim* need any other reason to participate in its construction? It is only because a person is in a natural state of inertia that he needs an incentive to motivate him. If one did not possess the characteristic of “being laid back,” which causes inertia, he would have no need to create an incentive to motivate himself - such as seeking his own glory. Because the *Niseeim* were flawed with the characteristic of *atzlus*, they did not appreciate the true value of the Mishkan and needed to be motivated with false glory.

The Gemara in Tractate *Sanhedrin* tells us that the only reason the Jewish people participated in the Sin of the Golden Calf was to engage in forbidden sexual relations. Despite the fact that Satan darkened the skies and presented an image to the Jewish people of Moshe’s remains lying on his funeral bier, they would have been able to resist this deceptive ploy had they not subconsciously wanted to take part in forbidden relations. Chazal are telling us that the Jewish people were convinced that Moshe had passed away not because of their lack of faith but because of their conflict of interest. Had it not been for their subconscious desire to return to forbidden sexual relations, they would not have failed with the Golden Calf.

The reason people fail is not necessarily due to what they consciously believe. Very often, the person is not aware of a hidden agenda and this actually undermines one’s success. The cause of the *Niseeim*’s failing was not that they wanted glory; it was because they did not fully appreciate the value of participation in building the Mishkan. Thus, their motivation to overcome their laziness was their self-glory.

3. The Ability of the Jew to Give

Moshe told the Jewish people to donate articles of gold, silver, copper, fabric, dyes, etc. “according

to the generosity” of one’s heart for the building of the Mishkan. The Jewish people followed Moshe’s instructions and gave abundantly and unceasingly. In fact, their generosity and zeal to build the Mishkan reached such a level that Moshe had to issue an order to halt their participation. The Torah states, **“All the wise people came- those performing all the sacred work...and they said to Moshe, as follows, “The people are bringing more than enough for the labor of the work that Hashem has commanded to perform.” Moshe commanded that they proclaim throughout the camp saying, “Man and woman shall not do more work toward the gift for the Sanctuary!” and the people restrained from bringing.”**

Seemingly, the generosity of the Jewish people should be regarded as being praiseworthy. However, the Midrash tells us that when Rebbe Akiva would read this passage in the Torah he would be brought to tears.

The Midrash tells us that Rebbe Akiva explains the generosity of the Jewish people vis-à-vis the Mishkan with an allegory. There was a wealthy man who lived in a mansion. He hosted every rabbinic figure that visited the community as if he was royalty. There was no effort spared. His level of hospitality was unique and continued in this manner for many years. When the Pope arrived to visit the community, the wealthy man hosted him in the same way that he had hosted all the rabbinic personages. The behavior of this great philanthropist reflected that he did not value and revere the Torah per se; rather he valued and respected religious personalities. Similarly, when the Jewish people participated in the building of the Mishkan, their selfless generosity was unlimited. However, Rebbe Akiva observes that when the Jews participated in the building of the Golden Calf they demonstrated this identical characteristic of selfless generosity. This is what brought Rebbe Akiva to tears.

The Jew is inherently giving. The character traits of compassion and shame are inherited from our Patriarch Avraham. Avraham is known as the pillar of *chesed* (kindness). He gave of himself and his possessions selflessly for the sake of disseminating monotheism. While Avraham channeled his *chesed* into purging the world of paganism, the Jews at Sinai utilized that same characteristic when they contributed so generously towards building the Golden Calf.

The Jew has the ability to give unceasingly. The question is – how is his generosity and philanthropy dispersed? If the Jew’s philanthropy is within Torah guidelines, then the act of *chesed* is an emulation of Avraham our Patriarch. However, if the Jew’s generosity emanates only from his sense of compassion then very often his kindness is misdirected and can lead to tragedy.

