



The Stirring Possibilities of Generative Constraint
Parashat Ki Tissa 3.6.21
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*What if all this pain, all this isolation, death, illness, constriction, could awaken in us
our own most audacious imagination, about our lives, this country, the world?
The story of a young artist, the monarch butterfly rescue mission,
and our own quest to make this period of confinement a generative and creative time.*

We're getting milkweed this coming week. I'm so excited. I've been waiting a year for this. Just over a year ago, in one of my last meetings before pandemic, I sat in café with a new friend who told me about the monarch butterfly shortage. Like so many devastating effects of climate change, milkweed—the only thing monarchs eat—is becoming scarce because of excessive land development and the widespread overuse of weed killer. Without milkweed, the monarchs will go extinct. My friend and her kids decided to do their part to help—they planted milkweed in front of their house, and watched every day as it became a haven for monarch butterflies. Since then, we've heard R' Artson and Elana speak about their own adventures with milkweed, and we've eagerly awaited the arrival of our own.

I think it's clear why so many of us are so invested in the monarch butterfly revival project. It's not only because they're beautiful, magical creatures, nor is it only because it frankly feels like the least we can do to help reverse course on some of the destruction caused by human greed and recklessness, with near total disregard for the creatures with whom we share this planet. It's not only because it's one of the small ways we can take action that has nearly immediate, visible impact.

But it's also because—my God!—those butterflies are wondrous creatures! Because the journey, from caterpillar to butterfly, can take even the greatest cynic's breath away. And perhaps especially in this time of pandemic, because there's something so profoundly relatable about a creature that needs to fully go into herself in order to self-actualize, to come out the other side ready to soar.

We read Ki Tissa, in the Book of Exodus, this shabbat: the *parasha* that tells the sorry tale of the Golden Calf, revealing the people's failure to hold their faith when Moses delays in returning from the mountaintop where he convenes with God in the divine revelation.

But I want to speak today about something that happens just before that incident. Before the people gather up against Aaron, Moses's brother, and demand he make them gods to replace Moses, who seems to have abandoned them. This is before Aaron tosses all their gold jewels into the fire and a calf emerges, unmatched for thousands of years in its folly and ill-conceit

until another golden idol, testament to another false god, would traverse the halls of CPAC in the Hyatt Regency in Orlando last week. But this is before all of that.

God has plans for this people, newly freed from enslavement in Egypt. God wants them to build something holy in the world, a sacred space, a *mishkan*, that would be a resting place for the divine presence as they travel through the desert.

And God's got just the architect to create such a sacred place.

רָאָה קִרְיָתִי בְּשֵׁם בְּצִלְאֵל בֶּן־אִרִי בֶן־חֹר לְמִטָּה יְהוּדָה:

Pay attention, God says to Moses. I am calling by name Betzalel son of Uri, son of Hur, from the tribe of Judah. (Ex 31:1) I have I have endowed him with a divine spirit, and with wisdom, insight, and knowledge. He is a master of every kind of craft. Through him, this holy place will be built.

As exceptional as Betzalel is, there are yet two important things you should note about him that make his brilliance even more remarkable:

First, the Rabbis (Sanhedrin 69b) tell us that at the time he was chosen by God, he was only a 13-year-old child. A bar mitzvah boy. His voice was still cracking! And even still, already in his short life he had acquired the wisdom and sensitivity to realize the holy aspirations of a people physical form.

And maybe even more remarkably, this part of the story takes place only a few months after Betzalel and the people left enslavement in Egypt. Meaning, this young person's entire life had been spent as a slave. And only months after he and the people finally emerge, he is charged with the most magnificent work of art, the creation of the *mishkan*. How is that even possible? And what are we to learn from it?

One year into this pandemic that has turned our worlds upside down, that has robbed us of our health, for some of us our loved ones, our faith in American democratic systems, our sense of stability and security and certainty about the future, that has kept us from our families and friends and community and supplanted our routines, cemented our addiction to and utter dependence on these screens and devices, and planted deep within us a pervasive, irrepressible sense of fear and anxiety... some days, given all of that, it's a miracle we can even get out of bed. We don't have to be heroes, in this time—some days it's heroic to simply function, is it not?

