

Real Presence — Art in Vayakhel-Pekudei

It is surprising that after the narrative of the calf, the Torah returns to the mishkan, the tabernacle in the desert. Regardless of whether you hold that the building of the mishkan was a response to the calf or whether you hold that it preceded the calf, either way it is surprising that after the people sin grievously, attempting to locate God's presence within a finite human creation, God orders the building of other creations meant to contain Him.

Equally striking is the resplendent artistry of this parasha, in contrast to what has been a fairly dull burnt sienna in the earlier sections of the Torah. Suddenly, against a backdrop of desert brown, we have techelet and argaman, blue and crimson threads. We have embroidered curtains with cherubim on them, sockets and hooks made from silver, wash basins and utensils from copper, a menorah of solid gold, each holder fashioned to resemble an almond blossom, semiprecious stones on the high priest's breastplate, golden keruvim atop a golden ark. It as if we traveled from the first part of the movie the Wizard of Oz, when everything was in black and white, to over the rainbow in amazing technicolor.

And for the first time we learn of the appointment of Bezalel, the chief artisan, a man filled with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft. In the earlier chapters, we didn't know how the holy objects were to be made — now we have a divinely inspired craftsman, an artist. Bezalel works with fire just as the golden calf was forged in fire. And just as the calf springs seemingly whole from the fire, Bezalel, like all artists, emerges out of nowhere, his presence inexplicable and potent.

Art is often considered secular — the antithesis of religion — and yet here, at the center of our story, we find a divinely inspired artist with a team of able craftsmen and artisans, able to work in all kinds of media to build a home for God. Is this different than secular art because it is a divine sanctuary, comparable to the great cathedrals of Europe — art for a holy purpose? Or is this a more general statement about art? Or to ask the question differently, are art and beauty divine?

I ask this question a week after I received my first vaccine. For the first time in a year my mind went wild beginning to imagine things we would do. The first order of business was of course the seder — almost my entire immediate family — our three parents, my children, my brother — will be together for the first time in well over a year. But after that I started thinking about what else we would do. My very first thought was that we would book a weekend in New York and plan to visit museums — I cannot wait to return to the Met; I read that the Frick collection, temporarily housed at the old Whitney on Madison is newly accessible; who knows, maybe we will go to MOMA too? I can't wait to be back in a museum. I have not seen a work of art other than ones that are digitally produced on my screen or the handful of pieces of art we own at home, beloved but familiar, in well over a year.

Museums are such evocative places for me. They are a kind of temple and I cherish all the rituals associated with them — I will go in up the grand steps fighting the wind. Immediately I will be welcomed by the swoosh of warmth as I step indoors. The huge vases will be filled with enormous and breathtaking flower arrangements thanks to the generosity of Lillian Acheson Wallace, maybe forsythia or cherry blossoms. We will check coats, get our little colored button for the day — oh no, I think that they did away with those buttons and the plexiglass urns which contained them in their many colors by the exit door a few years ago. Then we will decide where to go first, what art to encounter and what we will discover serendipitously. At some point, we will sit and eat in one of the well-appointed cafes (maybe they are closed, maybe outside) and we will peruse the bookshop before we depart, tired and satisfied.

Museums, particularly the Met, evoke so many childhood memories for me — the Egyptian galleries, those little canoes, the wax faces on the sarcophagi, the arrival of the Temple of Dendur to the museum when I was 9, the Greek statues and vases and so much more. As a small child I generally felt dragged there, an adult educational activity which I was meant to enjoy but rarely found interesting. All of that changed in the early 70's when I was 11 or 12. We went to the Impressionist exhibit at the Met which, I believe, was the first blockbuster exhibit at a museum. Despite the crowds, I was swept away. From the Monet Terrace in St Andres, where you could feel the flags blowing in the wind, to the radiant skin of the Renoir dancers at Bougival and the play of light and the feeling of abandon in the dancers at the Moulin de la Galette, to Monet's poplars and the Rouen cathedrals to the water lilies where in the end Monet painted light itself. I was amazed and enthralled. For the first time, art spoke to me; I had the feeling it all came together and I understood art and life with new eyes.

If I think over the rest of my life, there are similarly happy encounters over the years — the first time I saw Michelangelo's David, the altar panels at the Uffizi, Rembrandt's Night Watch, Caravaggio's Abraham and Isaac, Vermeer's letter reader, the artistic puzzles and politics of Aiweiwei, my first trip to the Musee d'Orsay. One summer when I was 19 I worked across the street from the Museum of Modern Art. Guernica was being returned to Spain that year and I would go often during my lunchbreak — admission was free for students — and visit it, as if it were a friend from whom I knew I must part. All of these moments come together in my mind — memories of encounter with something ineffable, something more than meets the eye.

