Wisdom of Heart: Thoughts on Parashat Vayakhel, February 26, 2011

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Carl Sandburg once observed: "We know that when a nation goes down and never comes back, when a society or civilization perishes, one condition may always be found. They forgot where they came from. They lost sight of what brought them along. The hard beginnings were forgotten and the struggles farther along." ("Remembrance Rock," 1948, pp.18-19)

Sandburg was pointing to a significant feature of a living civilization: it remembers its beginnings, it sees itself as an organic part of the past. The ancestors have an ongoing vote, albeit not veto power. When this connection with the past is lost, the civilization unravels and declines.

In contemporary life, these words of Sandburg have increasing significance. We live in the "me generation", when ego gratification seems more important than upholding tradition. Advertisers constantly emphasize that products are "new", "improved", with an "updated formula". Nothing is more passe than the past, than the old. Even in matters of literature, art, and religion--society seems bent on discovering new forms and chasing after new fads, while sneering at "old-fashioned" traditional styles. People aren't interested in where they came from, but in where they are now and where they may be tomorrow. The more these tendencies set into a society, the clearer it is that the society is in decline. It becomes like a tree that rejects its own roots, not realizing that its life and future depend on those roots.

The Talmud (Berakhot 55a) states that God only gives wisdom to one who has wisdom. Shouldn't God be giving wisdom to those who lack it, rather than to those who already have it? We may understand this Talmudic passage in light of this morning's Torah reading.

In describing the building of the Mishkan, the wilderness sanctuary of the ancient Israelites, the Torah states that God called upon those who were "wise of heart" to do the work. This refers to a special kind of wisdom, not merely a high I.Q. God appointed those who had an aesthetic sense, who were receptive and

imaginative, whose hearts were in tune with the history and destiny of their people. God gave wisdom--and gives wisdom--to those who are receptive to receiving wisdom in this special way. Those who lack "wise hearts"are simply not receptive to this wisdom.

This quality of having a "wise heart" is vital to the wellbeing of every society, and certainly of every sacred endeavor. It is a repudiation of egotism and an affirmation of loyalty to the greater glory of God. It is a sensitivity to the historical context of the people, and a commitment for organic development. It is a rejection of the quick-fix attitude that cares more for self-gratification than for the greater good of the society.

Let us pray that we be worthy of having a wise heart, so that we and our children, and our children's children, will all be faithful to God and true to the Torah and Jewish traditions.

Angel for Shabbat