

“Betzalel... made/did all that Hashem commanded Moshe.” (38:22)

Rashi cites an interesting dialogue that took place between Moshe Rabbeinu and Betzalel. Moshe had instructed Betzalel to fashion the Aron Ha'kodesh and then make the Mishkan.

Betzalel questioned the sequence, “Should one first make the furniture and then construct the edifice which will contain them?” Moshe responded, “Your name, Betzalel, means b'tzel Keil, in the shadow of G-d. Surely, you must have been standing in the shadow of G-d, for that is what Hashem commanded me.” The commentators perceive Moshe’s response to mean that Betzalel grasped Hashem’s command accurately. This would imply that Moshe Rabbeinu who was surely greater in perception than Betzalel did not completely understand Hashem’s command. This is difficult to accept. Moreover, if Betzalel’s name denotes the clarity and depth of his understanding of Hashem’s Divine wish, his name should have been Uriel, which means one who is illuminated, rather than one who stands in the shadows.

The Sokolever Rebbe, z.l., takes a somewhat different approach to interpreting this dialogue. Moshe felt that the Aron took priority. Its sanctity and eminence was so great that it needed no protection. As the Aron “carried its carriers,” so, too, was it immune to any physical damage. The question did not concern damage from outside forces, but, rather, from a laxity in the manner Klal Yisrael conducted themselves in its presence. The issue was decorum in the presence of the Torah. Regrettably, things have not changed much. There are laws which regulate proper conduct in a shul, in the presence of the Torah.

Moshe Rabbeinu’s relationship to Hashem was certainly closer than Betzalel’s. He perceived the brilliance and clarity of the Shechinah associated with such closeness on a more sublime level. He could not fathom anyone acting in an undignified manner in the presence of the Aron. Moshe Rabbeinu’s profound humility did not permit him to believe that anyone could be different than he in his reverence for the Almighty.

Betzalel, however, was more “down to earth” than Moshe. He was acutely aware of the frailty of the common Jew. He felt that Moshe was over-estimating the spiritual plateau of the average Jew. He was, consequently, concerned that an exposed Aron would not receive the appropriate respect it deserved and demanded. Hence, he felt that the enclosure to protect the Aron from human irreverence was needed prior to building the Aron. Moshe agreed with Betzalel, because he understood that Betzalel’s perception of the common Jew was more realistic than his. He said, “You decided to make the protective edifice first because you stood in the shadow of G-d. Had you been closer, had you benefited from standing in the direct light, your perception would have been much more lucid. You also could not have conceived that anyone would behave improperly in the presence of the Aron.”

Moshe Rabbeinu's response to Betzalel is of a timeless nature. Indeed, the further we are removed from the Revelation of Har Sinai, the deeper we progress in the "shadow of G-d." The precautionary laws that Chazal have legislated for us are to protect us from forgetting this fact; we stand only in the shadow of the spirituality that Klal Yisrael once manifest.