Critic George Steiner argues that “the experience of aesthetic meaning in particular, that of literature, of the arts, of musical form, infers the necessary possibility” of what he calls real presence. For him the experience of encounter, whether with another human being or with work of art, is an encounter with God — a transcendent reality underwrites all art and human communication. Steiner has no patience for much art or music of the 20th century, nor its accompanying critical genres. For him, art is about encounter with a real other, and the mystery of that encounter to touch deep chords within us, to transform us, to lift us up out of the daily reality of New York, the streets, the weather, the jostling visitors at the museum, to a reality we sense is there but which art makes palpable. In encountering a work of music or art, he writes, we find

ourselves “in the presence of the verbally inexpressible but wholly palpable energy in being that communicates to our senses and to our reflection what little we can grasp of the naked wonder of life.... Music [Steiner quotes Leibnez] is the secret arithmetic of the soul unknowing of the fact that it is counting.” We discover in art’s presence, he writes elsewhere, that we are close neighbors to the unknown. Art enables us to sense, in ways we rarely do in our workaday lives, the continuum between “temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between human and other.”

When I think about that first encounter with Monet, I think I saw light differently than I ever had seeing the sun’s light. Similarly, seeing Michelangelo’s David I experienced the divinity of the human form in ways I never had gazing at a mere human. Art makes strange that which is commonplace compelling us to reflect more deeply on our place in the cosmos, uncovering the deep mysterious chords that echo well below the surfaces of our lives. Such encounters change us. In some ways, they return us to Eden, to the primordial creation and what it felt like for a world of welter and waste to be transformed to a world populated with orchids, redwoods, whales, giraffes, microbes and us. An encounter with art — music, visual, literary — recreates the Creation within us, enabling us to reconstitute ourselves and our lives in the process. We glimpse the shimmering reality that is our life, and the God that underwrites it.

Returning to the parasha, it is clearly no accident that Bezalel’s name means, b’tzel el — in God’s shadow. He is inspired by God, able to intuit God’s intentions in his architectural renderings, like God, in God’s image, b’tzelem, a creator. All artists, I would argue, or at least all artists who seek to encounter the viewer or listener or reader through their work, who seek to plumb the mystery of our existence together, all of them are בצל אל in God’s shadow,

God, then, needs a mishkan just as we need art — so that we can become artists, so that God can tap the creative power in us, and so that we join with God in creating a home for Him on earth. Just as God creates a world for us to dwell in, through His vision and creativity, we are invited to do the same for Him. In so doing we join God in the act of creation.

Winding all the back to where I started, if art is a path to holiness, then what was wrong with the calf? God likes some art and not others? God only likes the art that he commissions? I think the answer has something to do with fixity. The calf is a single object made to represent God. A midrash argues that the calf represented one of the four faces of the beings on Ezekiel’s chariot. The text in Ezekiel describes four figures on each corner of the chariot, wings spread out each to the next. Each figure had four faces — a human face, a lion face, an ox face, and an eagle face. By choosing to make a golden calf and represent God as a calf (ox), Aaron and the Israelites are effectively denying the rich multifaceted reality of God, acting as if he is only one face, one thing. Even the curtains of the mishkan and the Holy of Holies, according to Rashi, are embroidered differently depending on which side you are looking. On one side there would be a lion’s face and on the other an eagle’s. Reality is multifaceted; God is multifaceted. To fixate on one image, is to betray the imagination. Art is not only about

what is in front of us — it also suggests what is absent. Think for a moment of the face of a Rembrandt self-portrait, rich with suggestions of a life lived fully and hard. Think of the Mona Lisa — who is she looking at? what is she thinking? Or a cubist painting that invokes the sides a face or a guitar without portraying them. “A stable and completely realized image,” to quote Bachelard, “clips the wings of the imagination.”

This is why, it seems, God instructs Moses to create the keruvim — two and not one. God exists, as it were, in the possibility of encounter with the other. Unity is experienced through plurality — God’s dimensions are infinite. Just as the keruvim, face to face, create a charged space where God might flicker, the artist seeks to create an encounter between the artwork and the observer. Like Bezalel the artist seeks to create charged space where two souls meet and electrify the space that lies between them.

In a world filled with natural beauty, human beings still create art. It appears that creativity is the very essence of our createdness. When we create, we stand, like Bezalel, in God’s shadow; we join the Creator in His work. We invoke divinity — real presence — every bit as much as the keruvim and the mishkan once did.