The Chofetz Chaim had lived throughout his lifetime in a number of communities such as the cities of Vilna and Brisk. The Gemara in Tractate *Bava Basra* tells us that the mitzvah of giving charity is more than merely supporting the needy. It also entails one engaging the needy person in conversation to make him feel valued. In addition to giving charity to the needy, the Chofetz Chaim would ask where they came from. He noticed that when he was in the Vilna community the majority of those seeking charity came from Brisk community. Years later, when the Chofetz Chaim was living in Brisk he noticed that many of the needy were from Vilna. He asked himself, “Why do the poor of Brisk need to come to Vilna to collect and those of Vilna need to come to Brisk? Why doesn’t each community support its own needy?” The Chofetz Chaim then explains that as much as Satan would like to stop the Jew from being charitable, he cannot do it because it is innately part of the Jew’s essence. However, he can detract from the quality of this mitzvah. There is an order of priority in supporting the needy. One must first support the needy of his own community and only then should he offer support to other communities. The Satan is able to undermine this qualitative aspect of the mitzvah of tzedakah.

A Jew gives naturally to what he believes has value. How is this determined? The Mishna in Tractate *Sanhedrin* asks, “Why was man initially created as a single being (without a counterpart)?” The Mishna answers, “So that he may understand that all existence was created for him alone.” Thus, every person has a mind of his own. To counter this persona of self-centeredness and individuality, Chazal in *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of Our Fathers) advise that one must establish for himself a rebbe (teacher). The rebbe represents the Torah perspective and he is part of the unbroken transmission from Sinai. One’s own feelings and understanding is not adequate to

assess true value. It is only through the eyes of the Torah that one can truly perceive inherent value and support it sufficiently.

4. Where Does Wisdom Emanate From?

The Torah states, “See, Hashem has proclaimed by name, Betzalel son of Uri son of Chur, of the tribe of Yehuda. He filled him with G-dly spirit (*Ruach HaKodesh*) with wisdom (*chochmah*), insight (*binah*), and knowledge (*daas*) and with every craft...” to oversee the building of the Mishkan. The Midrash asks, “From where did all of the praiseworthiness of Betzalel emanate? It answers, “From the tribe of Yehudah.” Since Betzalel’s pedigree was from the tribe of Yehudah, he merited this unique level of *chochmah* (*wisdom*).

The Midrash continues to explain as it is stated in the verse in *Iyov* (Job), “He said to Man behold *Yiras shamayim* (*fear of G-d*) is *chochmah*.” Pharaoh had commanded the Hebrew midwives Yocheved and Miriam, to kill the Jewish male children during the birthing process. The Torah tells us that they defied the king’s orders because “They feared G-d.” As a reward Yocheved and Miriam merited that “Hashem made for them *baatim* (*houses*).” Yocheved received the houses of *Kehuna* (*Priesthood*) and *Malchus* (*Kingship*). This reward was realized through Moshe (as King of the Jewish people) and Aaron (who was the High Priest). Miriam’s reward was *chochmah* (*wisdom*) as the verse states, “Fear of G-d is wisdom.” Betzalel, a descendent of Miriam, merited *chochmah* because of Miriam’s demonstration of her fear of G-d. Thus, Betzalel was endowed with the most advanced level of *chochmah*, which gave him the ability to understand the inner workings of creation.

Dovid HaMelech (King David) writes in *Tehillim* (*Psalms*), “*Reishis chochmah yiras Hashem* (The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d).” Rabbeinu Bachya in his commentary explains this verse can be understood in one of two ways. Either the fear of Hashem is the pre-requisite for wisdom or wisdom begins with the fear of Hashem. One could say that although a person is born with a degree of wisdom, the way it is properly utilized and channeled is through the fear of G-d. If one is not distracted with his own agenda, then he can apply his ability properly. We see from the Midrash that the meaning of “*Reishis chochmah yiras Hashem*” goes beyond this understanding.

The endowment of wisdom actually emanates from *yiras Hashem* (*Fear of G-d*). A person could have an average level of intelligence; however, if he possesses a fear of G-d, he will become endowed with wisdom. The person who fears and reveres Hashem at an advanced level will merit wisdom – just as Miriam’s descendent Betzalel had done.

