Seeing the Light, With Shadows: Thoughts for Vayakhel

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Angel for Shabbat, Vayakhel
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The chief architect of the Mishkan (sanctuary) was Bezalel, named specifically by the Almighty to undertake this sacred task. The Torah describes Bezalel as a person filled with the spirit of God “in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship” (Shemot 35:31).

In this week’s Torah portion (as in previous Torah portions), Bezalel’s name includes reference to his father, Uri, and his grandfather, Hur. Because of the unusual inclusion of his grandfather’s name, the Midrash suggests a special reason why Hur was mentioned. Hur was one of the leaders of the Israelites. He and Aaron were second in command to Moses. Yet, we hear very little about Hur in the text of the Torah. The Midrash suggests that when the Israelites wished to fashion the golden calf, Hur stood up in bold resistance to the proposed idolatrous behavior. As a result of his moral courage, the people murdered him and then compelled Aaron to make the golden calf. The Almighty, as a reward to Hur for his valiant spiritual heroism, chose Hur’s grandson Bezalel to be the architect of the Mishkan. Thus Bezalel is identified in the Torah as son of Uri and grandson of Hur, making sure that Hur’s name is associated with the building of the sanctuary.

While the Midrash provides a dramatic homiletic story, nothing in the text of the Torah suggests that Hur indeed did resist the Israelites’ demand for an idol or that he was martyred for his spiritual heroism.

Perhaps the identification of Bezalel as son of Uri and grandson of Hur may be interpreted in another way. This interpretation is based on the literary significance of the three names.

The name Hur is related to the Hebrew word “Hor”—meaning a cave, a dark place. Uri is related to the Hebrew word “Or”—meaning light. Bezalel literally means “in the shadow of God.” Why was Bezalel chosen as the master artist and

architect of the Mishkan?

Let us put his names together, starting from the earliest generation. Hur reminds us of darkness. Wisdom begins in “nothingness,” in a dark void of inner searching. But then wisdom proceeds into the light, into flashes of insight. This stage is suggested by the name Uri, light. Finally, though, wisdom requires the ability to balance darkness and light, to see nuances and subtleties. This is suggested by the name Bezalel, whose very name reminds us of shadows; not just any shadows, but “Godly” shadows, shadows of a wisdom so deep that it is sensitive to the mysteries of darkness and light. Bezalel was chosen because of his special gift of wisdom and his aesthetic sense; he combined the technical talents of an architect with the spiritual and aesthetic sense of an artist.

The larger message is that life, including religious life, operates on different levels. We need to tend to technical details and precise requirements in order to maintain orderly lives. But we also need to contemplate spiritual foundations, the underlying meanings of our technical actions. Thoughtful people plumb into the darkness of philosophical, spiritual yearnings.

A rabbinic teaching has it that wisdom is found in nothingness. Wisdom seeks ultimate meaning, and it begins with the humble and mysterious searching through darkness. But then, the serious seeker will have flashes of insight, glimpses of the light of truth. A person might think, though, that once he/she has “seen the light,” truth has been found once and for all. This is a grave mistake. A person must move to the higher level of wisdom: the ability to see “shadows,” to balance darkness and light, to live with nuances, uncertainties, hints and mysteries. Although knowledge of technical reality is essential, wisdom infuses knowledge with meaning, subtlety, sanctity.

Perhaps this is the message implied by the names of Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur. We begin in darkness, we move to light; but we then strive to live in the shadow of God, a world of shadows and hidden meanings, a world of wisdom and aestheticism, a world of reality and soulfulness.

Angel for Shabbat