

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Vayakhel/ Shabbat Shekalim  
March 9, 2024 \*\*\* 29 Adar I, 5784

Vayakhel in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/1338/jewish/Vayakhel-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1338/jewish/Vayakhel-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The name of the Parshah, "Vayakhel," means "And he gathered" and it is found in Exodus 35:1.

Moses assembles the people of Israel and reiterates to them the commandment to observe the Shabbat. He then conveys G-d's instructions regarding the making of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). The people donate the required materials in abundance, bringing gold, silver and copper; blue-, purple- and red-dyed wool; goat hair, spun linen, animal skins, wood, olive oil, herbs and precious stones. Moses has to tell them to stop giving.

A team of wise-hearted artisans make the Mishkan and its furnishings (as detailed in the previous Torah readings of Terumah, Tetzaveh and Ki Tisa): three layers of roof coverings; 48 gold-plated wall panels, and 100 silver foundation sockets; the parochet (veil) that separates between the Sanctuary's two chambers, and the masach (screen) that fronts it; the ark, and its cover with the cherubim; the table and its showbread; the seven-branched menorah with its specially prepared oil; the golden altar and the incense burned on it; the anointing oil; the outdoor altar for burnt offerings and all its implements; the hangings, posts and foundation sockets for the courtyard; and the basin and its pedestal, made out of copper mirrors.

Haftarah in a Nutshell – II Kings 11:17 – 12:17

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/640159/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/640159/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The Parshat Shekalim Torah reading discusses the annual obligation for every Jew to give half a shekel to the Temple coffers. The haftarah discusses the efforts of King Jehoash (9th century BCE) to earmark these communal funds for the upkeep of the first Holy Temple.

Background for this haftarah: Because of an alliance with the Northern Kingdom of Israel, idol worship had become rampant in the erstwhile righteous Davidic dynasty-controlled Southern Kingdom. When the king of the Southern Kingdom, Ahaziah, was killed, his mother Athaliah murdered the remainder of the royal family and seized the throne. During her brief reign, she actively promoted

idolatry. Unbeknownst to her, one of Ahaziah's sons, a small baby, was hidden and survived. When he became seven years of age, Jehoiada the High Priest led a successful revolt against Athaliah, and installed the child king, Jehoash, as the new King of Judea.

The haftorah begins with the new king renewing the people's covenant with G-d. They destroyed all the pagan altars and statues and appointed officers to oversee the Holy Temple. Jehoash then instructed the priests regarding all the funds that were donated to the Temple. According to his plan, all the funds would be appropriated by the priests. In return, the priests would pay for the regular maintenance of the Temple. In the 23rd year of Jehoash's reign, the priests neglected to properly maintain the Temple. Jehoash then ordered that all monies should be placed in a special box that was placed near the Temple altar, and these funds were given directly to the workers and craftsmen who maintained the Temple.

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[God's Shadow: Vayakhel by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayakhel/gods-shadow/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayakhel/gods-shadow/>

In Vayakhel we meet, for the second time, the man who became the symbol of the artist in Judaism, a man by the name of Betzalel.

Then Moses said to the Israelites, "Know that the Lord has chosen Betzalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and has filled him with a Divine spirit of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge in every craft, to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze, as well as cutting stones for setting, carving wood, engaging in every other craft. He has also given him the ability to teach others, together with Oholiav, son of Achisamach of the tribe of Dan. He has filled them with the skill to do all kinds of work as engravers, designers, embroiderers in sky-blue, purple, or scarlet wool or fine linen, and as weavers. They will be able to carry out all the necessary work and design.

Ex. 35:30-35

It would be Betzalel (together with Ohaliab) who would make the Tabernacle and its furnishings and be celebrated through the centuries as the inspired craftsman who used his skills for the greater glory of God.

The aesthetic dimension of Judaism has tended to be downplayed, at least until the modern era, for obvious reasons. The Israelites worshipped the invisible God who transcended the universe. Other than the human person, God has no image. Even when He revealed Himself to the people at Sinai:

["You heard the sound of words but saw no image; there was only a Voice."](#)

## Deut. 4:12

Given the intense connection – until around the eighteenth century – between art and religion, image-making was seen as potentially idolatrous. Hence the second of the Ten Commandments:

“Do not make for yourself any carved image or likeness of in the form of any creature in heaven above or the earth beneath or in the waters below.” Ex. 20:4

This concern continued long after the biblical era. The Greeks, who achieved unrivalled excellence in the visual arts, were, in the religious sphere, still a pagan people of myth and mystery, while the Romans had a disturbing tendency to turn Caesars into gods and erect statues to them.