As a young man, Reb Elchonon Wasserman zt’l (who was a leading Torah Sage of his generation and the primary student of the Chofetz Chaim), was not known to have an extraordinary mind and memory. However, he possessed an extraordinary level of *yiras shamayim*. The Chofetz Chair had said about his talmid Reb Elchonon, that his ability to have the entire Talmud committed to memory did not emanate from having a photographic memory but rather from his love for Torah and his *yiras shamayim*. Even a person of ordinary ability can easily recall a unique and special experience. Reb Elchonon experienced every word of Torah as having infinite value and therefore was able to retain all that he had studied.

One may have average ability, however, if he connects to the right source, his level of achievement could become extraordinary. Just as Betzalel was able to understand the inner workings of creation because of the *yiras shamayim* of his forbearers, so too, if one possesses the fear of Hashem, he will merit wisdom.

5. How Does One Sense G-d?

The Portion begins, “*Vayakhel Moshe es kol adaas binei Yisroel* (Moshe assembled the entire assembly of the Children of Israel).” The Midrash tells us that there is no other portion in the

Torah that begins with “*Vayakhel* (and he assembled)”. The Midrash continues, “Hashem instructed Moshe, ‘Gather large gatherings and lecture before them the laws of Shabbos. So that future generations should learn from you to gather in large gatherings every Shabbos in synagogues and study halls to be taught *hilchos issur v’heter* (the laws of what is prohibited or permitted). So that My Great Name should be praised among My children.’”

One would think that the reason Hashem would want that the Jewish people to gather on Shabbos and study the laws of the Torah is so that they should be proficient in it so that they should live as proper Torah observant Jews. As the Gemara in Tractate *Kiddushin* states, “Great is the study (of Torah). Study brings to action.” However, this is not what Chazal are saying. The purpose for the gatherings on Shabbos and studying the laws is so that the Great Name of Hashem should be praised among His children. Seemingly the Midrash is saying that studying the laws is only the means to this end. How do we understand this?

Rabbeinu Yonah in his commentary on *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of Our Fathers) and *Shaarei Teshuvah* (The Gates of Repentance) writes, “All the mitzvos (commandments) of the Torah are “*parparaos*-appetizers” to *yiras shamayim* (fear of G-d).” The reason for this is because whenever one performs a mitzvah it is a demonstration of his fear of G-d. He is only performing the mitzvah because Hashem commanded him to do so. Therefore the performance of mitzvos are an expression of one’s *yiras shamayim*.

The Midrash on *Shir Ha’Shirim* (Song of Songs) interprets one of its verses to mean, “The words of the *Sofrim* (the Rabbis- Rabbinic fences) are more beloved (to Hashem) than the wine of Torah (mitzvos that are Torah dictates).” The Midrash is saying that Hashem values rabbinic enactments to a greater degree than the Divine Word – the Torah and mitzvos themselves. Rabbeinu Yonah explains that the reason for this is that when one fulfills a Rabbinic law he is demonstrating a greater degree of *yiras shamayim*. The basis for the promulgation of a Rabbinic fence is human frailty. Because of a one’s vulnerability and lack of continuous cognizance, there is a concern that one may violate the Torah law. Therefore, the *Chachamim* (Rabbis) legislated fences to protect the Torah law so that it should not be transgressed. Since the adherence to mitzvos (which are the Word of G-d) is one’s expression of *yiras shamayim* as Rabbeinu Yonah explains - how much more so is the adherence to Rabbinic enactments which are to safeguard the Torah.

It is only through the performance of the mitzvos of the Torah that one is able to gain a sense of Hashem’s Presence. If He had not given us the mitzvos and merely commanded us to be monotheistic- how would we have been able to appreciate who He is? The world reflects the omnipotence of G-d; however, the only way one can perceive this is through the eyes of the Torah. It is when one studies and internalizes the Torah that one is able to see G-d in existence. Thus, praising the Name of Hashem. This is the reason Hashem commanded Moshe to gather large gatherings and teach them the laws of *issur v’heter*.

