

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף נה עמוד א

אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי יונתן:

בצלאל על שם חכמתו נקרא –

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 א-ל היית, וידעת.

Berakhot 55a

Said Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmeni said Rabbi Yonatan:

Betzalel's name reflects his wisdom –

At the time that The Holy Blessed One said to Mosheh: 'Go, tell Betzalel "Make for me a Tabernacle, Ark, and utensils",

Mosheh went and flipped them, and said to him "Make an Ark and utensils and Tabernacle".

Betzalel said to him: Mosheh our Mentor, the way of the world is that a person builds a house and afterward brings utensils into it, and you are saying to me "Make for me an Ark and utensils and Tabernacle"!? The utensils that I make, where will I store them?! Perhaps The Holy Blessed One actually said to you: "Make a Tabernacle, Ark, and utensils!"

Mosheh said to him: Perhaps you were in the shadow of G-d, so that you knew.

This passage presents as if it is motivated by the play on words with Betzalel's name – "In the shadow of God" – but more plausibly it is an effort to explain the differing orders in the various presentations of the construction of Mishkan and accessories (although see Rashi and Tosafot for the difficulties in reconstructing the explanation in detail. Note also that Tanchuma Behaalotkha 11 attributes Betzalel's name instead to his capacity to perfectly reproduce the fiery image G-d showed Mosheh of the Menorah – Betzalel could have done so only if he had somehow seen the same image).

Let us leave aside, for now, the meaning of 'the shadow of G-d'; it suffices as is to explain how Betzalel got it right. But

- a) Why did Mosheh get it wrong?
- b) Why does Betzalel assume (apparently correctly) that "the way of the world" is a compelling guide for the construction of the sacred Tabernacle?

Rav A. Y. Kuk in his **Ein Ayah** (available [here](#); the entire Atid series there is highly worthwhile for those with a deep interest in Judaism and art) answers that for the *chakham*, the default ordering is in accordance with the ways of *chakhmah* and *mussar*, whereas for the *metzayyer hativ'li ha'amiti*, the default ordering is in accordance with the *olam hametziut*. Roughly translated, the philosopher orders things ideally, whereas the artist orders things actually. Rav Kuk goes on to say that the "entire *chokhmah* of the artist" is the exact match of his *tziyyur* with existence.

The radical move Rav Kuk makes, which I'm not sure Plato countenances anywhere, is to allow the artist to correct the Sage. How does he accomplish this, when the Sage sees the true world (of the Forms?),

and therefore should have unmatched clarity of vision? Rav Kuk suggests that Divine commands related to art should follow the canons of the discipline of art, which he associates with fidelity to the real over the ideal, and which he implies is a discipline impenetrable to philosophy.

So in this case Mosheh wished the utensils to be made in order of holiness, whereas Betzalel suggested that the Tabernacle be made first so that the utensils would not be left exposed.

This passage of Rav Kuk is often used as a resource for Jewish validation of art, but I wish here to raise a few issues with regard to that utilization.

1) It seems to me that Rav Kuk here is working within a Platonic scheme, in which art is not at core a creative, but rather a reproductive, endeavor. Art's purpose is to show us things as they truly are, to physically represent form/*tziyyur*. This is not the way many contemporary artists self-conceive, and we need to think about whether we wish to bind Judaism to this understanding of art, or whether we can limit the scope of Rav Kuk's definition to some but not all artists.

2) Rav Kuk presents artistic and philosophic vision as innate natural tendencies, rather than as choices or achievements.

3) Rav Kuk's construction of Mosheh's argument seems to me to take sides in a midrashic dispute as to why human beings were created last – does this indicate that the world was created for humanity, or rather that humanity was created for the world? This of course may depend on whether you emphasize the first or second creation story (should humanity dominate or serve-and-preserve the earth), and also rejects Rav Aharon Soloveitchik's argument that women must be holier than men, since they are created afterward (at least in the second creation story).

It seems to me possible that the Talmud's point here is that Betzalel is a craftsman rather than an artist, by which I mean – and I know those are loaded terms – that he understands objects in the context of their function – their *sitz im leben* - rather than their pure symbolism. In other words, he sees the utensils as accessories for the Mishkan, which accordingly have no purpose until the Mishkan exists. Rav Kuk, by contrast, sees the Mishkan as the container for the Ark, with no independent purpose. Alternatively, one could combine my understanding of Betzalel with Rav Kuk's of Mosheh, and thus have this be the issue between Mosheh and Betzalel.

To be, I hope, continued and refined.

Happy Shushan Purim, and Shabbat shalom

Aryeh Klapper