However, the visual dimension was not wholly missing from Judaism. There are visible symbols, like tzitzit and tefillin. There is, according to the Sages, a meta-mitzvah known as hiddur mitzvah – “beautifying the command” – to try to ensure that all objects used in the performance of a command are as beautiful as possible.

The most significant intrusion of the aesthetic dimension was the in Tabernacle itself, its framework and hangings, its furniture, the cherubim above the ark, the menorah, and the vestments of the priests and the High Priest, lekavod uletifaret, “for dignity and beauty” (Ex. 28:2).

Maimonides in The Guide for the Perplexed (III:45) says that most people are influenced by aesthetic considerations, which is why the Sanctuary was designed to inspire admiration and awe; why a continual light burned there; why the priestly robes were so impressive; why there was music in the form of the Levitical choir; and why incense was burned to cover the smell of the sacrifices.

Maimonides himself, in the work known as The Eight Chapters – the introduction to his commentary on Mishnah Avot – speaks about the therapeutic power of beauty and its importance in counteracting depression:

Someone afflicted with melancholy may dispel it by listening to music and various kinds of song, by strolling in gardens, by experiencing beautiful buildings, by associating with beautiful pictures, and similar sorts of things that broaden the soul...  
The Eight Chapters, chapter 5

Art, in short, is balm to the soul. In modern times, the thinker who spoke most eloquently about aesthetics was Rav Kook. In his Commentary to the Siddur, he wrote:

“Literature, painting, and sculpture give material expression to all the spiritual concepts implanted in the depths of the human soul, and as long as even one single line hidden in the depth of the soul has not been given outward expression, it is the task of art [avodat ha-umanut] to bring it out.” Olat Re-ayah, II, 3

Evidently these remarks were considered controversial, so in later editions of the Commentary the phrase “Literature, painting, and sculpture” was removed and in its place was written, “Literature, its design and tapestry.”

The name Betzalel was adopted by the artist Boris Schatz for the School of Arts and Crafts he founded in Israel in 1906, and Rav Kook wrote a touching letter in support of its creation. He saw the renaissance of art in the Holy Land as a symbol of the regeneration of the Jewish People in its own land, landscape and birthplace. Judaism in the Diaspora, removed from a natural connection with its own historic environment, was inevitably cerebral and spiritual, “alienated.” Only in Israel would an authentic Jewish aesthetic emerge, strengthened by and in turn strengthening Jewish spirituality.

Perhaps the most moving of all remarks Rav Kook made about art came in the course of a conversation he had with a Jewish sculptor:

“When I lived in London I used to visit the National Gallery, and my favourite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a tzaddik. Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt’s works, they reminded me of the rabbinic statement about the creation of light?

We are told that when God created light [on the first day of Creation, as opposed to the natural light of the sun on the fourth day], it was so strong and pellucid that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous in the World to Come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that God created on Genesis day.”[1]

I have often wondered what it was about Rembrandt’s paintings that so enthralled the Rav. Rembrandt lived in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, knew Jews and painted them, as well as painting many biblical scenes, though the closeness or otherwise of his connection with Jews has been the subject of controversy. Rav Kook’s admiration for the artist had, I suspect, nothing to do with this and everything to do with the light Rembrandt saw in the faces of ordinary people,

without any attempt to beautify them. His work let us see the transcendental quality of the human, the only thing in the universe on which God set His image.

Art in Hebrew – omanut – has a semantic connection with emunah, “faith” or “faithfulness.” A true artist is faithful both to his materials and to the task, teaching us:

To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.[2]

The name Betzalel means, “in the shadow of God.” Art is the shadow cast by the radiance of God that suffuses all things:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.[3]

And as Goethe said: “Where there is much light, the shadow is deep.”[4] When art lets us see the wonder of creation as God’s work and the human person as God’s image, it becomes a powerful part of the religious life, with one proviso. The Greeks believed in the holiness of beauty. Jews believe in hadrat kodosh, the beauty of holiness: not art for art’s sake but art as a disclosure of the ultimate artistry of the Creator. That is how omanut enhances emunah, how art adds wonder to faith. 1. Rav Avraham Kook, article in *The Jewish Chronicle*; London; 13 September 1935, p. 21. 2. From *Auguries of Innocence* by William Blake. 3. From *God’s Grandeur* by Gerard Manley Hopkins. 4. *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Götz von Berlichingen with the Iron Hand*, translated by Walter Scott, London; 1799.

