

**A Few Thoughts on Parashah Vayak'hel (Exodus 35:1-38:20; Exodus 30:11-16; Kings II 11:17-12:17) February 25, 2022**  
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This is Shabbat Shekalim, the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh Adar 2 in this leap year. At the beginning of last week's parashah, Moses was commanded to take a census for the purpose of levying an annual tax of half a shekel on all people, rich and poor alike, for the upkeep of the *mishkan*. Because all are equally obligated, all are equally invested, regardless of their station in life. This is a fundamental step in turning a mixed multitude of former slaves into a cohesive community. Similarly, the command to contribute to and participate in the building and furnishing of the *mishkan* is not based on wealth or status. At the beginning of our parashah, all are called upon to contribute whatever they can. But remarkably, we read that the contributions are to come from "every generous-hearted person" (35:5), i.e., from those who honestly act from the heart, the place of deepest desire that resides in every human being. It seems to be taken for granted that all would wish to participate, and indeed, we find nothing to the contrary. In this light, Midrash Tanchuma Vayakhel 8 teaches that all Israelites are commanded to build the Ark, "... so that not one of them would be able to humiliate his fellow Israelite by saying 'I contributed more for the building of the Ark than you ...'" It is significant however, that it is the princes who donate the precious stones and spices (35:27-28), the costliest of the gifts, thereby demonstrating that they understand and uphold their responsibilities both as leaders and as people of means.

Dominating our parashah is the most vital of all bodily organs – the heart. Today, the functions of cognition, emotion, and volition are associated with the mind, but in the ancient world they were assigned to the heart. Physiologically speaking, it is not surprising that so many cultures once viewed the heart as the center of both intellectual and emotional life. In perpetual motion from inception to death, the heart reveals our innermost feelings in the nature and rhythm of its beating. For the ancients the heart was the seat of wisdom: "Teach us to number our days, so that we shall acquire a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:12), of bravery: "Hope for the Lord, be strong and He will give your heart courage ..." (Psalm 27:14), and of learning: In the *shema* HaShem enjoins us to "impress My words upon your heart," to indelibly instill them within ourselves so that we are able to pass them on to the next generation. But the heart was also seen as being susceptible to temptation and capable of evildoing, as alluded to in the third paragraph of the *shema*, as well as in the lengthy discourse in Parashah Va'eira on Pharaoh's obstinate heart. And as we read numerous times in our parashah, the heart was also deemed the place where generosity, inspiration, energy, and skill reside. In short, our parashah outlines what is possible when the heart is honestly engaged in worthy pursuits. The episode of the golden calf was a tragic lesson in what happens to hearts gone astray. Now, duly chastened, the people are ready to take up the process of building the *mishkan*. But lest they once again get carried away in their zeal, Moses interrupts his enumeration of their future labors and admonishes them to strictly observe Shabbat. Enthusiasm notwithstanding, work cannot go on unabated if the people are to remain healthy and productive. Their eagerness must be tempered by the wisdom to know when enough is enough. As we see in chapter 36, the people have brought so much that they are commanded to stop donating. Sadly, some people are enthusiastic and generous to a fault, giving so unsparingly of their time and resources that they end up neglecting themselves and their loved ones. Their unbridled generosity thwarts their good intentions. Likewise, wisdom is far more than intellectual prowess. It is grounded in the understanding that there is always more wisdom to acquire, and in the humility to actively seek it. Knowledge and wisdom are not synonymous. Knowledge is simply accumulating information, whereas wisdom is the ability to put whatever knowledge one has to the best possible use, humbly rather than arrogantly. Working together with others, we can combine our unique abilities for the greater good. This is what our parashah calls an "uplifted heart," a heart buoyed by discernment, insight, and common sense. Finally, wisdom also involves behaving honorably at all times. Betzalel was appointed to lead the building project because he was "imbued with the spirit of God, with wisdom, with insight, and with knowledge, and with [talent for] all manner of craftsmanship." (35:31) It is noteworthy that Betzalel overlays the ark with pure gold from inside and from outside. (27:2) From this the Talmud derives an important, timeless teaching: "As Rabban Gamliel would proclaim and say: Any student whose inside, his thoughts and feelings, are not like his outside, i.e., his conduct and his character traits are lacking, will not enter the study hall." (Berakhot 28a) In other words, the knowledge and wisdom we acquire are worthless if they are used with less than honorable intentions. In the concluding words of the *Amidah*, "May the expressions of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart find favor before You, HaShem, my Rock and my Redeemer." Yes, to our ancestors, the heart was far more than a fist-sized muscle pumping life through our bodies. It was the core of our being, the locus of will, thought, emotion, memory, and cognition. It determined our character, our words, and our actions. It was – and, along with its anatomical function, it remains the place of our innermost truth.

Shabbat shalom!