

Parshat Vayakhel
On Lost Arts
Tamar Marvin

The Torah is inordinately concerned with the details of the *Mishkan* (tabernacle): the materials from which it was built, its specific component parts, the exquisite skill of the artisans who adorned it, its elaborate inauguration, even the order in which it was disassembled during the *midbar* (wilderness) years. As the blueprint for the dwelling of the Divine on earth, the *Mishkan* has, of course, more significance than a mere temporary structure. But the sheer amount of space the Torah gives to the subject of the *Mishkan* elicits in us the question: Why? What is this all about?

As just one example: why are the colors sky-blue, purple, and crimson (תְּכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי) repeated some nineteen times in the *Mishkan parshiyot*, a familiar refrain to any reader, almost a mantra?

The Torah's insistence that we pay close attention to such details runs counter to Judaism's aniconic bent, our anxiety about the seductive nature of idolatry and our attendant privileging of the abstract. Often attributed to the second of the *aseret ha-dibrot* (Ten Commandments), לא תַעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ פֶּסֶל וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה, the Jewish discomfort with figurative art is struggled with in halakhic literature. It is also, as scholars of Jewish art are wont to point out, not entirely accurate (sadly, the idea that Jewish culture lacks artistic expression is entwined with the antisemitism and Orientalism pervasive to nineteenth-century art history). But a distrust of *gashmiyut* – the realm of the sensory, material, and embodied — runs undeniably deep throughout Jewish culture, granting preeminence to text and the intellectual. When my relatives made aliyah in the 1920s, the British colonial government insisted that they be photographed for their papers. My grandmother recalls that her grandparents balked — participate in the making of a graven image?

And yet, the centrality of the *Mishkan's* ephemeral details in Sefer Shemot reminds us of the value our tradition accords to experiences like the feel of dolphin skin beneath one's fingers; the rare and regal visual delight of *techelet* which is the royal blue of the *Mishkan* and the *tzitzit*; the knotted beauty of acacia wood. In considering the Torah's description of the *Mishkan*, we cannot avoid the importance of its physical details, including the sensory awe evoked by its golden *kravim* (cherubs) or almond-blossomed menorah cups. The *Mishkan* is very real. It is deliberately designed as a meeting place of humans and the Most Holy.

Consider the description of Betzalel and Oholiav's artistic skill, another refrain that punctuates the *Mishkan* sequence. The first place this description is found is in the previous parashah (Shemot 31:2-6), but it is prominently repeated in our parashah:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְקֹוֹק אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
רְאֵה קָרָאתִי בְשֵׁם בְּצַלְאֵל בֶּן-אוּרִי בֶן-חֹוּר לְמִטֵּה יְהוּדָה:
וְאִמְלֵא אֹתוֹ רוּחַ אֱלֹקִים בְּחָכְמָה וּבְתִבּוּנָה וּבְדַעַת וּבְכָל-מְלָאכָה:
לְחַשֵּׁב מַחֲשֶׁבֶת לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּזָהָב וּבְכֶסֶף וּבְנֹחָשׁ:

וּבְחֵרָשָׁת אֶבְרָן לְמִלֵּאת וּבְחֵרָשָׁת עֵץ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכָל־מְלָאכָה:
וְאֲנִי הִנֵּה נֹתְתִי אֹתוֹ אֶת אֶהְלִיאֵב בֶּן־אָחִיסָמָךְ לְמִטֵּה־דָן וּבְלֵב כָּל־חַכְמֵי־לֵב נֹתְתִי חִכְמָה וְעָשׂוּ אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִךְ:

Moshe said to the Bnei Yisrael, See, the L-rd has called by name Betzalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Yehudah; and he has filled him with the spirit of G-d, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship; and to contrive works of art, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in the cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of wood, to make all manner of artistic work. And he has put in his heart that he may teach, both he, and Oholiav, the son of Achisamach, of the tribe of Dan. I have also put wisdom into the heart of all the wise-hearted, so that they will be able to make all I have commanded you (Koren translation).