It is not the delving in current events or trying to understand the geopolitical situation that one will come to know G-d. It is only through the study of Torah that one can appreciate G-d in existence.

6. The Positive Quality of Single-Mindedness

The Torah states after the Jewish people sinned with the Golden Calf, “**Hashem said to Moshe Say to the Children of Israel, You are stiff-necked people. If I ascend among you, I may annihilate you in an instant. And now remove your adornments from yourself...**” Firstly Hashem refers to the Jews as “a stiff-necked people” and then tells them to remove their “adornments.” G-d is attributing the Jews’ failure through idolatry (the Golden Calf) to the characteristic of being “stiff-necked,” therefore, they must relinquish their adornments. The “adornments” mentioned in the verse are referring to the special levels of spirituality that the Jews

attained at Sinai.

The Gemara in *Tractate Shabbos* tells us that when the Klal Yisroel said, “*Naaseh V’nishma (We shall do and we shall listen)*” regarding the receiving of the Torah, the angels in heaven were astounded at this level of selfless devotion. G-d sent 600,000 angels bearing two crowns for each Jew – one for *Naaseh (we shall do)* and another for *V’nishma (we shall listen)*. These were no physical crowns but rather representations of higher levels of spirituality. After the sin of the *Agle (Golden Calf)*, they were taken from the Jewish people, thus causing their spiritual level to be reduced.

Their diminishment was not a punishment but rather a kindness from Hashem. Since they had sinned, they could no longer perform at an advanced spiritual level. If they had been allowed to remain in the close proximity to G-d, which they had achieved with “*Naaseh V’nishma,*” they would have been destroyed. That level of intimacy with the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) requires perfection and anything less than perfection would have triggered the Attribute of Justice. Thus, it was a kindness that G-d kept the Jews at a distance so that they should not be subjected to the Attribute of Justice. As the Torah states, “**If I ascend among you, I may annihilate you in an instant.**”

The Gemara in *Tractate Yomah* tells us that if the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) had any distractions or improper thoughts when entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, he would expire immediately. One cannot be in proximity to the *Shechina* (whose location was in the Holy of Holies) without being worthy and perfectly focused. Chazal tell us that during the Second Temple period there were more than 300 *Kohanim Gedolim* (High Priests) who officiated. This means that on the average there was a new High Priest almost every year. What the Torah is telling us is that although the Jews had sinned with the Golden Calf, if they did not have the characteristic of being “stiff-necked,” they would have been able to survive the initial intimate relationship with Hashem. Where can the characteristic of being “stiff-necked” be traced to in our pedigree?

The Gemara tells us that the innate characteristics, which a Jew possesses, are inherited from our Patriarch, Avraham. These attributes are being merciful, having shame, and doing acts of loving-kindness. The Gemara also states that if one does not exhibit these traits, his pedigree is to be questioned. To what do we attribute the innate characteristic of being “stiff-necked”?

The Torah refers to Avraham as “*Avraham Ha’Ivri* (Hebrew/ from across the river).” Chazal tell us that the appellation of *Ivri* identifies Avraham as the person who is on one side and the rest of the world was on the other. He single-handedly took on the world and disseminated monotheism. Avraham’s conviction of belief was so deeply rooted that it gave him the strength to stand up against the entire world. He did not waver or deviate from his mission to dispel paganism from existence. Every Jew possesses this characteristic of “*Ivri*”. Avraham manifested the positive side of this characteristic because he was guided by his faith in Hashem and his desire to do His Will. Although, the Jewish people inherited the quality of being steadfast, nevertheless because of their lack, it expressed itself as “stiff-necked.” After they reached their pinnacle of spirituality through “*Naaseh V’nishma,*” they fell and sinned with the Golden Calf because of that same single-mindedness.

The Jewish people have always been viewed by the nations of the world as “obstinate, unbending and unrelenting.” Despite the adversities and holocausts that were experienced by the Jewish people throughout history, the world never succeeded in eliminating the Jew.

