

Picture this. A group of people begin gathering just as dawn is breaking. Some come from inside their tents, stepping out into the cool early morning air. Some haven't slept all night, still awake as the darkness gives way to a hazy sunrise. The setting is a dusty and brambly wilderness and the tone is mournful, tense, and weary. The shock of tragedy weighs heavily on the crowd as they slowly begin to piece together the chaos of the previous day and night. A mountain looms large nearby.

At the foot of that mountain, the ground is charred, burnt, the earth is torn, and there's a layer of gold dust on every nearby rock. Moses, their leader, sits with his head in his hands a few hundred feet away.

This is the unwritten setting of the story of Parshat Vayakhel, the words that we read this week. See, the language of parshat Vayakhel is a little repetitive, a little monotonous, just on the edge of "OH MY GOD, ARE WE REALLY STILL TALKING ABOUT THE MISHKAN!?", but the context is not. The context is raw and real and it asks us to be present with the Israelites on the most painful morning of their lives. It's the morning after the tragedy of the Golden Calf - it had been built, danced around, and then it had been utterly destroyed, leaving 3,000 dead in its wake.

Our text then suddenly turns toward the building of the Mishkan, the portable Tabernacle that will carry with us through the wilderness. We've been talking about it for a few weeks now, but we rarely take note of the state of the *people's hearts* when the building of it actually begins. This Mishkan will point us toward the Promised Land, it will house our most deeply held values, it will be the place at which we meet God, but this collaborative, artistic, beautiful, hopeful structure - will have to be built in view of the charred ground and the destructive remnants of the Golden Calf - in the shadow of the Israelites' pain, and under the weight of their most recent losses. Those are the circumstances under which they will have to build the vehicle for their own redemption and freedom.

I believe we are, right now, living in a Parshat Vayakhel moment. And I think this parsha has what to offer us as we discern how to navigate the chaos in which **we** are living. We're waking up, day after day, to the charred remnants and the injured people left in the wake of this administration's actions, in the shadow of this ongoing destruction. Feeling as the Israelites might have, confused, afraid, overwhelmed, despairing. And, in the midst of it all, we know as well, that the only way out is to begin acting, and building vehicles, for our own redemption and freedom. Even if we have to do it under the weight of the destruction wrought just the night before.

As we step out of **our** tents this week, we see the wake of destruction left by three airplanes carrying more than 200 immigrants, headed for a jail in El Salvador, many of whom were not charged with a crime, were not afforded due process, but were loaded onto a plane and flown, potentially against judicial orders, to a foreign country they are not from, sold to that country, to participate in hard labor. Their heads were shaved, they were shackled into submissive positions, and recorded in a propaganda video for the world to see. And we have no idea who

they all are. Possibly one is a soccer player, possibly one is a gay tattoo artist. And now they are lost to their families.

And the earth is deeply scarred from the ripping up of norms and covenants and basic expectations from a democratic nation. From this, we understand that we are meant to feel **afraid**. Afraid for these individuals and afraid of what it means that our government can now grab anybody and deport them without proof of anything. And therefore perhaps we should keep our head down and just try to stay off their radar.

And then we glance back at the destruction site and we see the aftermath of the attacks on social security that will make it so hard for seniors to access these lifeline payments. And we see the moves to dismantle the department of education and we realize these are attacks on our oldest and our youngest, on life's first curious and hopeful beginnings and on the chance to age with dignity and security. And we see that from **this**, we are meant to feel despair and overwhelm and sadness. And maybe we should just make sure our own parent or our own child is okay, because the barrage is so exhausting.

And then we see out of our peripheral vision the shattered remnants of the Pentagon removing from their databases references to the Navajo Code Talkers, to LGBTQ folks, to Black people, to women, and to the Holocaust. From this, we see, we are meant to feel demoralized and exasperated and angry. And maybe we should just wander away from this site because it's all so futile.

This week, Heather Cox Richardson, a political historian, quoted Harvard Law professor Ryan Doerfler and Yale professor of law and history Samuel Moyn reflecting on the limitations of the courts, that the way forward **must** be enacted "in Congress, at government workplaces, and in the streets." The building of our vehicles of redemption and freedom, they suggest, is in the people's hands. Even under the weight of all these things and much more.

