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Our heart and our hands

D'var Torah for Parashat Vayakhel

by LEILA BILICK • 2/25/2022 | 24 Adar 5782

In your experience, what typically comes first: 1. the deep feeling and intention, giving rise to the desire to act OR 2. the behaviors that, in doing them, help you feel connected and inspired to continue doing the work? When you stop and consider the fuel for your personal fire, when are you most lit up?

This is a great debate in rabbinic literature (and other traditions and disciplines) and a source of rich discussion: see here for a helpful source sheet on the topic of keva (institutionalized prayer, proscribed ways of performing tasks) and kavanah (intention, devotion, concentration of the heart).

This week's Torah portion, Vayakhel, it seems to me, is highly attuned to this chicken-and-egg question. We're in the desert, still in our wandering, preparing to build the Tabernacle, the Mishkan, a dwelling place for God. Moses says:

קְחוּ מֵאִתְּכֶם תְּרוּמָה לַיהוָה כֹּל נְדִיב לִבּוֹ יְבִיאֶהָ אֵת תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה זָהָב וָכֶסֶף וּנְחֹשֶׁת:

Take from among you gifts to God; everyone whose heart is so moved shall bring them—gifts for God:* gold, silver, and copper

Take from among you gifts to God; everyone whose heart is so moved shall bring them—gifts for God:* gold, silver, and copper

Moses makes it clear: the stirring in our hearts is the prerequisite for contributing to the building of the Mishkan. If you feel it, build it.

Shortly after:

וְכָל־חַכַם־לֵב בָּכֶם יָבֹאוּ וְיַעֲשׂוּ אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה:

And let all among you who are skilled come and make all that God has commanded

The hebrew that is translated as "skilled" here literally means "heart-smart" to use a phrase my daughter's school employs to encourage the kids to make good choices.
What might this strange phrasing mean? And how does the heart relate to skill?

Interesting to note the way the whole section ends:

כָּל־אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר נָדַב לִבָּם אֹתָם לְהָבִיא לְכָל־

Thus the Israelites, all the men and women whose

הַמְּלָאכָה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה הֵבִיאוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל נְדָבָה לַיהוָה׃

hearts moved them to bring anything for the work that God through Moses, had commanded to be done, **brought it as a freewill offering** to God.

Are there things we must do, regardless of where our hearts are at when we begin the task?

Then Moses says that a man named Bezalel has been tapped by God to do the actual work. Why?
"God endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability and knowledge in every kind of craft and inspired him to make designs..."

Now we're talking about a calling, it seems. A calling that manifests in the doing, in action. In what ways might Bezalel embody a meeting point of inspiration and practicality?
Taking us back to our original question, what do you feel called to do? And do you awaken to the calling before action or through action?

Finally, here's Emily Dickinson to take us home. How might she be weighing in on the matter?

The Props assist the House (729)
By Emily Dickinson

The Props assist the House
Until the House is built
And then the Props withdraw
And adequate, erect,
The House support itself
And cease to recollect
The Augur and the Carpenter –
Just such a retrospect
Hath the perfected Life –
A Past of Plank and Nail
And slowness – then the scaffolds drop
Affirming it a Soul –

Whatever the source, however you arrive, **may your hearts stir.**

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