

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXII: Vayakhel (Ex. 35:1–38:20)

Essay 8. The wisdom of Bezalel

פְּרָק ט' דְּבֵרְכוֹת אָמַר ר' שְׁמוּאֵל בְּרַחֲמֵי אָמַר ר' יוֹנָתָן בְּצִלְאֵל עַל שֵׁם חֻקְמָתוֹ נִקְרָא, בְּשִׁעָה שֶׁאָמַר לוֹ הַקֹּב"ה לְמִנְשָׁה לֵךְ אָמֹר לְבְצִלְאֵל עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁכָּן, אֲרוֹן, וְכֵלִים. הֲלֹךְ מִנְשָׁה וְאָמַר לְהַפֵּךְ עֲשֵׂה כֵלִים, אֲרוֹן, וּמִשְׁכָּן. אָמַר לוֹ, מִנְשָׁה רַבְּנֵי מְנַהֲגוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם וְכוּ', שְׁמָא וְכוּ', אָמַר לוֹ בְּצֵל אֵל הָיִיתָ וְיִדְעָתָ. ע"כ.

Chapter 9 of tractate Berachot:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said that Rabbi Yonatan said: Bezalel was called [by that name] on account of his wisdom. When the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: Go say to Bezalel, “Make a Tabernacle, an Ark, and vessels.” Moses went and said the opposite: “Make vessels, an Ark, and a Tabernacle.”¹ He said to him: Moses, our teacher, the practice of the world [is that a person builds a house and afterward places the vessels [inside], and you say: Make an Ark, and vessels, and a Tabernacle. [If so,] the vessels that I make, where shall I put them? Perhaps G-d told you the following: “Make a Tabernacle, Ark, and vessels.” [Moses] said to [Bezalel]: You were in G-d’s shadow [betzel El],² so you knew [what He said].

- Berachot 55a

צָרִיף עֵינָי לְמָה מִנְשָׁה הִפְךָ הַסֵּדֶר, וְיָמָה חֻקְמָה הִיא זֶה שֶׁל בְּצִלְאֵל אִם לֹא אָמַר אֶלָּא דְּבַר פְּשוּט שֶׁהוּא מְנַהֲגוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם.

This requires investigation:

Question 1: **Why Moses did reverse the order?**

Question 2: **What was this wisdom of Bezalel, if all he said was a simple matter that was the practice of the world?**

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¹ Our current (Vilna) edition of the Talmud gives the order as “Ark, vessels, and Tabernacle,” but a search of The Friedberg Project for Talmud Bavli Variants, <https://bavli.genizah.org>, shows that the reading “vessels, Ark, and Tabernacle” appears in the manuscripts Paris 671 and Oxford 366.

² The name Bezalel means “in the shadow of G-d.”

וגיש לומר שמצד אחד הנה נראה שקדושת ארון וכלים גדולה מקדושת המשכן, שהרי המקדש והמשכן נחרב, וכלים בקדושתו הם עומדים ויאשיהו המלך גנזם. והבית נחרב בשביל להציל את ישראל, שצדקה עשה עמנו ששפך חמתו על העצים ועל האבנים, ולפי מאי דמיימא לן מעלין בקדש, צריך לעשות תחלה המשכן ואחר כך הכלים, אמנם מצד אחר גדולה קדושת המשכן והמקדש, כמו שמצינו בגוב ובגבעון ומשכן שילה שלא שרתה שם השכינה, לפי שעדיין לא נבנה הבית. ולפי זה הנה צריך לעשות תחלה הכלים ואחר כך המשכן.

It can be said that on the one hand, it would have seemed that the sanctity of the Ark and vessels was greater than the sanctity of the Temple and Tabernacle, for the Temple and the Tabernacle were destroyed, but the Ark and vessels in their sanctity were left standing, and King Josiah hid them.³ The Temple was destroyed in order to save Israel, for [G-d] acted charitably with us, in that He poured out His anger on wood and on stones.⁴ So from this viewpoint, the Ark and vessels were more important than the Temple and Tabernacle, and in accord with that which we hold, that one elevates to a higher level of sanctity and does not downgrade,⁵ it was necessary first to make what was less sacred and then make what was more sacred, i.e., to first make the Tabernacle and afterward the Ark and vessels. This would agree with the order presented by G-d and Bezalel.

However, on the other hand, the sanctity of the Tabernacle and the Temple were apparently greater than the vessels, as we find at Nob⁶ and at Gibeon⁷ and the Tabernacle at Shiloh,⁸ for the Shechinah did not dwell there at those places, even though the Ark and the vessels were there, for the Temple had not yet been built. Therefore, following the rule to start with what was less sacred and then make what was more sacred, it was necessary to first make the vessels and afterward the Tabernacle. This would agree with the order presented by Moses.

והנה אמרו ז"ל במסכת סוטה שמשה ודוד לא שלטו שונאיהם במעשה ידיהם. וכמו שפיתבו המקובלים שאם הנה משה נכנס לארץ והנה בונה הוא המקדש לא היו יכולים האויבים לשלוט בו יד, ולכן הקב"ה צוה למשה עשה משכן ארון וכלים, מפני שהנה יודע שסופו של משה למות במדבר וסופו של מקדש לחרב, ומפני שמעליו בקדש צריך לעשות תחלה המשכן.