This passage interweaves the material and the spiritual, the physical and the intellectual. Betzalel's work is described in terms of craftsmanship of natural materials. At the same time, his skill is described as interior and abstract. Betzalel is "filled with the spirit of G-d" (*ruach Elokim*) and endowed with *chochmah*, *tevunah*, and *da'at*, wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. Both his mind and his heart are engaged. This duality of the real and the abstract is intentionally combined in the important phrase *melechet machshevet*, thoughtful work, which, in another context, gives us the framework for what constitutes labor that is forbidden on Shabbat. Betzalel's artistry is expressed in this passage another time as an amalgam of thought and act: לחשב במחשבת לעשות — literally, *to think with thoughts of making*. In both *machshavot la'asot* and *melechet machshevet*, cognition and creation are intricately linked. Finally, both Betzalel and his assistant, Oholiav, are given the power of education, to teach others this divinely inspired *melechet machshevet*. We are given a glimpse of this transpiring among Jewish women specifically:

וְכָל־אִשָּׁה חַכְמַת־לֵב בְּיָדֶיהָ טָווּ וַיָּבִיאוּ מְטָוָה

And all the women that were wisehearted did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun. (Shemot 35:25).

Ramban suggests (in his comment on Shemot 31:2) that this type of skill had been lost to Bnei Yisrael during their enslavement in Egypt, and that Betzalel's ability was miraculous:

כִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם פְּרוּכִים בְּעִבּוּדֵת חוּמֵר וּלְבָנִים, לֹא לָמְדוּ מִלֵּאכֶת כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב וְחֵרוּשֵׁת אֲבָנִים טוֹבוֹת וְלֹא רָאוּ אוֹתָם כָּלֵל. וְהִנֵּה הוּא פֹלֵא שִׁימְצָא בָהֶם אָדָם חָכֵם גְּדוֹל בְּכֶסֶף וּבְזָהָב

Yisrael in Egypt had been crushed under the work in mortar and in brick, and had acquired no knowledge of how to work with silver and gold, and the cutting of precious stones, and had never seen them at all. It was thus a wonder that there was to be found amongst them such a great wise-hearted man who knew how to work with silver and gold, (Ch. Chavel, trans.)

A similar argument was made by medieval Jewish philosophers, among them Rambam, about philosophy having been lost to Jews during their enslavement. Whether with regard to art or philosophy, this sense of loss and rediscovery insists on the authenticity of creative modes of expression that lie outside of traditional forms of Jewish cultural production.



Our parashah begins with *Vayakhel*, the gathering of all of Bnei Yisrael. As Ramban notes (on Shemot 35:1):

וַיִּקְהַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־כָּל־עַדְת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל - יְכֻלּוּ כָל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׂאִים, כִּי כָל־הַתְּנֻבוֹ
בַּמְלָאכָה הַמִּשְׁכָּן.

The expression *all the congregation of the children of Israel* includes the men and women, for all donated to the work of the Tabernacle (Ch. Chavel, trans.)

It is no accident that this gathering of klal Yisrael includes both men and women; women are noticeably present in the creation of the Mishkan. They participate in the artistry, provide an abundance of material donations, and seem to be included among the students of Betzalel. I would like to suggest that this inclusiveness — —of male and female, sense and reason, art and intellect—is a central theme of the Mishkan sequences. Though art (and women) have not always been included in the world of the beit midrash, Parashat Vayakhel reminds us how central all aspects of human experience, including the embodied ones, are to our tradition.



Born in Israel and raised in the United States, Tamar Marvin holds a Ph.D. in Medieval Jewish Studies and a B.A. in Literature and Journalism. Her writing has been published in academic journals as well as in the broader media. Since receiving her doctorate, she has taught in Jewish Studies programs at universities in New York and Los Angeles, and has served as a faculty member in the Wexner Foundation's Heritage Program. Seeking to take an active part in shaping Jewish tradition, Tamar is honored to join the Core Semikha Program at Yeshivat Maharat. She brings with her a deep fascination with Jewish intellectual culture, especially the ways in which premodern Jews faced challenges of integrating new cultural developments with Masorah. She believes that the Rishonim with whom she loves spending so much of her time, from the philosophers to the Kabbalists, have a great deal to tell us about navigating the Jewish future. As an educator, Tamar is passionate about creating access to classical texts for all who wish to approach them, bringing them to life for her students. Tamar is also an inveterate maker, mostly of handcrafted textile Judaica and home baked challah. She lives with her family in Los Angeles, California.