

## **The Art of Worship** **Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer**

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### *Parshat Ki Tisa*

There is a curious pattern in this week's Torah portion. As we begin the reading, we are told of the ingredients of the oil with which the *Ohel Mo'ed*, the Tent of Meeting, was to be anointed. And not just the ingredients, but the exact amounts. Exodus 30:23-24 is more than just a list of ingredients; it is the recipe, to be followed exactly. Curiously, however, the text then immediately tells us (G\*d speaking to Moses) that the oil is to be prepared by a skilled perfumer. Why? Any reasonably intelligent individual can follow the instructions; the recipe is quite specific. Why is a skilled perfumer needed?

G\*d then instructs Moses to make an incense compound, and once again the exact proportions are given. We feel that anyone can follow the instructions, but G\*d specifies again that it is to be prepared by a master perfumer.

And then – third time's the charm – even though the details of the *Ohel Mo'ed's* construction have already been specified (in last week's reading), G\*d specifies not just that a skilled artist be engaged to do the work but that Betzalel, the son of Uri and grandson of Miriam and her husband Hur, be the artist, because **I have filled him with a Divine Spirit of wisdom and understanding.**

Three times G\*d gives explicit instructions for the preparation or construction of the holy material, and three times G\*d then specifies that a master artist be engaged to do the work, once even specifying the name of the artist.

Betzalel! What a wonderful name, especially for an artist! I have never fully understood why it is that we translate Native American names but try to reproduce the sounds of Hebrew names. *Betzalel* is his Hebrew name, and it means *In-G\*d's-Shadow*. Only one who consciously stands in G\*d's Shadow, it seems, can be trusted to direct the work of building the Sanctuary, the Tabernacle, the sacred vessels. And we are again moved to ask why.

The simple construction of a building, even (perhaps we should say especially) a temporary building, can be done by anyone who has learned how to place one stone upon another. The instructions have been given, and it is only necessary to follow the instructions. Certainly, stone masonry is not a simple task, but it is a learnable task. Betzalel was not chosen to lead the construction crew because he was an outstanding stone mason; he was chosen because G\*d had endowed him with a Divine Spirit; he was an artist, and that is, perhaps, the point of the choice.

Doing is not enough, even doing supremely well. We can all learn to do, each according to his or her abilities. Even knowing is not enough. Through knowing, through the acquisition of knowledge, we can understand. In-G\*d's-Shadow had the ability to do and to do very well. He had the ability to understand and to understand profoundly. But that was not enough to make him G\*d's choice to lead the team building the Tabernacle and preparing its vessels and other material objects. More important was the fact that In-G\*d's-Shadow had been endowed by G\*d with a Divine Spirit of wisdom in addition to understanding. He was able to *feel*, as any true artist must.

The construction of the Tabernacle was not just the erection of a portable building; it had to be a work of art, and this is, perhaps, one of the essential lessons of this week's Torah portion. Our worship is to be more than just going through the motions, even more than going through the motions with understanding; we are obligated to make it an art form! This is our art – our worship of G\*d – and it is from this that we derive the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, beautification of the mitzvah. Not just the doing, not just the understanding, but the feeling. When we see a fine painting or sculpture, when we listen to a great piece of music, it is not the precision of the execution that moves us, but the artistry, the feeling, the passion. And so, we are taught by the choice of In-G\*d's-Shadow as leader of the Tabernacle-building team, should we prepare our prayers. If our prayers are exactly the same week after week, we have not engaged in the art of prayer. The words may be exactly the same – the formulas for the oil and incense and the dimensions of the Tabernacle and its vessels were specified – but that “something special,” the artistry, will be different each time we pray, each time we read the Torah, each time we study the sacred writings.

I heard from my teacher, Rabbi Joseph Gelberman, that, when he was very young, he would accompany his father to the synagogue.

*He once asked his father, “Papa, where are we going?”  
“We are going to the synagogue,” his father answered.  
“What are we going to do there?”  
“We are going to hear the reading of this week's portion of the Torah.”  
“Didn't we hear that reading last year?”  
“Yes, we did.”  
“And isn't the Torah exactly the same as it was last year?”  
“Yes, my son; the Torah is the same as it was last year. But, my son, are you the same as you were last year?”*

To an understanding that we are not the same as we were last year and to a realization of the art of worship, may we all soon be led.

Shabbat Shalom.