All Jews possess the characteristic of being “stiff-necked.” One must realize that it can be applied in a positive manner (as with Avraham our Patriarch) or in a negative manner (as with the Jewish people at Sinai). We must strive to maintain clarity through the study of Torah to insure that our abilities and steadfastness is being positively directed. It is with the positive aspect of “*Ivri*” that we have the ability to change the world.

7. The Value of Unity (For Shabbos Shekalim)

The Torah tells us about the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* (the half coin made of silver) that was donated by every male above the age of twenty. All Communal Offerings (*Korbanei Tzibur*) that were brought in the Bais HaMikdash needed to be purchased with each year's new half-coin donations, which were replenished every Nissan. The Mishna tells us that in order to collect a sufficient amount of the new coins by the first of the month of Nissan, they would announce at the beginning of the month of Adar that one must send his *Machtzis Ha Shekel* to the Bais HaMikdash (Temple).

The Gemara in Tractate *Megillah* tells us that Haman had given 10,000 talents of silver to Achashverosh (King of Persia) to seal the fate of the Jewish people- to annihilate every Jewish man, woman, and child. In exchange for the silver talents, Achashverosh gave his ring to Haman in order to send a royal proclamation throughout the Persian Empire to establish the date for their destruction.

The Gemara in *Tractate Megillah* tells us that before G-d brings punishment upon the Jewish people He provides the antidote for that punishment in advance. The Gemara explains that the Commandment of giving the *Machtzis Ha Shekel*, which was given 1,500 years prior to the decree of annihilation, was the antidote to negate the talents of silver that were given by Haman. Why was the the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* the antidote for the decree of annihilation?

The Torah tells us regarding the obligation of the *Machtzis Ha Shekel*. **“The wealthy man is not permitted to give more and the poor man is not permitted to give less than half a silver coin.”** Clearly the Torah is requiring uniformity in the giving of this donation. One would think, as with any other charitable donation, that it is admirable to give more than the minimum amount. Nevertheless, in this case, the Torah is being emphatic that only the half-coin of silver (*Machtzis Ha Shekel*) is acceptable.

The fact that every Jewish male was permitted only to donate a half a silver coin and not a whole coin is symbolic that every Jew needs to complement his fellow in order to create the whole. This is the concept of *achdus* (unity). The *Machtzis Ha Shekel* represents the concept of *tzibur* (community) the unification of the Jewish people.

A community is not a collection of individuals each having their own perspective and direction, but rather it is a unified and equalized group with a common viewpoint and goal. This is represented through the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* that is given to purchase the *Korban Tzibur* (Communal Offering). In order for an offering to be considered a *Korban Tzibur* it must be purchased with communal funds and not with individuals participating as partners.

One of Haman's claims that he communicated to Achashverosh against the Jewish people was that, **“they are scattered and fragmented among the people.”** Some commentators explain this criticism to mean, that the Jewish people were not unified but rather they were fragmented and divisive which is the antithesis of a “tzibur.” We can now understand why the mitzvah of *Machtzis Ha Shekel* was the antidote to negate Haman's ten thousand talents of silver. Haman was sealing our fate with the claim that there was no *achdus* among the Jewish people. The *Machtzis Ha Shekel* given by the Jews up until the destruction of the First Temple countered that claim and thus negated Haman's plot.

The mitzvah of the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* signifies the unity of the Jewish people, which is “tzibur.” The month of Adar, in which we announce the giving of the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* is a month that we express our unity.

Every day in the *Amidah* (silent prayer) we ask Hashem in the blessing for the ingathering of the exiles that He should gather us in - *yachad* (together) - from the four corners of the earth. Why do we add the word “yachad”? We are only a fully functioning people if we are unified with a common perspective and goal. The Second Bais HaMikdash (Second Temple) was destroyed only because of a lack of unity which expressed itself through *sinaas chinam* (baseless hatred). It can only be rebuilt through the unity of the Klal Yisroel.