



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayakhel 5771

By Rachel Farbiarz

February 26, 2011

This week, we are pleased to welcome guest writer, Dvar Tzedek alumna Rachel Farbiarz.

In *Parshat Vayakhel* the Children of Israel built the Tabernacle. The project demanded of Israel formidable helpings of both creative energy and generosity. In the punishing desert, the people were expected to furnish a marvelous array of gold, silver, bronze, linens, indigo, hides, oils, incense and precious stones.¹ And from these gifts, they were to carve, spin, cut, rivet, embroider, weave and fashion the Sanctuary's sacral architecture and furnishings.

That such an effort could be successfully undertaken in the desert was extraordinary enough. That it be executed by a mass of recently-freed slaves—who, while well-accustomed to hard labor, were untutored in skilled craft—is understood as nothing less than miraculous.² This preternatural ingenuity is most plainly embodied in Bezalel, the man specially named by the Almighty to lead the construction efforts. A creative genius, Bezalel was “filled [] with a spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in every task.”³

The capstone of the Divine spirit that filled the accomplished craftsman was not, however, his mastery of goldsmithing or his way with joinery. It was, instead, his ability to teach others, as the *parshah* informs: God “has given in his heart to instruct [.]”⁴ Commentator Robert Alter notes the singular significance of this gift, observing that while Canaanite and Greek myth both venerated a “craftsman god; here, instead the Lord inspires a human being with the skill, or ‘wisdom’ of the craft as well as with the ability to administer the project.”⁵

It fell to Bezalel then to transform his fellow Israelites—these willing, but unable, manual laborers—into master craftsmen. To do so, he was surely endowed with those qualities so palpable in great teachers: He had to convey instruction plainly and engagingly, to demand excellence while exuding patience. And most critically, Bezalel needed to instill in his workmen-pupils a powerful sense of confidence that this awesome project was within their grasp.

Perhaps, then, this is the Tabernacle's ultimate glory—that the process of its construction helped transform a mass of unskilled, uneducated slaves into a people that could make something awesome with its own hands. This was an effort that fashioned not only altar and laver, *menorah* and *ephod*—but dignity. It illuminated for people who were dependent on manna from heaven, water from a rock and protection from a cloud that God, in turn, relied upon *them* to build the Divine dwelling on earth. And it was Bezalel, with his gift of guidance, who shepherded the fledgling nation through this ennobling transformation.

¹ Exodus 35: 6-9.

² See, for example, Nachmanides on Exodus 35:21.

³ Exodus 35: 30-31.

⁴ Exodus 35:34.

⁵ Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004. p. 517, fn. 34.

In our times too, we can recognize the precious Bezalels who cultivate dignity and transform lives by imparting a skill, a trade—something of which to be proud. These are the people and organizations who know that teaching a man to fish does more than feed a person for a lifetime: It incubates a dignity that nurtures a different kind of sustenance.

One can see this dynamic unfolding in the work of organizations like Women for Women International (WFWI). WFWI helps women who have survived through conflict and violence to develop skills and resources that will enable them to live stable, self-sufficient lives. The core component of these programs is job training: From canning dates in Iraq to tailoring in Rwanda and gem-cutting in Afghanistan, WFWI's efforts embolden marginalized women to become integral and powerful forces in their families, local communities and broader civil societies.⁶

Such a transformation is borne out, for instance, by those participating in WFWI's training programs in Democratic Republic of Congo. While over 80 percent of these women report an improvement in their economic situations, even greater numbers report that they are now actively participating in key household decisions and have gained knowledge of their legal rights. Ninety percent of participants go on to train and mentor other community women using the skills they have acquired. In the words of Lucienne, a single mother of three who spent months as a sex-slave to rebel soldiers: "Joining the program has been a salvation...my life has changed and my children are healthy. I recovered confidence through the training."⁷

It takes a special kind of focus, perseverance and patience to cultivate such transformational confidence. It is a role for which not even Moses *Rabbeinu*—"Our Teacher"—his nerves too often stripped by the nation of not-yet-transformed-slaves, seems to have been cut out. Today, God may not call out the names of those extraordinary people who labor and thrive in this challenging work as the Divine did for Bezalel.⁸ It is, instead, our duty to single them out for our admiration, and most of all, our support.



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⁶ WFWI, "What We Do." www.womenforwomen.org/programs-supporting-women/programs-for-helping-women.php

⁷ WFWI, "Taking a Stand Against Violence: The Women of DR Congo." www.womenforwomen.org/global-initiatives-helping-women/help-women-congo.php

⁸ Exodus 35:30.

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The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to the Jewish community and to social justice. She was a creative and vigorous supporter of leadership development, public interest law, women and public policy and Jewish culture. Lisa died tragically at the age of 54. She was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

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