

## **Fantasy or Reality: The Ultimate Challenge**

By: Shmuel Reichman<sup>1</sup>

There was a peasant farmer in old Russia. This poor farmer stood weeping by the side of the road. He was a farmer with no land to farm and no food to feed his family.

As he stood there, contemplating his bleak future, the Czar happened to pass by in his Royal Coach. He saw the peasant, and the flow of tears rolling down this poor man's face touched the Czar's heart. So much so, that he asked the driver to stop so that he could inquire about the nature of this poor man's misfortune. When he heard the whole problem was a lack of land to farm, he took a stake and drove it into the ground, right where they stood. He then gave the peasant three stakes and instructed him: "Walk as far as you wish and then drive this stake into the ground. Turn, walk again as far as you wish, and then place the next stake in the ground. Finally, turn again and walk as far as you'd like before placing the last stake in the ground. The land between the four stakes will be yours as a gift from me, the Czar.

The man was overcome with joy and eagerly began to walk. After some time, he stopped and prepared to plant the stake in the ground. He was about to shove it in when he paused and thought, "Why should I stop here? I can have so much more!" So he continued to walk. After some time, he stopped and he once again prepared to plant the stake in the ground. He was about to shove it in when he once again paused and thought, "Why should I stop here? I can have so much more!" So he continued to walk. And as the story goes, this man never stopped walking...

The powerful message from this story is clear; we have so much potential in our lives, but if we never sacrifice our potential in order to create something *real*, we will never accomplish anything! This connects to an important idea in this week's parsha.

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## **1. Moshe and Betzalel**

Parshas Pekudei begins by stating that Betzalel built the Mishkan, the Tabernacle, according to the exact instructions that Hashem gave to Moshe. Chazal describe a critical debate that took place between Moshe and Betzalel regarding the proper way to construct the Mishkan. Moshe believed it best to first create the keilim, the actual utensils which would be used to serve Hashem, before then creating the Mishkan, the place within which to store them. Betzalel, however, thought it best to first create the actual structure of the Mishkan, and only *then* construct the inner content, the vessels.

It would seem, at first glance, that Betzalel's position is more intuitive. It only makes sense to first create the container before filling it up with substance? The gemara indeed tells us that after hearing Betzalel's argument, Moshe agreed that this was in fact the correct method. Therefore, when Betzalel built the Mishkan, he first constructed the outer structure and only afterwards built the inner content, the vessels.

If, however, this is the obvious approach, why did Moshe initially reason that they should do the opposite? What exactly was this argument about? Furthermore, the passuk states that Betzalel built the Mishkan according to the exact instructions that Hashem gave Moshe. If these were in fact Moshe's initial instructions, why would he have argued with Betzalel? In order to understand this episode, we must first analyze the fundamental topic of potential and actualizing potential and see if there is something deeper here than meets the eye.

## **2. Potential vs. Actual**

As the Maharal and others explain, there is an important relationship between the spiritual concepts of potential and actual. Potential is endless, multipotent, everything and anything. It has no boundaries, no borders, and no limitations. Something real, on the other hand, is limited, has borders, and is restricted only to what it is. Potential might be endless, but it's not real. What is real might be limited, but it has taken on true existence. Our lives are filled with experiences of both potential and actualized potential. Let us explore a few manifestations of these ideas in order to better understand this root concept.

### **3. Important Expressions**

The prime example and illustration of potential and reality is our relationship with time. Every single morning, when you wake up, the day holds infinite potential. You have the time to do anything, go anywhere, meet anyone. But that's only potential, for in reality, you haven't done anything yet. And in reality, you can't do everything, only something. On the other hand, every night when you go to sleep the potential of that day is completely gone. The only thing that remains is that which you made real from the time you were given, what you accomplished, who you became in that day. The sadness of this moment is that the potential is gone - your day is over. The happiness is everything that you have accomplished, everything you've made real.

This same paradigm applies to life itself. At the beginning of life you have infinite potential; you can become anything, learn anything, meet anyone. Your whole life is ahead of you, but completely in potential. This is not real, it's only potential, the possibilities for what you can choose to become. Only the potential that we actualize and make real becomes eternal. At the end of our lives there is a mixture of feelings. The sadness is that your potential is gone. The happiness is that we can then look back at all that we have accomplished with a feeling of pride, knowing that we have taken the time we were given to build ourselves, to make our potential real.