[Vayakhel: Every Letter, Every One by Rabbi Amy Josefa Ariel](https://truah.org/resources/amy-josefa-ariel-vayakhel-moraltorah_2024/)

[https://truah.org/resources/amy-josefa-ariel-vayakhel-moraltorah\\_2024/](https://truah.org/resources/amy-josefa-ariel-vayakhel-moraltorah_2024/)

One of my students taught me his Torah of 1+1=1. After each individual in each tribe is numbered and counted, Aaron blesses the people of Israel not as individuals or separate tribes (Numbers 6:23), but as one whole community, echoing the first verse in Vayakhel. Vayakhel tells us that if anyone is missing from our community, we can’t build the Mishkan — the Tabernacle — and then God’s presence among us is diminished. Judaism assumes concern for every person. Commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves, we understand that if we fail to see a member of our community, it is because we are not looking for them with enough love.

Long before COVID, many immunocompromised, medically vulnerable, and

disabled members of our communities were excluded to varying degrees, and our exclusion was often barely noticed. With the COVID pandemic, we had a collective opportunity to improve our eyesight and more lovingly see and care for these members. We could have become more curious and more creative and asked those most affected how to build the social and practical structures that would have offered genuine access. Instead, as a general experience, once the majority determined they no longer needed what we needed, the Jewish world returned to insisting that the Mishkan could be built without us. There was a collective decision that it is okay if many of us are relegated to watching community rather than being in it.

Our parshah holds us accountable to an expansive understanding of community: "Moses then brought together the whole Israelite community — Et kol adat b'nei Yisrael — and said to them: These are the things that THE ETERNAL has commanded you to do." (Exodus 35:1)

There are 1,558 words in Vayakhel made up of 6,181 letters. Among all of those words are these five: et kol adat b'nei Yisrael. The ayin and dalet of adat make the word ed, "witness," and call us to pay careful attention. Adat is "community of" — a congregation. Kol means all. Et, a Hebrew word with no English equivalent that indicates a direct object, creates a sense of emphasis. Et kol adat insists that Moses brought together the complete Israelite community. No one was missing.

Or HaChaim, the Moroccan 18th century rabbi, asks and answers: Why would the Torah even mention that Moses assembled the people, something that happened so often? The word "kol" included orphans, minors, women, and other people who weren't always assembled and didn't expect to be included. Why not explicitly invite the wealthy? Because the wealthy man was always in the assembly and he would assume his place was being saved for him this time as well (Or HaChaim on Exodus 35:1). Inclusion is only necessary when someone is already excluded. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik teaches that Judaism has always viewed humanity from the dual perspective of seeing every individual as independent and also as a limb of the body of Israel, a member of a community (On Repentance, 114).

In addition to the words and letters in Vayakhel, there are 79,980 words altogether in the Torah, created from 304,805 letters. Which one could we do without?

"When I [Rabbi Meir] came to Rabbi Yishmael, he said to me, 'My son, what is your occupation?' I told him, 'I am a scribe,' and he said to me, 'Be meticulous in your work, for your work is the work of heaven — perhaps you will omit one letter... you would thereby destroy the entire world'" (Talmud Eruvin 13a).

Rashi, expanding on this teaching, explains that if one were to leave off the aleph in the phrase, "THE ETERNAL our God is true," the word true/emet instead becomes met and means dead. Exclude one letter and God, God forbid, is murdered. Exclude one letter and the entire world is destroyed.

In a true community of belonging, we wouldn't need to include folks who are vulnerable because they would not have been excluded in the first place. We would know that we need every single member of our community to build the Mishkan, and we would know that when we are incomplete, so is God. We would do better. We should do better.

If, like me, you are immunocompromised, or if in some other way you are here with your gifts waiting for someone to see you, I am looking for you. You are the letter we cannot do without. I know you are here. I'm glad we are here together.

*(Rabbi Amy Josefa Ariel (she/her) is an independent, immunocompromised rabbi who teaches and serves an international Jewish community entirely online. [www.amyjosefaariel.com](http://www.amyjosefaariel.com))*

### The People Step Up: Vayakhel by Robert Harris

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-people-step-up/>

By this point in the Book of Exodus, the story outlines are probably familiar: the people—having been redeemed from Egypt and covenanted with God on Mt. Sinai, and having already sinned a terrible sin by building the Golden Calf—respond to God's detailed instructions to build a Tabernacle by donating so generously that the collection of the material with which to construct the sanctuary has to be stopped midway, even as the people are still in the process of donating.

