

Parshat Pekudei
In the Shadow of God, Son of Light
Leah Fine

One of my favorite strolls in the heart of Jerusalem is along the Bezalel and Schatz pedestrian walkways. On Fridays artists come together and display their works, with local musicians adding to the artistic ambience. As I walk down Bezalel Street, I often stop in the garden of the historic Bezalel School, now the Jerusalem Artists House, which rests on the top of a hill looking out toward the Old City and the Temple Mount. It has a beautiful turreted tower, a menorah at its peak. The school is surrounded by a high stone wall. It is really a magical place.

The story behind this building begins with strudel and coffee in a small Viennese cafe in 1903, with Boris Schatz (1867-1932), a successful sculptor, and Theodor Herzl (1860-1904). Schatz nervously presented his idea to the iconic Zionist leader. Herzl liked Schatz's initiative to create a national museum and school for artists, and asked, "What name will you give to your school?" Schatz immediately answered, "Bezalel—after the first Jewish artist who once built us a tabernacle in the wilderness." The Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts was opened two months after Schatz arrived in Jerusalem in 1906. It was a harbinger of cultural renewal in the land of Israel.



Schatz had high hopes for the Bezalel School, which he laid out in his utopian novella, *Jerusalem Rebuilt: A Daydream* (1924). The frontispiece to the book, designed by artist Ze'ev Raban, says it all. Here you see the biblical Bezalel in heroic terms, standing next to the menorah atop the Bezalel school, discussing the future of Herzl's "Old-New land," and the school's place in it. Schatz wanted his school in Jerusalem to be the center of spiritual life and creative activity, following in the path of Ahad Ha'am, the founder of "Cultural Zionism." While Eliezer ben Yehudah was reviving Hebrew as a spoken language, Boris Schatz was reviving Jewish art, drawing inspiration from the biblical Bezalel.

Bezalel ben Uri ben Hur was endowed with the God-given abilities to teach his expertise of *all* crafts. The artisans at the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts were not unlike the artisans who built the Mishkan.



Bezalel school ceramic tile, 1920s — עוד אֶבְנֶנּוּ וְנִבְנִית בְּתוֹלַת יִשְׂרָאֵל
I will build you firmly again, O Maiden Israel! — (Jeremiah 31:4)

Like Bezalel's assistant Oholiav, who specialized in carving, designing and embroidering, the Bezalel School artisans had their own specialties. Moreover, they all thought visually, seeing objects, where others saw only words.

Hazal, our sages, emphasized this special capacity of fine craftsmen, as they tried to explain Bezalel's special gifts in relation to Moshe (*BaMidbar Rabba 15:10*). While Moshe Rabbeinu was master and leader, the special gifts of Bezalel, the light and place "in the shadow of God," was a capacity that Moshe well recognized.

רבי לוי בר רבי אומר, מנורה טהורה ירדה מן השמים, שאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: (שמות כה, לא): *ועשית מנרת זהב טהור*

אמר לו: כיצד נעשה אותה, אמר לו (שמות כה, לא): *מקשה תעשה המנורה, ואף על פי כן נתקשה משה וירד ושכח מעשיה,*

עלה ואמר רבובי כיצד נעשה אותה, אמר לו: *מקשה תעשה המנורה, ואף על פי כן נתקשה משה וירד ושכח,*

עלה ואמר רבובי שכחתי אותה, הראה לו למשה ועוד נתקשה בה. אמר לו (שמות כה, מ): *וראה נעשה, עד שנטל מנורה של אש והראה לו עשיתה, ואף על פי כן נתקשה על משה, אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא: לך אצל בצלאל והוא יעשה אותה*

, ואמר לבצלאל מיד עשאה, התחיל תמה ואמר אני כמה פעמים הראה לי הקדוש ברוך הוא ונתקשיתי לעשותה, ואת נשלא ראית עשית מדעתך, בצלאל, בצל אל היית עומד קשה הראה לי הקדוש ברוך הוא עשיתה.

R. Levi bar Rabbi said, "A pure menorah descended from the heavens. Because the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses (in Exod. 25:31), 'And you shall make a menorah of pure gold.'

He said to Him, 'How shall we make [it]?' He said to him (ibid. cont.), 'Of hammered work shall the menorah be made.' Nevertheless Moses had difficulty; for when he descended, he had forgotten its construction.

He went up and said, ‘Master of the world, I have forgotten [it].’ He showed Moses, but it was still difficult for him.

He said to him (in Exod. 25:40), ‘Observe and make [it].’ Thus He took a pattern of fire and showed him its construction, but it was still difficult for Moses.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, ‘Go to Bezalel and he will make it.’

[So] Moses spoke to Bezalel, [and] he made it immediately.

Moses began to wonder and say, ‘In my case, how many times did the Holy One, Blessed be He, show it to me; yet I had difficulty in making it. Now without seeing it, you have made it from your own knowledge. Bezalel (*b’tsal’El*), were you perhaps standing in-(*b*) the shadow-(*tsal*) of God-(*El*) when the Holy One, Blessed be He, showed it to me?’

This midrash highlights the visual-spatial intelligence of Bezalel. This gift set him apart even from Moshe Rabbenu, leading to his “career” as the master craftsman of the Tabernacle.



Every time I look up at the tower of the Bezael School with its turrets and menorah, I imagine Schatz, the student sitting before the master artist of the Mishkan, Bezalel son of Uri, and dream just a bit about the Tabernacle, its kelim and our capacities to bring this special kind of learning to our own lives. Then I look out at the many artisans on the street—men and women, young and old, and marvel once again at their skills and creativity. Schatz founded an academy to bring this artistic capacity, inherent in Torah, to life. May we all see the beauty in the tabernacle, together sitting— and looking— in the shadow of God, *be-tsel El*.



Leah Fine comes to Maharat with a deep commitment to Jewish life and learning. She is an accomplished Jewish educator, committed to reaching each student לפי דרכו, as a “whole world” and a unique person. Leah holds an MA in Modern Jewish History from the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University and teaching credentials in elementary and special education from California State University. She studied at Pardes, Drisha and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Leah was director of Jewish Family Programming at Beth El-Baltimore, a pioneering integrated multi-generational Jewish studies experience. As a result, she was awarded the prestigious Melton Senior Educators Fellowship at the Hebrew University. Leah has taught and innovated curriculum within a wide range of formal and informal settings, with a particular passion for including people with special needs into all aspects of Jewish communal life. She is co-author of Where God Dwells: A Child’s History of the Synagogue and is currently completing a children’s book about Samaritan folktales.