Thus, [the rabbis] of blessed memory said in tractate Sotah [9a], that the enemies of Moses and David didn't rule over the work of their hands, as each built a house for the L-rd that remained in existence the rest of their lives. As the Kabbalists wrote,⁹ if Moses had entered into the Land of Israel and had built the Temple, the enemies wouldn't have been able to raise a hand against it, and therefore the Holy One, Blessed be He, commanded Moses, "Make the Tabernacle, ark, and vessels," because He knew that the end of Moses was to die in the

³ Yoma 52b.

⁴ Lam. Rabbah 4:14.

⁵ Berachot 28a.

⁶ I Sam. 21:1–10. The Tabernacle was at Nob, as the verses describe that the High Priest was there, and the showbread and ephod are referenced.

⁷ I Kings 3:4; I Chron. 16:39; I Chron. 21:29–30; II Chron. 1:3–6.

⁸ Josh. 18:1.

⁹ Rabbi Nathan Nata Spira (1585-1633), Polish rabbi and Kabbalist, Chief Rabbi of Kraków, whose principal work was Megaleh Amukot (1637). Megaleh Amukot, parshat Va'etchanan, ofen 20.

wilderness and the end of the Temple was to be destroyed, and because one elevates to a higher level of sanctity, it was necessary to make the Tabernacle first, as it had a lower level of sanctity.

אָמַנְם מֹשֶׁה, שֶׁהִנֵּה מִצְפָּה לְהַכְנִיִּים יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאַרְצָהּ, וְהִנֵּה יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁלֹּא יִשְׁלֹטוּ הָאוֹיְבִים בְּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו, אָמַר לוֹ עֲשֵׂה פְלִים, אֲרוֹן, וּמִשְׁכָּן. וּבְצִלְעָל לֹא רָצָה לְהִשְׁיב עַל זֶה בְּפִירוּשׁ, הוֹאִיל שֶׁהַדָּבָר תְּלוּי בְּמִיתָתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה, אֲלֵא הִשְׁיב לוֹ מִמְנַהֵג הָעוֹלָם. וְאַחַר כֵּן אָמַר לוֹ שְׁמָא כֵּן אָמַר לָךְ הַקַּב"ה וְכו', כְּלוֹמַר מָנָא לָךְ הָא? שֶׁמִּשְׁכָּן הוּא יוֹתֵר חֲמוּר מִפְּלִים, וְדִילְמָא הַפְּלִים יוֹתֵר חֲמוּרִים מִהַמִּקְדָּשׁ, דְּאִי לָאו הִכִּי קָשָׁה עַל בְּצִלְעָל מַה קוֹשִׁיָא הִיא זוּ לֹמַר שֶׁמְנַהֵג הָעוֹלָם הוּא לְהַפְּדוּ. דִּילְמָא גְזִירַת הַמְּקוֹם הִיא לְעֲשׂוֹת פְּסֻדָּה הִנֵּה, כְּמוֹ שֶׁצְּנָה הַפְּלִאִים בְּבִגְדֵי כְּהוֹנֵה אִף עַל פִּי שֶׁהַפְּלִאִים אֲסוּר, אֲלֵא וְדִאִי שֶׁבְצִלְעָל עֲשֵׂה בְּחֻקָּהּ לְהַסְתִּיר הַדָּבָר בְּפָנֵי מֹשֶׁה כְּדִי שֶׁלֹּא יִרְגִישׁ.

Answer to Question 1: **However, Moses, who was expecting to bring Israel into the Land of Israel, and who knew that the enemies would not rule over the work of their hands, said to [Bezalel], “Make the vessels, Ark, and Tabernacle.”** He knew that no enemy could destroy the Temple if it were built by him, and would have the highest level of sanctity.

Answer to Question 2: **Bezalel didn’t want to answer explicitly, since the matter depended upon the death of Moses. Rather, he answered [Moses] based on the custom of the world, and afterward, he said to [Moses], Perhaps the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to you, “Make a Tabernacle, Ark, and vessels.” This is as if to say, “How do you know this, i.e., that the Tabernacle is more important than the vessels, for perhaps the vessels are more important than the Temple?”**

For if that is not so, that this is what Bezalel had in mind, then we have to question Bezalel what the difficulty was with Moses’ instructions to him, for him to say to Moses that the custom of the world was the opposite. Perhaps the decree of the Omnipresent was to make this order, even if it doesn’t agree with the custom of the world. This would be as He commanded the mixture of two kinds of material in the priestly garments, i.e., *shatnez*, a mixture of linen and wool, even though a mixture of these two kinds of material is forbidden.¹⁰ Rather, certainly Bezalel acted with wisdom to hide the matter from Moses, so that he wouldn’t sense that it implicated his death in the wilderness.

וְעוֹד אֲפֻשֶׁר לֹמַר שֶׁהִשְׁיב לוֹ מִמְנַהֵגוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, כְּלוֹמַר שֶׁמְנַהֵג הָעוֹלָם הוּא לְהִיּוֹת חוֹטְאִים, וְאִם יִשְׂרָאֵל יִחְטְאוּ וְהַמִּשְׁכָּן יִהְיֶה קָיָם, הַקַּב"ה יִרְיֵה צְרִיף לְשַׁפּוֹף חֲמָתוֹ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָעוֹלָם יִהְיֶה "תְּהוּ וְבִהוּ".

Also, it’s possible to say that [Bezalel] answered him [referencing] the custom of the world, as if to say that the custom of the world is to be sinners, and if Israel would sin and the Tabernacle would be in existence, the Holy One, Blessed be He, would need to pour out His wrath on Israel, and without Jews performing mitzvot, the world would be “unformed and void.”¹¹

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¹⁰ Lev. 19:19, “You shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material.”

¹¹ Gen. 1:2.