But to truly appreciate some of the implications of this narrative, let us go back and unpack several of the key verses. Exodus 35 begins with Moses convoking "the whole Israelite community" and passing on the detailed instructions to build the Tabernacle he had received from God. At this point the Torah records the response of the people to these commands:

So the whole community of the Israelites left Moses' presence. And everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit moved him came, bringing to the LORD his offering for the work of the Tent of Meeting. (Exod. 35:20–21)

The Torah goes on to relate the many gifts that the people brought with great enthusiasm, and generosity both of spirit and of material. Pausing to introduce the two "project managers," Bezalel and Oholiab, the Torah next narrates how these two led the people in actually building the Tabernacle, "to perform expertly all the tasks connected with the service of the sanctuary," a process that begins at Exodus

36:3 and continues to the end of this parashah and the next.

However, there is an important episode that I have left out in this account, so let us focus our attention on it:

But when these continued to bring freewill offerings to him morning after morning, all the artisans who were engaged in the tasks of the sanctuary came, each from the task upon which he was engaged, and said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work that the LORD has commanded to be done." Moses thereupon had this proclamation made throughout the camp: "Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!" So the people stopped bringing: their efforts had been more than enough for all the tasks to be done. (Exod. 36:3–7)

The people's exuberance is an important detail in a narrative already replete with them. Whereas in the narrative of the Golden Calf in last week's portion, it was Aaron who proposed the donation of the gold, and that and the people's acquiescence took all of two verses (Exod. 32:2–3), in this week's portion the people seem to be spectacularly engaged and eager participants—so much so that their energy has to be restrained. As Nahmanides comments:

"Scripture mentions, the people bring much more than enough, in order to praise the people who brought with such generosity, and to glorify the wise men for their honesty."

Yet if we read the entire sequence that leads to this result, a curious question arises: The Torah showers such praise in detailing the dedication of the people and the way in which they take the initiative, but . . . Where were their tribal leaders? Where were the princes of the people? We know that when the Torah narrates the dedication of the Sanctuary (Num. 7), it goes out of its way to narrate the contribution of the princes in exceeding detail. But here in the construction of the Sanctuary itself, could they not have been mentioned?

Attentive close readers of course know that the princes were, indeed, mentioned, albeit in a somewhat offhand measure (Exod. 35:27):

And the chieftains brought lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece . . .

Rashi, always a fine reader and never one to overlook a detail, notices that the word for "princes" in this verse  $\text{דָּאֲרָשִׁי}$  is spelled with what grammarians call "defective orthography," that is, it does not contain the letter yod that usually indicates a plural (thus, we would expect the word to be spelled either  $\text{דָּאֲרָשִׁי}$  or



נְשִׂאִים, if not completely fully, נְשִׂאִים). In this case, Rashi reads the Torah with an incorporation of a midrashic insight from Sifrei Bemidbar (7:3):

R. Nathan asked, “What reason had the princes to volunteer their contributions at the dedication of the Tabernacle (in Num. 7) at the beginning, whereas at the construction of the Tabernacle (here in Exod. 35–36) they were not the first?” (in fact they were the last to contribute!). Rather, this was how the princes reasoned: “Let the community donate what they would donate, and what will then be lacking we shall complete.” But when the community gave everything needed in its entirety (and then some!)—as it is said, their efforts had been more than enough for all the tasks to be done (Exod. 36:7), the princes asked, “What can we now do?” therefore: And the chieftains brought lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece . . . (Exod. 35:27). That is why they were the first to contribute at the dedication of the Tabernacle (in Num. 7).

Up to this point, Rashi narrates the midrash as it has come down to us. However, he perspicaciously adds a detail on his own:

“Because, however, they were lazy (or if you prefer, dilatory) at the beginning, a letter is missing here from their title: for it is written הַנְּשִׂאִים (instead of נְשִׂאִים or נְשִׂאִים, i.e., as related earlier, it is normally spelled with at least one yod in the Hebrew Bible).”

