

Be Bold (Edited Transcript)

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This week's parsha, Vayakhel, is about the actual construction of the Tabernacle, the magnificent Mishkan which served as the prototype for the Temple that would one day be built.

The Ramban, one of our classic commentators from the Middle Ages, asks, how did they build it? Where did they learn the skills to craft things from gold and silver? They were a slave nation. Their only work experience was menial labour, with bricks and mortar - indeed very coarse work which did not require a high level of skill. The Mishkan required a lot of skill and special talent to put it together. How did they do it?

The power of boldness

The parsha (35:21) says that every person asher nesao libo vechol asher nadva rucho, 'whose heart was lifted up and anyone whose spirit was generous' came forward to contribute to the building of the Mishkan. We tend to think about contributions in terms of money only, but this verse describes two kinds of contributions: there are those who are able to contribute money and there are others who are able to give of their skills and their time. This verse describes how some of the people came forward to volunteer their time and their talent. The verse says 'their hearts lifted them up,' which the Ramban explains means they had the boldness to come forward and say, we don't know how to work with gold or silver or how construct the Mishkan, but we are going to try. And they did, and were successful.

The Ramban asks similarly about Betzalel ben Uri, the project manager of the Mishkan; where was he trained? He grew up in Egypt; where could he have learned these skills? And yet, when G-d instructed Moshe to appoint Betzalel, he accepted the appointment, and all of them worked in an area in which they had no training or expertise. They courageously came forward, tried and succeeded.

The actions of the people who came forward to build the Mishkan demonstrate heroism and determination to overcome all odds. We never know the potential of another person, nor, even, do we know our own potential. Rav Mordechai Gifter cites the Midrash Tanchuma on Betzalel's appointment which says that every person has three names : the name given by one's parents, the name given by other people, and the name one gives to him? or herself. Rav Gifter explains that the name in this passage refers to a person's identity. Parents obviously have a major influence in creating the child's identity, as do one's peers and society. But ultimately, it's the name that you choose for yourself, that is the identity you discover and create for yourself, that determines who you are. This identity is buried deep within the neshama, the soul, and refers to the special calling to use the unique abilities and talents that G-d has given each one of us. In order to discover this calling we must live with action and boldness, which bring out the deep inner resources of a person's neshama.

People sometimes underestimate themselves. They think, how can I do this? The lesson of these heroes in the desert is that they just came and did it. They didn't know how to work with the gold and the silver; they didn't have any special skill, but they were determined to try. When we throw ourselves into something, we can be amazed to discover the results. This applies in many spheres in life - making a living, supporting a family with dignity, raising children, keeping mitzvos - all the different aspects of life where we sometimes feel someone else might be capable, but not us; that it's too difficult. People sometimes say some mitzvos are too hard - I can't give the right amount of charity, Shabbos is too difficult, etc., but if we really believe in ourselves, we will be amazed at the inner strength we have and what we can achieve when we just throw ourselves into something. But with each of these challenges we must throw ourselves in and when we do, we discover the most remarkable internal resources buried deep within our neshama which, without our having tried, would never have been brought to the fore. The human capacity for greatness is unlimited. We are created in Hashem's image and our neshama has awesome potential which we cannot even begin to fathom - not in ourselves, and certainly not in others.

Only G-d knows our full potential

Only G-d can see that inner calling and full potential of a person. Rav Gifter brings as an example the passage in Tanach where Samuel the Prophet comes to anoint the new king. He comes to the house of Yishai, Jesse. He knows it's one of Jesse's sons but he doesn't know which one. Eliav walks in, tall and handsome, and Samuel thinks he's the king. But G-d says, don't look at his appearance, for man sees what his eyes behold but G-d sees into the heart. And as we know, in the end it wasn't Eliav but David who was anointed as king. Rav Gifter says we cannot say that Samuel the Prophet, who was such a great man, would be swayed by the externalities of a person. Such a great prophet would not think Eliav was the king simply because he was tall and handsome. Rather, Samuel saw the **spiritual** greatness within Eliav and assumed he had what it takes to be king; still, he was mistaken. We never fully know the incredible resources and potential that lie beneath the surface of our personality. Only Hashem saw the enormous inner potential of David before he became king. It was only after assuming the responsibilities of leadership that King David's full potential started to emerge. The greatness of human potential is buried deep inside the neshama and is only perceptible to G-d Himself, and the only way that it comes out is when we rise to the occasion and act boldly.

