

Parshat Vayechel
2/21/14
Friday Evening Sermon

Lately, one major international event has loomed over everything. TV commercials, sports coverage, news, human-interest stories, fashion, pop culture satire....really, everything. Every four years, countries from around the world send their best athletes to the Summer and Winter Olympics respectively. The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics seem to pop up everywhere! They are a part of common conversation at school and work, I see billboards featuring some of the athletes, and when I check the news one of the top stories always involves a recap of the highs and lows. They even make fun of the interesting town of Sochi. Whenever I watch the Winter Olympics, I can't help wonder about the athletes and their great skill. How are they that good? How did they know as kids that this is what they were meant to do? What drove them to work hard and unlock these talents? Indeed, how does anyone who is so good, so gifted in any field, know that this is their calling? In this week's Torah portion, one individual may have indeed asked the very same question.

In Parshat Vayakhel, we read a summary of the various pieces and instructions for building the Tabernacle. After repeating some of the same details about acacia wood and metal rings we read in previous chapters in

Exodus, an important name comes up again. In Chapter 31 of Exodus, God chooses Bezalel, whose name means “in the shadow of God,” to oversee the construction. God endows him with certain gifts and knowledge, and he and his assistant are filled with the Spirit of God to do this work. This week’s parsha reminds us again about the hard work of Bezalel and his artisans:

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.

² Moses then called Bezalel and Oholiab, and every skilled person whom the Lord had endowed with skill, everyone who excelled in ability, to undertake the task and carry it out. ³ They took over from Moses all the gifts that the Israelites had brought, to carry out the tasks connected with the service of the sanctuary.

So, we know that Bezalel had the skills and that they came from God.

And we know the name of the master builder of this holy place, the place where God would dwell among the people of Israel. But why do we need to know his name? One could argue that the work will speak for itself—to emphasize the importance of the work he is doing, perhaps it would have been better that Bezalel should remain anonymous. The reader of Torah would only know today that someone used his skills to glorify God. Well, then this would be a different d’var torah! We do indeed know Bezalel’s name, so my question now is why Bezalel? God gave him the skills but we don’t know anything else about him. Was he from a good family? Kind or

mean? Pious or lax in his faith? The Torah does not bother to tell us.

Fortunately, many great sages have asked the same question- who is this Bezalel, and why does he get to build the first dwelling place for God in the Jewish community?

This issue of name is no small matter. In Judaism, your name isn't just a bunch of letters and sounds put together or a convenient way to identify someone. It is your essence, an interpretation of your traits and your character. In the Midrash Tanchuma on Vayekhel, a 6th century source of legends about the Torah, the rabbis bring up the issue of Bezalel's name. It says that a person has three names: one given to him by his parents, one given to him by other people, and one that he makes for himself. The midrash goes on to say that God chose Bezalel because of the good, solid name he had made for himself. This is why he is called by name—his name, his reputation in the community, in addition to his talents, made him worthy of the great task.

Furthermore, The *Zohar*, the main text of Kabblah, claims that Bezalel, which again literally translates to "in the shadow of God," is not a name the head craftsman received at the beginning of time, but rather a title that he earns upon completion of his commissioned project. Applying the *Zohar's* explanation to the introduction of Bezalel, we would read the

verse as "Behold, I have designated that the name of the person to work in this holy endeavor should at completion be called Bezalel -- in the shadow of God." The end of Bezalel's job description gives us a clue as to how this artist and builder achieves the status of living "in the shadow of God." By inspiring his or her constituents to live up to their own names by reaching their potential, Bezalel earns the designation of working "in the shadow of God." For Bezalel, his actions and his life defined him. He lived according to his values, he was true to himself, and God endowed him with the skills to build a place to glorify God's presence.

This is a powerful message: we must be accountable for our actions because we are capable of becoming someone else. We can aspire to live by our values and be true to ourselves, and others will take notice of us and consider us worthy. This concept of "a good name" is not unique to the Midrash—it shows up in many places in Jewish text and thought. In Pirkei Avot, a section containing words of knowledge and wisdom it teaches:

Rabbi Shimon said: There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship. And the crown of a good name is superior to them all.

Who you are is more important than anything. Being able to walk the walk, not just talk the talk, is more valuable than any rank, learning, or influence.

In Bezalel, God saw his saw some unlocked potential, a wealth of talent and integrity that needed their own special purpose. Furthermore, Bezalel's gifts as an artist allowed him to see the untapped potential in ordinary objects and people. He took pieces of wood and colorful material and crafted them into a sanctuary. He pushed his artisans to work together to create this holy space.

In thinking about the ability of artists and creators, whether they are a man or God, I remembered a story about one of the most masterful artists of all time: Michelangelo. He is the example of all things Renaissance, using classical forms and innovation to produce some of the most well-known sculptures and paintings of all time. Michelangelo had to defy his family, who did not want him to be an artist, to go and study with the masters. He went it alone to pursue his true passion, and he became famous almost overnight. The sculpture of David in his home city of Florence carries with it a legend that illustrates the artist's ability to unlock hidden potential. The city government commissioned Michelangelo to make a statue of David and he proudly accepted. When he went to find the materials, he saw a damaged 19-foot block of solid marble. For any person this might seem overwhelming and disappointing—a huge damaged piece of marble is the only option. Of course, Michelangelo had a vision. Little by

little, he chipped away, sculpting with great detail over four years arms, legs, and a furrowed brow to create his version of the future King David, just before he slays the giant Goliath. Michelangelo was chosen for this task because of his reputation, and he delivered something from nothing!

Michelangelo's story and the story of Bezalel have much to offer us today. In fact, two career counselors created what they call "the Michelangelo Method" to inspire people who want to change careers or find fulfillment in the work they have already. It was even featured on Oprah. There are a few steps that any person that wants to make a change in himself or herself can take including: recognizing your own passions, knowing your guiding personal values, and eventually, you can find your personal gifts. I am not sure that this is the catch-all solution to making everyone successful, but it does really jive with the values we see in this week's parsha. When you have the gifts and the vision that are needed, they will be recognized. Remember it was not Moses our great teacher and prophet who was commanded to actually build the Tabernacle. It was Bezalel—he had the skills, insight, and understanding that Moses could not even begin to imagine. Moses simply conveyed God's instructions. Like Michelangelo and Bezalel and maybe even the gold medalist in skiing or figure skating, if we are lucky and work hard, we can use our talents and passions to serve

God. We don't have to be the best at everything. Few of us can say that we are excellent artists, crafters, swimmers, skaters, businessmen, scholars, and more. However, we can truly excel at something we believe in and nurture our talents. We can follow our instincts, live by our values, and be of service to others. In doing so, maybe we can find some measure of personal fulfillment and be our own *Mishkan* like the one built in the Torah—a beautiful, holy space that brings the divine into our lives.