

‘THE BETZALEL MADE THE ARK...’

Exodus 37:1

You will not find that Betzalel himself made any of the vessels of the Tabernacle, except for the Ark. All the other work, all the other vessels [were made only] at his command and with his advice. So, why is it explicit in relation to the Ark that it was his work alone and that he made it with his own hand? Because there the ‘shadow’ (*tzel*) of the Holy Blessed One, who concentrated the divine presence there, was manifest. Therefore, they called him BETZALEL [meaning, ‘in the shadow of God’] to make the ‘shadow’ (*tzel*) of the Holy Blessed One [manifest] between the two cherubim...

Midrash Tanchuma, Vayakhel §7

A tale of the Ba‘al Shem Tov – peace be upon him: He was [once] giving a lesson, as was his way, when he said the following: ‘This vessel is made of clay and was given cohesion by human action.’

He said that matter was simply matter, but that the form was [the crucial thing], along the lines [of the phrase from *Lecha Dodi*] ‘Last in deed, first in thought.’ Thus, a vessel receives some of the wisdom [of its maker], that is, some of the life-force of the human being is accepted into the life-force of the vessel. So, there exists in the vessel intelligence emanating from the craftsman. Therefore, you can recognise in the labour [spent] on the vessel the behaviour and goodness of craftsman, for it is well known that the branch contains the force of the root. So, be careful to understand.

Now, there stood before him a lovely jug of spirits, and he said: ‘It is the case that in this vessel I see that its craftsman was a man without legs, and it is the case that the coherence of this vessel is due to emanation and intelligence. If one were to exclude [the craftsman’s] intelligence from the vessel, this vessel would have no coherence.’

After the lesson, a student took the jug in his hand to stand it up on a bench, and as soon as the vessel was standing, it disintegrated into bits, as [it had been] at first.

Anon., Kitvei Qodesh (‘Holy Writings’) (Lublin, 1928), pp. 34b-c.

[These two passages are brought together only in Shim‘on Menachem Mendel of Govarchov (ed.), Sefer Ba‘al Shem Tov [‘The Book of the Good Master of the Name’] (Jerusalem, n.d.), v. II, p. 82.]

Many years ago, when I was a mere slip of an undergraduate in Washington, DC, I had to read some Marx for my degree in history. I would have preferred to read Groucho Marx, but this was Karl. I read the Communist Manifesto, and thankfully, only selected bits of Das Kapital, and those in English translation.

I read something there which I don't think I really understood at the time, but came to later. Marx said that in modern industrial society workers are alienated from the products they create. Now, I understand this to mean that in pre-industrial societies, when a craftsman made an object they were involved in every step of the process, they *contributed* to every step of the process. (Actually, this was probably not totally true. There were often apprentices and others who did a lot of the more menial tasks, but as a general rule, it was usually the case.)

But in 19th century industry, workers increasingly did only small jobs that contributed only marginally to the finished products. And unlike the master craftsmen, they didn't own their tools or the results of their labour. The capitalist investor did.

In *Vayakhel*, we have, of course, the description of how Betzalel, along with Oholiav, both master craftsmen, oversaw the construction of the Tabernacle, the *mishkan*, and its appurtenances. Obviously, there is no modern industrial process going on here. The resulting *mishkan* was entirely their doing, though it would appear that all credit was given to God.

The piece from the Midrash Tanchuma on your crib sheet seems to understand Betzalel's contribution to the *mishkan*. According to that anonymous teacher, Betzalel brought a particularly spiritual element to the construction of the one item in the *mishkan* that the Torah tells us, he made himself. (It would appear that the rest of the actual work was left to his largely unnamed team. Were these others, to use Marx' term, 'alienated' from their labour? We can only guess.)

Now, before I introduce the passage from the Ba'al Shem Tov, I have a small confession to make. His teaching is only placed in relation to this midrash in the late collection, *Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov*, by its editor. He tells us he found this text in an earlier collection called *Kitvei Kodesh*, but I have looked in two editions of that work, and neither refers to the piece from *Tanchuma*. Nevertheless, I decided to keep these two together, because I like the result.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, for his part, also seemed to understand the contribution of the craftsman to the finished product in an almost Marxist way. If a potter makes a pot, something of that potter's intellect is present in the pot, he says. Marx would have agreed, but add that this is no longer true in modern industry.

But I would suggest that it is true, or at least it should be true.

It looks like we may, perhaps, maybe, אפשר, coming to the end of the Covid 19 pandemic. But at its height, many of us were dependent for food, necessities, and other goods on people driving vans, filling orders at warehouses, performing separate technical tasks in highly mechanised factories or back-breaking labour on farms, and a whole host of other jobs too numerous to mention. At that time, along with doctors, nurses and associated people, they were referred to as 'essential workers.'

But now that the crisis seems to have passed, most of those people have been dubbed 'unskilled labour,' and therefore, not worthy of the higher wages that their status as 'essential workers' might have entitled them to.

Do they feel 'alienated from their labour'? Well, I can't really speak for them, of course. But if they are alienated, perhaps they would feel less so if we, those who benefit from their labour as consumers, demonstrated our support for them. Not by clapping at our front doors, but supporting their efforts towards higher pay, better working conditions, and greater dignity as valued human beings.

Now, I have another confession. I come from a line of American trade unionists. My grandmother, my mother and my father were all involved in their unions. My father was actually a union organiser and negotiator, and both my parents taught me never to cross a union picket line.

Today, surrounded by tales of soaring profits among the multinational corporations and their billionaire owners, we are beginning to see a tide of workers demanding the right to unionise and that their grievances be addressed. Uber, Amazon, to name but two.

If we truly value their work, if we truly value their humanity, I believe we must withhold our custom from such companies, until such time as settlements have been reached, even though that may mean inconvenience and higher costs for us. Both my parents, who agreed on little else, would have agreed with this.

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This Shabbat, I believe, no sermon can avoid mentioning the events in Ukraine. We Jews have a long, and admittedly, not always happy history in Ukraine – I will not go into details, but all of the early generations of Hasidic teachers, and many of their later successors, lived in Ukraine, starting with the Ba'al Shem Tov himself.

For over a thousand years, Ukrainians developed a unique culture, similar but not identical to that of Russia. They have frequently had to struggle to maintain that culture and their independence, first against Poland and then against Russia. And in the last decades, they have forged a democracy, one of only a handful to develop and be maintained in the Former Soviet Union.

Like the craftsman in the midrash and in the Besht's teaching, they have put their intellects, and indeed their hearts and souls, into that creation. It would be an incalculable tragedy if it were to be destroyed before our very eyes.

I therefore urge each you to do what you can to support Ukraine, and the small Ukrainian Jewish communities there. And may God grant that a just and lasting peace come soon.

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