And at the same time, I am struck by the message of Betzalel, God's chosen architect. What a wonder that a person who has known only suffering and oppression could muster not only artistic skill, but imagination! Someone raised in the narrowest of constraints is still somehow able to dream the most expansive possibilities!

It makes me wonder: Could this time of constriction also open us up to what might be possible? *What if all this pain, all this isolation, death, illness, limitation could awaken in us our own most audacious imagination, about our lives, this country, the world?*

I know at least two of who wrote and completed books in this time. That's incredible. Not only have I not written a book—the stack of books by my bedside has only grown as I find it hard to even *read* a book, more than a few pages a day most days. There's an exhibit at the MOMA now, called "Making Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration," an exploration of creativity in confinement. It features works from incarcerated artists who, with limited material, limited space, and limited freedom, created beauty. This work, Leslie Jameson recently wrote in the [Atlantic](#), "testifies to the stirring possibilities of generative constraint."

And yet I'm not even asking us what we're producing and creating in this time. I'm asking who we're allowing ourselves to become.

Betzalel did not make art until after he emerged from the constraints. But while he was in it still, he filled himself up with **רוח אלהים**, the divine spirit. **בְּחָכְמָה וּבְתוּבָנָה וּבְדַעַת**
...With wisdom, with insight and with knowledge.

Rashi helps us understand that the Torah is not just being redundant here—he distinguishes between these three: *wisdom* is what we learn from others. *Insight*, that's what we glean from paying attention to ourselves after we receive all the inputs from the world, if we're quiet enough to listen to our own hearts. And *knowledge*, that's **רוח הקדוש** - acquired by God.

In 1972, shortly before he died, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was asked: what is your message for the young people? He said the following:

"...that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can do, everyone, our share to redeem the world, in spite of all absurdities, and all the frustrations, and all the disappointment. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build life as if it were a work of art."

The meaning of life is to build life as if it were a work of art. How do we do that? Take it from Betzalel, the holiest of artists: It's not necessarily by buying the paint and taking out the blank canvas—that will come. Maybe we're not ready yet. For now, we start by training our hearts to receive **חכמה תבונה ודעת** wisdom, insight and knowledge.

I actually think this would be a beautiful and worthy exercise, friends. Take a blank page. Write on it these three words: **חכמה תבונה ודעת**... wisdom, insight and knowledge. What are we learning in this time from one other? From ourselves? From the Holy One? The ambitious ones among us might fill it out, adding lessons learned to each of the three columns. I know the

people who wrote books during pandemic will definitely do that. But the rest of us, maybe we'll just put that paper beside our beds, or our computers, a reminder to keep our hearts open through this period of constriction. To listen deeply. To pay attention. Because the lessons are there. Something is being stirred up in us right now, even though we can't see it. Something that—if we're open to it—could turn into a magnificent work of art one day.

This takes me back to that milkweed, which I can't wait to plant in front of our house in just a few days. I can't wait to do my small part to help create a more welcoming habitat for the monarch butterflies. But what I'm going to pay extra attention to is not what comes out of the cocoons, but what's happening within. The very process of transformation itself, or what Sam Anderson wrote about in a beautiful piece last spring in the [NYT magazine](#): "precisely the part of the story that tends to be skipped: the confinement, the waiting, the darkness, the change." Because we—all of us, have lived this past year through the confinement, the waiting, the darkness, the change.

Anderson explains that once a caterpillar enters the chrysalis, a cataclysmic event occurs: it essentially digests itself—"using enzymes to reduce its body to goo, turning itself into a soup of ex-caterpillar..." And "only after this near-total self-annihilation can the new growth begin... That's how you get a butterfly: out of the horrid meltdown of a modest caterpillar."

That is the metamorphosis.

Great changes are happening within each of us, all around the world. "Acts of internal self-destruction and rebuilding, subtle shifts and whole revolutions," in Anderson's language.

I have big, audacious dreams for what we'll build on the other side together. For now, let's use this time to pry open our hearts and ingest the lessons of this narrow place, like Betzalel did amidst the crushing harshness of enslavement. Only then will we be prepared to leave this time not only transformed, but equipped to transform our society. Only then might we yet become the artists the world needs to paint a new reality in this time and for generations to come. Only then might we be ready to make our lives a work of art.

Shabbat shalom.