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Parshat Pekudei: The Art of Teaching Rabbanit Aliza Sperling

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2019

By the end of the Book of Shemot, Bnai Yisrael have created a beautiful sanctuary for God. They are led in this endeavor by, among others, Betsalel and Oholiav, master craftsmen who are described as adept at carving, designing and embroidering, and who are able to shape the donations given by the people into objects of beauty. Earlier (Shemot 35:34), Betsalel and Oholiav are described as having another important talent: “ולהורות נתן בלבו”¹: not only are they able to perform beautiful work, they are also able to teach others their craft. Several commentators note that there are many wise individuals who can create but can't teach, but Betsalel and Oholiav were blessed with the ability to effectively transmit their wisdom to others.

Why is it so important for the Torah to tell us about this teaching ability of Betsalel and Oholiav? Perhaps it is because the act of teaching is a type of artistry and craftsmanship. Both the teacher and the artist need to be able to understand abstract concepts and translate them into new forms. Or perhaps it is because Betsalel and Oholiav's teachings allow them to experience firsthand what it means to be a vessel: the words and ideas flow through them to those who need to hear them. As they craft the holy objects of the Mishkan, they need to keep this lesson in mind: the Mishkan objects are also vessels, meant to carry meaning but not themselves the source of meaning. As beautiful as the objects in the Mishkan are, their true function is to serve as vessels to connect others to Hashem and bring more holiness to the world.

The 18th Century Moroccan commentator Or HaChayim takes a different perspective and focuses on the generosity associated with teaching and sharing one's wisdom. Betsalel and Oholiav do not selfishly guard their secrets in order to maintain their own prestige; rather, they teach and train anyone who wishes to learn. Or HaChayim contrasts Betsalel and Oholiav's generous behavior with several families described in Tractate Yoma who zealously guarded their trade secrets in their work for the Temple later on.

The Mishnah in Yoma 38a condemns the families who would not disclose their secret methods of Temple service:

And these were mentioned to their shame: They of the house of Garmu would not teach anything about the preparation of the showbread; they of the house of Avtinas would not teach anything about the preparation of the incense; Hygros, son of Levi knew a cadence in song but would not teach it; Ben Kamzar would not teach anyone his art of writing. Concerning the former (in the previous Mishnah) it is said: The memory of the righteous shall be for a blessing; concerning the others it is said: But the name of the wicked shall rot.

The Mishnah clearly faults these families for not teaching others their methods; it seems to understand their behavior as selfish. The accompanying Gemara, however, and a parallel sugya in Shir Hashirim Rabbah (3:6), suggest that the behavior of these families is more complicated than it first appears. When asked why they did not share their wisdom with others, members of the Houses of Garmu and Avtinas answered that they had a tradition that the Temple would be destroyed, and they were concerned that if they would teach others their secrets, their special methods of baking and incense preparation would be used for idol worship after the destruction of the Temple. In addition, these families went to great lengths to make sure that there would not

even be the appearance of improper use of their methods for their own honor. The House of Garmu, bread bakers for the Temple, would never eat refined bread of fine flour, and would only eat bread made of coarse flour mixed with bran, so that people would not say that they sustained themselves from the techniques they used from the production of the Temple bread. The craftsmen of the House of Avtinas, who prepared incense for the Temple, never allowed the women in the family to wear perfume so that no one would say that they used the incense to perfume themselves. This does not seem to be the behavior of families who are only interested in their own wealth and prestige.

The Gemara's elaboration of the positions of Beit Garmu and Beit Avtinas complicate the black and white picture painted in the Mishnah. It seems that these families were not necessarily motivated by selfishness or a desire for honor; instead they had real fears of what would happen if they taught others their crafts. Their refusal to teach was born out of fear that their students would misuse the knowledge they would give them. This fear of others might also have led them to their extra stringencies of not eating white bread or using perfume: they were afraid of being misperceived by others.

The members of Beit Garmu and Beit Avtinas were so motivated by fear that they ignored the benefits that could come from sharing their wisdom with others. It felt safer to them to keep the knowledge inside of their small group instead of considering the possible positive impacts that their teaching could have upon individuals outside of their clan. This is an understandable position, but also a stifling one. The fear is so great that it denies other people opportunities for their own growth and learning.

In our parsha, Betsalel and Oholiav, in contrast to the Houses of Garmu and Avtinas, show generosity and courage. They teach and empower others to build the Mishkan, believing in the power of sharing their wisdom with others just as presumably others had shared their wisdom with them. Perhaps, unlike the families of Garmu and Avtinas, they are not concerned that the people will misuse this knowledge because they know that teaching is not mere conveyance of subject material. It involves creation of a relationship between teacher and student, a give and take where both parties are impacted. In such a relationship, the student is no longer a person to be feared; rather s/he is a partner in building a better world.

It can be scary to teach. There is no guarantee that the ideas that mean so much to the teacher will be meaningful to the student, and no horoscope as to whether the student will misinterpret or misuse those ideas. Betsalel and Oholiav's courageous decision l'horot - to teach and share their wisdom, as opposed to the models of Beit Garmu and Beit Avtinas- can be a model for all of us who attempt to teach even as we are vulnerable and uncertain yet dedicated to being a vessel for the One Above.



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