

OPEN SCROLL

An Undergraduate Parsha Sheet for the Harvard Hillel Community

PARSHA VAYAKHEL

February 25-26, 2011

I Adar 22, 5771

Ali Haber

Seven years ago I sat down with this week's parasha, Vayakhel, to write my Dvar Torah for my Bat Mitzvah. My speech about the advantages of adapting tradition to changing times, however, was based on a discontinuity between the parasha and the special Shabbat HaChodesh haftarah, so, alas, I could not be lazy and recycle it this year. Ironically, the short and rather terse haftarah from 1 Kings that goes with Vayakhel on this normal Shabbat caused me to come to a very different conclusion about the idea of change.

Vayakhel details the construction of the Tabernacle by B'nei Yisrael in the desert, listing the materials and measurements for everything from the tent pegs to the priests' garments to the decorative buds and blossoms adorning the lampstands. The text is, frankly, a bit tedious; however, one particular aspect caught my attention: the word "heart" (*lev*), appears no less than fourteen times in the first third of the parasha. Moses calls upon the people to bring materials and creative skills and come help build the Tabernacle, and everyone who is "willing of heart" (*nediv lev*) brings copious offerings, while those who are "wise of heart" (*chacham lev*) contribute their sewing, crafting, and building talents to the effort. The response to this call for help is overwhelming: Moses even has to eventually ask the people to cease bringing materials due to oversupply.

The haftarah, taken from 1 Kings 7, paints a very different picture of a similar story: Solomon's construction of the First Temple. The parallels are obvious: both texts relate in great detail the building of a holy space replete with furnishings for G-d to dwell in among the people of Israel, but there are several important differences. Solomon commissions all the work to be done by a single skilled artisan named Hiram, and according to the haftarah, Hiram fashions all of the sacred objects from bronze or solid gold. This contrasts with the story in Vayakhel, where the text specifies not only that many people helped with the building of the Tabernacle, but states

explicitly that both men and women were involved: there were no limits on who was "willing" or "wise" enough to contribute. Additionally, many of the holy objects and adornments made for the Tabernacle were crafted of acacia wood and then covered in gold – a simpler, probably more economic, and definitely less grandiose option than the solid gold of Solomon's columns, vessels, and lamps.

There is an important lesson to be learned here: bigger, faster, and fancier is not always better. We see this in our own lives all the time: when leadership is passed into new hands, when it comes time to update or replace the old and the worn-out, or when we try to duplicate something that has been done before, we often tend to automatically use the newest methods and best materials at our disposal. As a result, though, we sometimes lose much of what made the original endeavor a success in the first place: heart.

Hiram may have built a very impressive, expensive Temple, but nowhere in the Haftarah does *lev* appear even once. There is no humble acacia wood, no colorful, hand-woven curtains, no teamwork, and no heart. When something amazing comes out of the efforts of a pioneering group of people working together for a common cause, it is a truly beautiful thing. But when the next generation tries to replicate or expand upon it, they must be careful, amidst all their new methods, fancy materials, efficiency, and expertise, not to lose the original cause. We may have new tools, solid gold, and professional carpenters; but that acacia core, painstakingly whittled by someone's uncle, represents so much more. The second time around will never live up to the first if we don't put in the same eager communal effort and the same heart.

Ali Haber '14 lives in Holworthy, plays rugby, and sings in Shani. She intends to concentrate pretty hard... once she decides in what.

Rachel Zax

Let's play a game. Which words don't belong in the following paragraph?

"This is what the Lord has commanded: Take from among you gifts to the Lord [...] And let all among you who are skilled come and make all that the LORD has commanded [...] Thus the Israelites, all the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work that the Lord, through Moses, had commanded to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord."

These words are found in the section of this week's parsha describing the building of the Tabernacle, the portable dwelling place for God's presence that the Israelites would carry with them through their wanderings in the desert. What seems odd is the juxtaposition of the words "the Lord has commanded" with the idea of "gifts," given by those "whose hearts moved them," as a "freewill offering." What does it mean to do something "freely" but also at the command of a higher power?

As college students, this is a dilemma we encounter every day. We (or at least I) spend most of our time complaining about, and occasionally actually doing, the work we've been assigned in our classes. To be fair, we did freely choose to attend college, and we do choose exactly the classes we want to take, but once we're here and our classes are picked and the add/drop deadline has passed, we have little choice but to do the work our professors tell us to do. And sometimes it's difficult or uninteresting or 4:00 in the morning, and we just can't bring ourselves to approach our studies with the passion and enthusiasm

that we like to pretend we've retained past the first semester of freshman year. How can we appreciate the joy of learning and discovery, when everything we do is for the sake of fulfilling requirements set by somebody else?

But when you really think about it, what we're doing isn't for anyone else. In the parsha, God doesn't actually need the Israelites to bring Him gifts and build Him a home. The Tabernacle is not really for God's sake, but for the Israelites themselves, providing them with a means by which to strengthen their relationship with God. The Israelites contributed their gifts joyfully and out of free will, not because God needed them, but because of their own desire to draw themselves closer to God. Similarly, my math professor is not depending on me to demonstrate the applications of Cauchy's theorem, and the TF for my core is probably not that interested in what I have to say about the role of women in the ancient Greek novels. Even though we hand in our papers and problem sets at the behest of our instructors, the work we do is really for ourselves. It's easy to get distracted by fulfilling requirements or maintaining a GPA or building up credentials we'd like to be able to claim after we graduate. But the most important thing (after getting into med school) is to take advantage of opportunities to freely explore the things we think are interesting, and to enjoy what we're doing every day.

Rachel Zax '12 is a Mathematics Concentrator in Adams House. She is trying to convince herself that switching one of her classes to pass/fail at the last minute was a good idea.

UPCOMING EVENTS AT HARVARD HILLEL

Tuesday, March 1:

6 PM: Parsha HaShavuah, Hillel Dining Hall

Enjoy dinner at Hillel while exploring the weekly Parsha.

9 PM: *Srugim*, Lamont Library

The Israeli TV show critics call a "pop culture phenomenon!"

Wednesday, March 2:

6:30 PM: Talmud Class, Hillel Solarium

Learn Talmud in a traditional class that will focus on Tractate Beitzah!

Thursday, March 3

6:30 PM: Level II Hebrew Course, Smith Hall, Hillel

This free follow-up course enables participants to strengthen their Hebrew reading skills. All participants will receive a student text.

8 PM: Mishmar, Beren Hall, Hillel

Come for the fantastic cholent, come for the intriguing and fascinating Torah learning sessions, or come to just hang out with friends.

Saturday, March 5

7:30 PM: Eurovision Study Break, Hillel Lounge

Enjoy four decades of Israeli music – and a whole lot of disco!

Open Scroll is brought to you weekly by the Harvard Hillel Education Committee. If you would like to contribute or have questions or comments, please email Samuel Milner at smilner13@college.harvard.edu.