Now, the great medieval exegete R. Abraham Ibn Ezra famously dismissed any effort to draw conclusions from the orthography of the Hebrew Bible and regarded all such efforts as “an affair for children” (from Ibn Ezra’s Introduction to the Torah). But Rashi’s comment is rooted in much more than mere orthography; rather I think he correctly intuits that the princes’ reasoning, as the midrash relates it, is faulty and self-serving. They might comfort themselves that they are acting altruistically, but what they were really doing was not functioning in the way that leaders are supposed to function—by leading, and not by following. The ostensible “leaders” hesitated in this instance from performing their true and obligatory role. And the people, whether noticing the leaders’ hesitation or not, effectively bypass the leadership to accomplish the task at hand.

In fact, these past months we have seen this very social phenomenon—of leaders failing to act as leaders, and the people picking up the slack to get the job done—in the State of Israel. Leading up to and following the catastrophes and horrors of October 7, the political leadership failed miserably to live up to its obligations, mainly to protect the citizenry against attacks like the one Israel experienced from

the outset, but also in failing to take responsibility for what in Hebrew is termed a **מחדל**, a “default” in carrying out the fundamental, contractual obligations of a government to protect its people from harm. And what followed the initial attack was that the people took over the responsibilities of government in virtually every sense of the word. “Start up Israel” kicked into gear at every level of society, healing the wounded, sheltering and comforting the refugees, clothing and feeding the soldiers who were belatedly protecting the nation. The energy and effectiveness of Israeli citizens in “making up” the deficiencies of their political leadership has been nothing less than inspiring. And while by no means have we arrived at the point where someone needs to tell the citizenry **די והותר**, “you have done enough and do not need to do more,” we may take inspiration from the reaction of Israelis to make up for the deficiencies in their leaders and accomplish what they have accomplished in these most difficult of times.

Let us hope and pray that this ingenuity will help lead ultimately to making a peace with strength, and may it bring safety for all innocents. (*Robert Harris is Professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages at JTS*)

[Adding the Divine's Name to the Hebrew Word for Group Makes All the Difference: Coming Together with a Holy Purpose by Rabbi Arie Hasit](https://schechter.edu/adding-the-divines-name-to-the-hebrew-word-for-group-making-all-the-difference-coming-together-with-a-holy-purpose/)  
<https://schechter.edu/adding-the-divines-name-to-the-hebrew-word-for-group-making-all-the-difference-coming-together-with-a-holy-purpose/>

This Shabbat we will be reading from two Torah readings. The first we will be reading from parashat Vayekhel, a continuation of how the Israelites in the wilderness are putting together the Tabernacle. And we will be reading from parashat Shkalim a special Torah reading that actually only goes back a week earlier to parashat Ki Tissa about a special donation that the entire Israelite people needs to give.

I'd like to speak for the moment about the connection between these two things through a look at the word: **ק - ה - ל** קהל.

Vayekhel means to gather the people together, and indeed **ק - ה - ל** קהל is a group of people. We use this word in modern Hebrew largely to describe a crowd or an audience. When you have a play or a concert, the people who are watching and have gathered together are a **קהל** .

Of course, this term is also known to us in Hebrew through word **קהילה** which means community.

What exactly makes a crowd into a community?

Let's think, actually, about what the task is at hand. Parashat Vayekhel talks about how the Israelites are to continue in their work in creating this sanctuary, this Mishkan, this traveling temple of sorts, where God will dwell among the People of Israel.

Parashat Shkalim actually give us something kind of counterintuitive, even against different parts of the Torah. Where earlier we learned that everybody should give according to what their hearts desire, and according to what their ability to give is. In Parashat Shkalim, we are told that every person must give exactly half of a shekel. Whether you are wealthy or poor, you do not give more you do not give less, you give exactly half.

Parashat Shkalim is an excellent reminder that sometimes equality means being able to give and perform based on your abilities and sometimes equality means treating everybody as equals.

So what exactly is a kehilla קהילה?

A קהילה is a place where everybody has the opportunity to be their unique individual selves, to give what they can based on their abilities, based on their means, but also a Kehilla is a place where every person is seen as equal. Where in some moments, everyone is told you are no more and you are no less: everyone is together.

What is this great being that represents the infinity of every person?

The fact that we are all equal, we all created, of course, in the image of God.

A Kehilla is the place that makes room for God. We learn that from the combination of Vayekhel and Shkalim that when we come together and when we are equal, we make room for God.

What happens when you add God's name Yud Hey (יה) to קה-ל?

You turn קהל into קהילה. A group of people who make room for God together by looking at each other as equals with an equal sense of purpose and mission.

That is Holy Community. (*Rabbi Arie Hasit is the Dean of the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary*)