

Vayakhel 5782
The Head and the Heart
Rabbi Betsy Forester

The Head and the Heart is an Indie folk band I like very much. Jonathan Russel, one of the band's founding members, explains how they chose their name: "Your head is telling you to be stable and find a good job," he says, "and you know in your heart that *this* is what you're supposed to do..." Parashat Vayakhel is about a group of just-liberated slaves doing something that seems to make no sense: In the desert wilderness, they are building an elaborate home for the the Divine, and despite being completely dependent on God for food, protection, and direction, they produce an overabundance of luxury items for the task. It is a deeply human story of passion and devotion, and a most sacred one.

We believe Torah to be Divine, whether that means God's word given at Sinai or human attempts to capture Divine encounter and inspiration. In a piece published in the book *Torah Queeries*, Rabbi Jill Hammer delineates Revelation into two modes: Sinai and Mishkan. "Sinai revelation" refers to God's word coming to our ancestors as laws and principles proclaimed from a mountaintop. "Mishkan revelation" has to do with the Tabernacle that is the subject of our parashah. "Mishkan" revelation is much more human. Sinai revelation, in Hammer's words, "is transcendent law, Divine in origin," and treats everyone equally, "touch[ing] every member of the Covenant with its truths, whereas Mishkan Revelation relies on the inner wisdom and individual gifts of the people."

We see the move from Sinai to Mishkan in our parashah, when the reminder to observe Shabbat is followed, immediately, by God's command to "take from among you a gift for the Eternal," gifts from all "those whose hearts are willing" (ex. 35:5).

Hammer writes: "Although the pattern of the Mishkan comes from the Eternal, the gifts that make the sanctuary what it is come from the depths of the human heart." Through the art that is created there, by humans employing their own creative wisdom touched by the Divine spirit, our ancestors, and even we, can transform our experience of Torah itself.

The Mishkan cannot be built only by following Divine commands. It can only be brought into existence by people whose hearts are moved to create it from gifts given heartfully. And oh, how they do give—all people, all genders, all enthusiasm and desire for closeness with the Divine, with and through one another, giving as they are moved, until an overabundance of goods are amassed and Moshe must tell them to stop.

A beautiful phrase is used to describe the work of the women who spin the wool. They are called “*nas liban otana bechochmah*”-- those whose hearts lifted them up in wisdom. We cannot help but feel the textured glory of the Mishkan whose splendor emerges from the human process of its creation.

Rabbi Hammer makes a statement I find compelling and gorgeous: “The Tabernacle cannot be built without the wisdom of the heart. The yarn cannot be spun, the jewels cannot be set, the sockets cannot be fit together without the inner knowing of individual people...so, too, we can only build a sacred community when the wisdom of the individual heart has a recognized place alongside the sacred text.”

We sometimes have a tendency to undervalue our own intuitions in the religious realm. We may think that the tradition knows better, and the stirrings of our own hearts should be subdued. We can and should be more brave, and more honest, I believe.

So did Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. In the following quote, he describes this mistake, as he perceives it, first with regard to prayer, and then more broadly:

“There is a specific difficulty with Jewish prayer. There are laws: fixed texts. On the other hand, prayer is worship of the heart, the outpouring of the soul, a matter of devotion. Thus, Jewish prayer is guided by two opposite principles: order and outburst, regularity and spontaneity, uniformity and individuality, law and freedom. These principles are the two poles about which Jewish prayer revolves. Since each of the two moves in the opposite direction, equilibrium can be maintained only if both are of equal force. However, the pole for regularity usually proves to be stronger than the pole of spontaneity, and as a result, there is a perpetual danger of prayer becoming a mere habit, a mechanical performance, an exercise in repetitiousness. The fixed pattern and regularity of our services tend to stifle the spontaneity of devotion. Our great problem, therefore, is how not to let the principle of regularity impair the power of devotion. It is a problem that concerns not only prayer but the whole sphere of Jewish observance. He who is not aware of this central difficulty is a simpleton; he who offers a simple solution is a quack” (in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays* edited by Susannah Heschel, p. 111).

Rabbi Heschel raises a real problem and warns that it will not be solved simply. Deep, thoughtful work will be necessary to liberate religious practices from the spiritual constraints of routine, while retaining—and he does not say this, but based on his practices I believe we can infer—modes and frameworks that sustain serious religious practice.

In the Talmud, we find a midrash that speaks to this matter with regard to our parashah. “God said to Moshe: ‘Tell Betzalel to make the Mishkan, then the Aron, and the vessels.’ But when Moshe related the instructions to Betzalel, Moshe changed the order, saying: ‘First, make the Aron, then the vessels, and finally, the Mishkan that will house them.’ Betzalel turned to Moshe and said, ‘Moshe Rabeinu—Moses our Teacher—normally one first builds the house, and then places the furniture inside. Yet you said to make the vessels and then the Mishkan. These vessels that I will make—where shall I put them?’ Moshe replied in amazement, ‘You must have been in God’s shadow—B’tzeil El—and overheard’ (BT Brachot 55a)!