### **4. Winter vs. Summer**

In secular culture, youth is associated with spring and summer while old age is compared to winter. This is because youth is a time of potential, of excitement, of newness and fun. Old age, on the other hand, is when that potential is nearly gone and the physical body has withered and gone cold. It's therefore associated with the depression and darkness of winter, as death is nearing and potential has dwindled. Fascinatingly, this is in stark contrast with the Jewish approach.

Shlomo Ha'Melech, King Solomon, gives the exact opposite explanation. He compares youth to winter and old age to summer. This is because winter is the time of planting seeds, the ultimate time of potential. It represents childhood, the beginning of your journey in this world. Summer, on the other hand, is like the end of life when your seeds have borne crops, when you see all that you've produced with the life you've been given, all your growth and accomplishments. Secular

culture is enamored with youth and potential, with less attention paid to actualized potential and achieved greatness. The mode of Judaism is not an infatuation with what can be, it's an appreciation of what has been made *real*. We don't see potential as the ultimate ends, on the contrary, we aim for the rich satisfaction of actualized potential. *This* is the true joy of life, the ultimate summer.

## **5. The Creative Process**

This pattern of potential and reality is behind the experience of every creative process as well. When you begin an artistic work, whether it's a painting, a sculpture, a book, or anything of the sort, you have infinite potential. The creative process can lead you down any path, there are endless possibilities of what you can make. However, in order to make something real, you must decide on only one thing to make. You must limit the endless potential in order to make something real. Interestingly enough, this process mirrors Hashem's creation of the world. The Ramchal states that Hashem is infinite and therefore has the ability to create any type of world that He chooses. However, out of all the endless possibilities, He chose to create *this* world, the one you and I exist in.

## **6. Moshe vs. Betzalel**

This principle of potential and actual is the key to understanding the debate between Moshe and Betzalel. In fact, the deeper truth is that there wasn't really a debate to begin with, merely two different focuses. Moshe was focusing on the potential destination and outcome. The goal of creating the Mishkan was to house the *keilim* so that we could serve Hashem. However, this was merely potential, a vision, a destination. Betzalel was focusing on the practical, on how to actualize this potential. In order to have the vessels, we must first create the Mishkan to house them. That is why Moshe admitted to Betzalel that he was correct, for there was in fact no real machlokes, just a difference of focus. This is why the passuk says that Betzalel acted exactly according to the instructions that Hashem gave Moshe, for in truth, this was the plan all along.

## **7. The Strength and Weaknesses of Both**

Potential is beautiful, majestic, and genuinely precious. We all understand the value of potential. However, the weakness of potential is that it's just that, potential. It's not real, it's merely theoretical. The greatness of something that's been actualized is that it's tangible and real. The weakness, though, is that it's only that, nothing more. A finished project is a form of actualized potential. It's beautiful in that it's real, but it's still important to realize that it's limited to what it is. It could have been anything else- there were endless possibilities. However, it's now the specific and unique form that the artist chose to create.

## **8. Limiting Potential for Actual**

The ultimate challenge is limiting infinite potential for the purpose of making something real. Just imagine if a wealthy and generous person comes over to you and offers you any amount of money in the world. "Just quote me a number and I'll give it to you", he says. Your mind races as you think about what number you're going to state. Ten thousand dollars? A million? Let's say you finally decide to say five million dollars, and he hands over the money; the pleasure of that decision is that you are now five million dollars richer. The pain is that you don't get a single dollar more. You could have said six million, or five hundred million, or seven trillion. The list of potential numbers is never-ending. However, much like the farmer in our introductory story, if you can't sacrifice potential for actual, you won't end up with anything. We genuinely struggle in this area. You'll often hear people saying, "Why get married to this person, perhaps the next one who comes along will be better?" "Why take this business offer, maybe the next one will be better?" When we fall prey to this line of thinking we end up with nothing.

## **9. The Modern Challenge**

We like to fantasize about perfect futures, ideal living conditions, and ultimate relationships. However, sometimes we get so caught up in dreaming about a better life that we don't end up living our own. In fact, many people are stuck fantasizing about the life they want to live instead of

bringing that potential into reality. We must be willing to start with what we have, where we are, and work our way from there. Potential is beautiful, but only in as much as we use it, only in as much as we bring it to fruition. May we be inspired to actualize as much of our potential as we can, choose the real over the fantasy, and prepare ourselves for the ultimate summer.

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