

Shabbat Vayakhel 5784
Betzalel, Grandson of Hur
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

To be a parent is to be part of a wonderful club.

It's deeply challenging and endlessly rewarding to bring the next generation into the world. But I am told there is a club that is *even greater* than reaching parenthood: being a grandparent. All of the fun, not so many diapers, and a whole lot more sleep! In seriousness, new grandparents tell me it is simply the best, and I take their word for it. (I recognize that not everyone becomes a parent or grandparent, and that's OK. But there are enough here today that I wish to make this topic the focus of today's sermon.)

When a Jewish baby is born, the bris or baby naming is when the parents share their child's Hebrew name. In our tradition, a Hebrew name is never a sound but a story, often a legacy begun by relatives who no longer live. Many grandparents at a baby's naming wipe away tears as they wonder: if only my own deceased relatives could see this right now. They would be so proud.

When a Jewish boy or girl is given a Hebrew name, it is always X Ben Y v'Z for a boy, or A Bat B v'C for a girl. X son of Y and Z, or A daughter of B and C. Our parents' Hebrew names are fully part of *our* Hebrew names for our entire lives: every time we are called to the Torah, and what is written on our Ketubah. This tradition goes all the way back to the Torah.

But in this week's Torah reading, Vayakhel, we read a name that is completely different from almost every other name in the Torah. The context here is the construction of the Mishkan/ Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary that accompanies the Israelites through the desert from Egypt to Israel. We are told the name of the lead architect is Betzalel Ben Uri Ben Hur. That is, Betzalel son of Uri son of Hur. To this point, the Torah has introduced a great many names, but I believe this is the very first time it includes a grandfather in one's name. He is not Betzalel Ben Uri, but Betzalel Ben Uri Ben Hur.

Why is this character Betzalel uniquely named with a grandparent? And who was that man Hur?

Close readers of the Torah will recognize the name Hur, as we have seen him before. The first time we meet him is in Exodus, where he plays an important role in the battle against Amalek. The story goes that Moses remains on a mountaintop while Joshua

leads the Israelites in battle below. When Moses raises his arms, the Israelites prevail. But when he lowers his arms, Amalek takes the lead. Understandably, Moses's arms get tired, so he has two men prop up his arms to ensure victory. Those men are Aaron, Moses's brother, and Hur.

The second time we meet Hur is when Moses ascends Mount Sinai for 40 days, and he appoints two men to be in charge of the Israelites while he is gone: Aaron and Hur, again. From this we learn that Hur is on an equal level as Aaron, Moses's brother and High Priest. That's pretty good company! It's like he is the inner circle to Moses's cabinet.

And the third time we see Hur's name is here, in today's reading, as the grandfather of Betzalel, chief architect. We never hear about him again.

That's very strange. For a man of such great stature, why does Hur suddenly disappear forever? And why does his family take the lead in building the Mishkan?

The rabbis of the Talmud in Sanhedrin connect these dots, and they take us to a scene in the incident of the Golden Calf. Remember that while Moses is on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments for 40 days, the Israelites below urge Aaron to build an idol, which he does with surprising approval. The rabbis take a close look at verse 32:5. וירא אהרון יבין מזבח לפניו. "When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it." Exactly what does Aaron see at this moment? Rabbi Binyamin bar Yefet said in the name of Rabbi Elazar: Aaron sees the Israelites kill Hur. That is, the Israelites demand an idol and Hur says No. Then the mob kills him in retaliation and makes the same demand of Aaron, who accedes. Aaron reasons, if I don't listen to them now, they will kill me too.

The rabbis read the vowels of two words in our verse in another way. *Vayiven Mizbeach* can be vocalized *Vayaven Mizavuach*. "He built an altar" can also be read "He understood from the one who was killed." In this reading, Aaron goes along with the golden calf to save his own life and to prevent the Israelites from committing a second murder. Hur sacrifices his life for G-d by preventing the nation from worshiping an idol. The Midrash in Shmot Rabbah imagines this is precisely why G-d selects Hur's family to build the Mishkan. The selection of Betzalel is a reward to Hur for making the ultimate sacrifice to G-d. And how fitting is that? Hur gives his life in dedication to G-d and G-d's service. Isn't it beautiful that his own grandson would be the one to build a house dedicated to G-d and G-d's service?

This Midrash answers many of my questions that I raised earlier, crucially why Aaron, High Priest, is surprisingly eager to construct the golden calf. Now we understand more.

That being said, it does seem strange to me that this story about Hur's murder - significant, I would think- is not recorded by the Torah itself. But what can I do? Nobody asked me.

The story that Hur wrote for himself as chief architect was in fact begun earlier by his grandfather. Betzalel's story was not chapter 1 in a book, but the next chapter in a book that began long before him, a story deeply shaped by the chapter of his grandfather Hur.

And so it is with us. It is tempting to think that we are authoring our own story from the beginning, but the truth is our parents and indeed our grandparents shaped us in so many ways, obvious and not.

I recognize that family relationships are complicated and unique. At the same time, I have a message to both generations: if you are lucky enough to have one or more grandparents alive, actively ask them about their story. For in doing so, you will better understand your own.

And if you are lucky enough to have one or more grandchildren, tell them about your story, whether they want to hear it or not. Because someday, maybe not today, they will realize how important it is.

Daniel Gordis wrote a wonderful book about Jewish parenting, and in it is a message directed toward grandparents. He writes, "Grandparents need to know that their work isn't over when their children are grown; they have another chance to make a difference with their grandchildren. Grandparents who live full Jewish lives can be powerful models for their grandchildren, helping to create memories that will last a lifetime.... Even from far away, they can have an enormous impact. Kids adore their grandparents, and through them they learn about the past. Through them their link in the chain is strengthened."

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