The midrash shows that when it comes to creating a symbol of God’s indwelling presence, Betzalel, and not Moshe, is the one who stands in the shadow of God. We would have thought that Moshe, the lawgiver, would be in possession of the correct plan, but in fact it is the artisan who intuits God’s desire.

The notion that the heart can be even more revelatory than obedience to the text or the received instructions grows in importance when we consider how our entire tradition is learned and how it evolves.

According to the Talmud, any rabbi who wants to exercise their rabbinic authority to make rulings for others must be possessed of two qualities: they must be both *gamirna* and *savirna*. Being *gamirna* means that you know your Gemara. You know your stuff—the law, relevant principles, cases, commentary, etc. It is improper to issue a ruling based only on your gut. You must use the accumulated wisdom of our tradition.

On the other hand, it is also improper to issue a ruling *without* your gut. That’s where being *Sabrina* comes in. Its root means “reason,” as differentiated from using proof texts to make a point, but it means much more than having the ability to reason through the law, drily. It means bringing one’s essential self to the working out of what it means to walk in the world as a human being the way God intended. And guess what: it turns out that *Svara*, that kind of gut sense, is not only a prerequisite for rabbinic authority; it actually may be the most significant source of Jewish law that we can employ (Sanhedrin 5a).

For several years, before moving to Madison, I had the privilege of learning at a yeshiva called *Svara*. The Rosh Yeshiva of *Svara*, my dear friend and colleague Rabbi Benay Lappe, defines *Svara* as “moral intuition.” Menachem Elon, a major Jewish legal scholar of our generation and former Justice and Deputy President of the Israeli Supreme Court, says that *Svara* is “legal reasoning that penetrates into the essence of things and

reflects a profound understanding of human nature [and involves] an appreciation of the characteristics of human beings in their social relationships, and a careful study of the real world and its manifestations” [in *Jewish Law: Cases and Materials*, Mathew Bender, 1999, p. 97).

We actually derive Jewish law according to five methodologies set forth by our ancient sages. They are: the use of Biblical verses (*kra*), precedent (*ma’aseh*), custom (*minhag*), new legislation (*takanah*), and *svara*.

Now I’m going to quote my friend Rabbi Lappe: “That a person’s *svara* is a legitimate place to look to figure out what God wants of you is radical enough. But wait: As we all know, laws which the Rabbis derived from *kra*, or biblical verses, were given the status of *d’oraita*—directly from Torah, transmitted directly from God to Moshe on Mount Sinai. And laws deriving from *ma’aseh* (precedent), *minhag* (custom), or *takkanah* (legislation) were acknowledged as being of human derivation—a creation of the Rabbis themselves—and were labeled merely *d’rabbanan*, a kind of “second-string” as far as laws went.

“But—get this—a law that the Rabbis created by means of *svara* was classified as—now put your seatbelts on for this one—*d’oraita*. What comes from our kishkes, said the Rabbis, is *really* coming straight from God—from God to Moshe on Mt. Sinai to me. *Svara*, according to the Rabbis, *had the same authority as the biblical text itself*—and in many instances in the Talmud, *svara* trumps *kra*—*kishkes trump a biblical verse*.

“These audacious claims, made by our Rabbis two thousand years ago, set the tone of rabbinic courage and activism that is our spiritual legacy to this day. They constitute the core principles responsible for the mechanisms that have allowed Jewish Law to become the most exalted blueprint for human dignity and world perfection in history—and the mandate to alleviate human suffering, *particularly that caused by the Jewish tradition itself*, in every generation” (“*Svara, Queers, and the Future of Rabbinic Judaism*,” *Svara* website, accessed 2/24/22).

If we take our Judaism seriously, we must give voice to our heart-wisdom. Our tradition demands to be *lived*—and it can only be lived authentically if it is real for us, not only in form but in substance—not only in rote but in emotion, not only in law but in heart. Especially in heart—and this is coming from a Rabbi (me) who loves halacha.

Above the Aron in the Mishkan were two winged creatures we call “cherubim,” “*k’ruvim*” in Hebrew, spreading their wings over the Ark of the Covenant as a throne for the Divine Presence. Our tradition imagines the *k’ruvim* as winged people, facing each other, their

gazes intersecting at a point above the Aron. The Talmud imagines them locked in an embrace (Yoma 54a), symbolic of God's love for us. The point is astounding, really: the seat of holiness, the center point of spiritual gaze, is a place of intimacy, a place of heart, inner knowing, and emotion—a place of love.

It may feel intimidating to think that our tradition calls us to bring our own hearts and voices to the table. We might rather give over the power of our inner knowing to those who we think know more. But Judaism is not designed to be followed like that. **The truth is that our thriving depends upon both: knowledge of text and tradition and wisdom of the heart.**

May we seek to nurture both Sinai Torah and Mishkan Torah in this sacred home, and in the Jewish lives we build. May we find the courage to hear what each comes to teach us. And may we keep love at the center as we build the Mishkan we need.