



Bezalel's Leadership: An Additional Step in Leaving Egypt

Rabbi Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

Parashat VaYakhel-Pekudei 5777

Bezalel is a key character in our *parashiyyot*. In Tractate Berakhot (55a), there is a short *sugya* that deals with Bezalel ben Uri, one of the chief artisans building the *mishkan* (tabernacle).

The leadership model that Bezalel represents is an added step in the process of distancing Benei Israel from Egypt

This *sugya* raises varied perceptions regarding the qualities necessary for leadership and the qualifications of a leader. In the following lines I will suggest that this discussion of the leadership model that Bezalel presents, a discussion found at the end of the book of Exodus, is an added step in the distancing from Egypt, a step from a reality in

which Moshe the man of God is the leader, towards the possibility of human leadership of a different kind.

At first glance, the *sugya* has a three-tiered structure according to which Bezalel is a community leader, *parnas*, a leader who has three different qualities: first, he is chosen by God:

ברכות נה עמוד א

אמר רבי יוחנן: שלשה דברים מכריז עליהם הקדוש ברוך הוא בעצמו, ואלו הן: רעב, ושובע, ופרנס טוב... פרנס טוב – דכתיב: "וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר ראה קראתי בשם בצלאל" וגו'

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 55a

Rabbi Yohanan says: The Holy Blessed One decrees three things by Himself, and these are they: famine, plenty, and a good *parnas*... A good *parnas*—as it is written, “God spoke to Moshe, ‘See I have called Bezalel by name.’”

Not only was he chosen by God, but he was also chosen by the people:

אמר רבי יצחק: אין מעמידין פרנס על הצבור אלא אם כן נמלכים בצבור

Rabbi Yitzhak said: They do not set up a *parnas* over the congregation unless they consult with the congregation.

And finally, he is described as wise:

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן: בצלאל על שם חכמתו נקרא

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said Rabbi Yohanan said: Bezalel was called because of his wisdom.

But rereading the *sugya* that we have before us reveals two disputes dealing with the legitimacy of Bezalel's leadership, disputes that raise two questions about the validity and merit of his position. First, comes the question of whether Bezalel was chosen by God or by the people, and secondly comes the question of how his wisdom is defined and measured: Is it measured by its force of prophecy, in other words by the degree to which he sticks to a premeditated, known divine plan, or is it actually measured by its creativity and its ability to

suggest change vis-à-vis a plan that is presented before Bezalel (in this case a plan presented to him by Moshe)?

Who elected Bezalel, or how does one locate a communal leader that is worthy of his public position?

In his dictionary, Ben Yehuda defines the word *parnas* as follows: “An agent, one who feeds and provides.” He actually uses the word “administrator” as a non-Hebrew defining word and thus emphasizes the significance of giving, administering, that is embedded in the word. Moreover, Ben Yehuda adds another realm of meaning and explains that a *parnas* is also “a leader, the head of the community, manager, *gabbai*.” Bezalel who is introduced in our *parashah*, before the people, is represented in the literature of the sages as the paragon of a *parnas*:

אמר רבי יוחנן: שלשה דברים מכריז עליהם הקדוש ברוך הוא בעצמו, ואלו הן: רעב, ושובע,
ופרנס טוב... פרנס טוב – דכתיב: "וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר ראה קראתי בשם בצלאל" וגו'

Rabbi Yohanan says: The Holy Blessed One decrees three things by Himself, and these are they: famine, plenty, and a good *parnas*... A good *parnas*—as it is written, “God spoke to Moshe, “See I have called Bezalel by name.””

One can understand the financial/administrator role attributed to Bezalel through the word *parnas*, in light of some other biblical passages that are in close proximity to the election of Bezalel:

שמות לא, א'-ג'

וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: רְאֵה קָרָאתִי בְשֵׁם בְּצַלְאֵל בֶּן אוּרִי בֶן חוּר לְמִטָּה יְהוּדָה: נֶאֱמַלְא אֶתוּ רֹחַ אֱלֹהִים
בְּחֻכְמָה וּבְתִבּוּנָה וּבְדַעַת וּבְכָל מְלָאכָה

Shemot 31:1-3

God spoke to Moshe: See, I have singled out by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Yehudah. I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft.

This election is in close proximity to demanding the collection of the half *shekel* tax for the *mishkan*. In other words, it seems that the narrator of this *midrash* does not understand the choice of Bezalel only on the basis of his knowledge, wisdom, and abilities, as one might assume from a direct reading of the verses. Rather, he connects this choice of Bezalel to what was described earlier in the verses, the commandment on collecting half a *shekel*, and possibly also the collection of the *terumah* (priestly gift) towards the general building of the *mishkan*.

Rabbi Yohanan's statement is not preoccupied with the definition of Bezalel as a community leader, *parnas*, but rather in the way, the manner, in which he was selected. Rabbi Yohanan is presented as learning from the verses God's direct involvement in the selection of *parnasim* in general.