Facing challenges

In the context of the bold artisans of the Mishkan, Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz writes that when Rav Yisrael Salanter, one of the great rabbinic leaders of the 19th century, saw people being led after the *haskalah* - the so-called 'enlightenment' movement which was luring people away from the service of Hashem, he told his students they mustn't become intimidated and despondent and think they can't do anything about it. They must go out there and change the world, and indeed his students did.

To give a more personal example, about six years ago, when I sat down with a group of people and we realised we have to do something to stop crime, I had no knowledge about fighting crime; but I knew something had to be done. It was the same as in the desert, where they didn't know how to craft things out of gold and silver, but they realised something had to be done because otherwise the Mishkan wasn't going to be built. I realised that as a community we needed to work out a solution to crime, and that is how Community Active Patrol (CAP) was born. Obviously, any success comes about only with Hashem's blessing, but we have to throw ourselves in and face life's challenges. So often people get intimidated by life's challenges. Sometimes, G-d forbid, a person is struck by bereavement, illness or some other challenge and they think, how am I going to cope with this? Will I ever find the strength? But within each one of us lies the strength and ability to cope, strength which we cannot even begin to measure or realise until we put it into action.

Envisioning the bigger picture

Rav Yerucham Levovitz of Mir says that we learn from the people who built the Mishkan, how to have a broad vision of what can be accomplished. They didn't shirk from the task of building the Mishkan, but kept in their minds the vision of the final product. We have to think big about what we want to accomplish. Rav Yerucham says specifically within the realm of serving Hashem one has to have the desire to achieve great things. He quotes the passage in the Talmud which says a person has to say, when will my deeds reach the greatness of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In truth, who could possibly hope for that? But we have to believe that we are capable of great things and only when we believe we are capable of great things can we go out and achieve them.

Having a sense of dignity and self-worth enables us to achieve

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz says that we can learn something else from the heroic builders of the mishkan. Aside from the vision and the boldness, there is another necessary component for achieving, and that is belief in ourselves. This, says Rav Shmuelevitz, is an important principle which affects our behaviour, and is probably the most effective way of combating the *yetzer hara* (the evil inclination) and avoiding sin. When we have a sense of who we are, we know that sin is beneath us; as we say in Yiddish, *es past nit*, it doesn't pass, it's just not right for us. If you believe in yourself, then you realise that you are too great to stumble in sin, that it is beneath your dignity. Similarly, belief in oneself can lead a person to achieve great deeds as well, positive things that you didn't even think you were capable of doing. If you believe in yourself, you know you have incredible potential to achieve a great many

things.

Belief in oneself and the realisation that G-d has given each one of us a neshama within which lies awesome potential; and when that potential comes to the fore, then awesome things can be achieved. But the only way that potential comes out and the only way that G-d will help us achieve these great things is if we act. Life is about bringing that potential into action. If we just leave it dormant, we will never even know that it's there. No one but G-d can see it and the only way we will ever actualize it is if we throw ourselves in and try our best to do good, to the full capacity of which we are capable.

The purpose of the journey of life is to bring the potential power of our neshama into actuality. That's why the Maharal of Prague says the human being is called adam from the word adama, earth. The human being, like the earth, is pure potential. A piece of land is only what you make of it. You can build on it; you can fertilise it and make it grow. If you tend to it, it can produce great fruits. It might be the most fertile piece of land but if no effort is put into it, then it will remain barren. So, too, the human being is pure potential; and it is only through bold and determined action that the potential can be realised, and great things achieved. This is what our Parsha teaches us, that we never fully know our own greatness. As G-d said to Samuel the Prophet, don't look the way human beings see it, for only G-d can see man's awesome potential. We can actualise our potential, by having a vision, by believing in ourselves and by acting boldly.