Back in Parshat Vayakhel, the Israelites, also feeling fear, sadness, and demoralization, receive instruction to build the Mishkan and they, too, realize that it won't be built by God or even by Moses. It must be built by the people. So how will they do it, from this state they are in?

We read first a repetition of the gifts they're all to bring, and then we read *v'chol chacham lev bachem*, that all who are wise of heart, who are skilled, come forward. And dozens of verses have gone by. But still . . . no work is done, no Mishkan is built. Just lists and materials and commands. Until . . . we read this:

And Moses said to the Israelites: רְאוּ קָרָא יְהוָה בְּשֵׁם בְּצִלְאֵל בֶּן־אֹרִי בֶן־חֹר

See, יהוה has singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, endowing him with a divine spirit of wisdom, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft.

וְלִהְיוֹת נֹתֵן בְּלִבּוֹ

And to be able to teach, to communicate, with the people.

And suddenly, everything changes and the work finally begins. Even with their broken hearts and their beaten down bodies, they begin to build something together, with creativity, and beauty, with compassion, and patience, and skill, and artistry, they build the vehicle of their own redemption. Not in spite of the charred earth next to them, but in response to it.

So what changed? What did Betzalel bring, and what can we learn from this, sitting here as we are, knowing that we, too, need to build such a Mishkan in response to all that's happening?

I want to suggest three things that happen when Betzalel comes onto the scene:

First - the text tells us that Betzalel became expert in every craft that the people knew and needed, including the ability to speak to their hearts. So he was able to communicate to each person in their own language, encouraging them gently in their craft, seeing clearly their gifts. "Good, yes, that's beautiful, now twist the linen this way, now solder the metal that way, just as you are, sand the wood smooth, beautiful job." An understanding person honoring deeply what each person truly had to offer. We may not have one Betzalel here and now, but perhaps we have many Betzalels in each other - encouraging one another, speaking to each other's hearts. Can't we do that for each other? Wouldn't that help some? To hear a gentle voice next to you, saying - that's really something, what you do - your gifts are needed here. This lifted the people.

Second, we learn that Betzalel is called by *b'shem*, by name, and so commentators make a lot of what his name is. In a Talmudic compilation called Ayn Ya'akov, Moses tells him: "clearly, you are "B'tzel, El, in the "tzel," in the shadow of God. Picture what this means for the people, to have looked around and felt **sheltered** and **enveloped** under a shadow of God - to not feel alone, but instead, protected and connected to all that is. Trying to access this Betzaleliness can help us now, too. To see ourselves and others sheltered by a canopy of God, of universe, of utter connectedness. When we are afraid and sad and demoralized - to go outside and to breathe the fresh air. To go somewhere that reminds us that we are connected to all things, that the world is way bigger than this small space, that history is longer than this short chapter. Perhaps that enlivened them, and can enliven us.

And finally, for a third way that Betzalel transforms their moment, let's play with his name one more time. Betzalel also sounds like *B'tzlil* - with sound, with song, with cymbals - *tz'lil* can be something resonant that gets inside of us and fills the space. A joyful noise, it appears in Psalm 150 as we praise God with all the instruments we have. Perhaps Betzalel also brought the *tz'lil* of laughter, the *tz'lil* of song, freeing the Israelites' hearts toward hope and joy. When the goal is for us to be demoralized and afraid - such things matter.

Historian of authoritarianism, Ruth Ben Ghat, teaches: “Joy and optimism can play a big part in (preventing the horrors of autocracy). Far from being cringe-worthy, joy is precious and noble and (is) also the basis of effective anti-authoritarian strategy.”

Now, I understand that THIS sermon is not that funny or joyful, for which I apologize, but perhaps Betzalel’s presence will remind us how critical the sounds of joy and laughter really are when we are feeling so low, but there’s a Mishkan to be built.

So here we are, in a Vayakhel moment. We are the builders and the artists and the organizers and the strategists and the lawyers and the activists and the sign makers and the phone callers and the joke tellers and the protesters and the gentle voices of encouragement.

What will we each do as the sun rises again, against a backdrop of the destruction wrought?

May we turn toward one another for and with loving encouragement. May we remember that this moment is bigger than today, and we are connected to God and universe and nature and each other and history and future. And may we seek out laughter and play and song and party so we might have the strength we need to pick up the next clasp, the next thread, the next piece of wood, and may we place it, just so, into the structure, into the vehicles of our own redemption and freedom.

Amen. Shabbat shalom.