Right after his statement we find another:

אמר רבי יצחק: אין מעמידין פרנס על הצבור אלא אם כן נמלכים בצבור

Rabbi Yitzhak said: They do not set up a *parnas* over the congregation unless they consult with the congregation.

In the name of Rabbi Yitzhak, it is claimed that a communal leader must be voted by the community. He too proves his statement upon the case of Bezalel:

שנאמר: "ראו קרא ה' בשם בצלאל (שמות לה, ל') אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: משה, הגון עליך

בצלאל? אמר לו: ריבונו של עולם, אם לפניך הגון – לפני לא כל שכן? אמר לו: אף על פי כן, לך אמור להם. הלך ואמר להם לישראל: הגון עליכם בצלאל? אמרו לו: אם לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא ולפניך הוא הגון – לפנינו לא כל שכן?

As it is said, “See, God called Bezalel by name” (Shemot 35:5). The Holy Blessed One said to Moshe: Moshe, so you consider Bezalel suitable? He said to Him: Sovereign of the Universe, if You think he is suitable, all the more so I must! Said [God] to him: Even so, go and say to them. He went and said to Israel: Do you consider Bezalel suitable? They replied: If the Holy Blessed One and you consider him suitable, all the more so we must!

The sages dispute each other and present different approaches regarding the way in which a worthy communal leader need be selected. While Rabbi Yoḥanan adheres to divine choice, Rabbi Yitzḥak suggests a different model of leadership, leadership of the people and by the people. According to this read by Rabbi Yitzḥak, the human voice is enhanced in the choosing of Bezalel to become a leader. Moreover, There is a divine requirement for greater human involvement, and even an aspiration for a human stamp of approval.

Bezalel's wisdom: Prophecy or craftsmanship?

As the *sugya* continues, there is a third statement quoted that deals with the definition of Bezalel's wisdom:

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן: בצלאל על שם חכמתו נקרא

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani said Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Bezalel was called because of his wisdom.

One can read this statement as a third and separate possibility regarding the reason behind

Bezalel's being elected for leadership. According to this statement, Bezalel represents a model of leadership that does not arise from divine choice and is not based on human election, but rather on personal merit. In modern terms we might see Bezalel as a civil servant, not an elected official, and not a man of the cloth. A civil servant who is appointed on the basis of his abilities, talents, and wisdom.

And indeed the *sugya* turns to demonstrate Bezalel's unique wisdom :

בשעה שאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: לך אמור לו לבצלאל עשה לי משכן ארון וכלים, הלך משה והפך, ואמר לו: עשה ארון וכלים ומשכן. אמר לו: משה רבינו, מנהגו של עולם – אדם בונה בית ואחר כך מכניס לתוכו כלים, ואתה אומר: עשה לי ארון וכלים ומשכן! כלים שאני עושה – להיכן אכניסם? שמא כך אמר לך הקדוש ברוך הוא: עשה משכן ארון וכלים. אמר לו: שמא בצל אל היית וידעת!

When the Holy Blessed One said to Moshe, “Go and tell Bezalel to make me a *mishkan*, an ark and vessels.” Moshe went and reversed the order, saying, “Make an ark and vessels and a *mishkan*.” Bezalel said to him: “Moshe, our Teacher, the way of the world is that one first builds a house and then brings vessels into it; but you say, ‘Make me an ark and vessels and a *mishkan*.’ Where shall I put the vessels that I am to make? Can it be that the Holy Blessed One said to you, ‘Make a *mishkan*, an ark, and vessels?’” Moshe said to him: “Perhaps you were in the shadow of God (*be-tzel El*) and knew!”

One can understand this text in two different divergent and disputing ways: According to the first, Bezalel's greatness is expressed in the fact that he anticipated what was God's opinion as a sort of prophet who exists in the shadows of the divine, *be-tzel El*, Bezalel understood what were in fact God's guiding wishes. But according to a different read of the same text, Bezalel's greatness is manifest in his ability to think in a critical way about the guidelines set before him. He responds in a logical and creative way to the guidelines that Moshe presented him with, and chooses not to follow them. These two divergent reads

raise the question of whether Bezalel's greatness is embedded in his ability to be a kind of prophet, or in his being a skilled artisan, and thus embedded in creativity that stems from logical and critical thinking.

Ending the book of Shemot in motion towards human sovereignty

Placing these disputes around a central character that appears at the end of the book of Shemot raises the notion that we have before us one further step in the process of moving away from Egyptian slavery and the social constructs that it requires. One more step away from a reality in which God is the only source of sovereignty, the one who chooses accordingly the leader of the people just as He chose, for example, Moshe, the man of God and his prophet. We can see in this a divinely inspired movement towards human election of leadership, leadership whose power stems from critical and creative thinking also when it comes across the divine voice.