



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

ויקהל תשע"ט
Vayakhel 5779



I am deeply touched that Covenant & Conversation has been generously sponsored by THE MAURICE WOHL CHARITABLE FOUNDATION in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl ז"ל. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist on a vast scale, driven throughout his life by a sense of Jewish responsibility. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humanity and compassion, who had a kind word for everyone. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving. Through their Charitable Foundation, they continue to bring blessings to Jewish communities around the world. — RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. To download the accompanying Family Edition to this *Covenant & Conversation* essay, please visit www.RabbiSacks.org/CCFamilyEdition or subscribe to Rabbi Sacks' free mailing list via www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.

The Beauty of Holiness or the Holiness of Beauty

In *Ki Tissa* and in *Vayakhel* we encounter the figure of Betzalel, a rare type in the Hebrew Bible – the artist, the craftsman, the shaper of beauty in the service of God, the man who, together with Oholiab, fashioned the articles associated with the Tabernacle. Judaism – in sharp contrast to ancient Greece – did not cherish the visual arts. The reason is clear. The biblical prohibition against graven images associates them with idolatry. Historically, images, fetishes, icons and statues were linked in the ancient world with pagan religious practices. The idea that one might worship “the work of men’s hands” was anathema to biblical faith.

More generally, Judaism is a culture of the ear, not the eye.¹ As a religion of the invisible God, it attaches sanctity to words heard, rather than objects seen. Hence there is a generally negative attitude within Judaism towards representational art.

There are some famous illustrated manuscripts (such as the Bird’s Head Haggadah, Bavaria, circa 1300) in which human figures are given bird’s heads to avoid representing the full human form. Art is not forbidden as such; there is a difference between three-dimensional and two-dimensional representation. As Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (c. 1215–1293) made clear in a responsum, “There is no trespass [in illustrated books] against the biblical prohibition...[illustrations] are merely flat patches of

¹ For a more nuanced view, however, see Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

colour lacking sufficient materiality [to constitute a graven image].”² Indeed several ancient synagogues in Israel had quite elaborate mosaics. In general, however, art was less emphasised in Judaism than in Christian cultures in which the Hellenistic influence was strong.

“Positive references to art in the rabbinic literature are rare.”

Positive references to art in the rabbinic literature are rare. One exception is Maimonides, who says the following:

*If one is afflicted with melancholy, he should cure it by listening to songs and various kinds of melodies, by walking in gardens and fine buildings, by sitting before beautiful forms, and by things like this which delight the soul and make the disturbance of melancholy disappear from it. In all this he should aim at making his body healthy, the goal of his body's health being that he attain knowledge.*³

The very terms in which Maimonides describes the aesthetic experience make it clear, however, that he sees art in strictly instrumental terms, as a way of relieving depression. There is no suggestion that it has value in its own right.

The strongest positive statement on art of which I am aware was made by Rabbi Abraham ha-Cohen Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of (pre-State) Israel, describing his time in London during the First World War:

*When I lived in London, I would visit the National Gallery, and the paintings that I loved the most were those of Rembrandt. In my opinion Rembrandt was a saint. When I first saw Rembrandt's paintings, they reminded me of the rabbinic statement about the creation of light. When God created the light [on the first day], it was so strong and luminous that it was possible to see from one end of the world to the other. And God feared that the wicked would make use of it. What did He do? He secreted it for the righteous in the world to come. But from time to time there are great men whom God blesses with a vision of that hidden light. I believe that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his paintings is that light which God created on Genesis day.*⁴

² See Tosafot, commentary to Yoma 54a–b, s.v. Keruvim; Responsa Rabbi Meir Mi'Rothenberg (Venice: 1515), 14–16.

³ Rambam, introduction to commentary on Mishna Avot, Eight Chapters on Ethics, chap. 5. 298.

⁴ Jewish Chronicle, September 9, 1935

Rembrandt is known to have had a special affection for Jews.⁵ He visited them in his home town of Amsterdam, and painted them, as well as many scenes from the Hebrew Bible. I suspect that what Rabbi Kook saw in his paintings, though, was Rembrandt's ability to convey the beauty of ordinary people. He makes no attempt (most notably in his self-portraits) to beautify or idealise his subjects. The light that shines from them is, simply, their humanity.

It was Samson Raphael Hirsch who distinguished ancient Greece from ancient Israel in terms of the contrast between aesthetics and ethics. In his comment on the verse "May God enlarge Japheth and let him dwell in the tents of Shem" (Genesis 9:27), he observes:

*The stem of Japheth reached its fullest blossoming in the Greeks; that of Shem in the Hebrews, Israel, who bore and bear the name (Shem) of God through the world of nations...Japheth has ennobled the world aesthetically. Shem has enlightened it spiritually and morally.*⁶

Yet as we see from the case of Betzalel, Judaism is not indifferent to aesthetics. The concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, "beautifying the commandment," meant, for the sages, that we should strive to fulfil the commands in the most aesthetically pleasing way. The priestly garments were meant to be "for honour and adornment" (Exodus 28:2). The very terms applied to Betzalel – wisdom, understanding and knowledge – are applied by the book of Proverbs to God Himself as creator of the universe:

The law and the Lord founded the earth by wisdom;

He established the heavens by understanding;

By His knowledge the depths burst apart,

And the skies distilled dew. (Proverbs: 3:19–20)

The key to Betzalel lies in his name. It means "In the shadow of God." Betzalel's gift lay in his ability to communicate, through his work, that art is the shadow cast by God. Religious art is never "art for art's sake."⁷ Unlike secular art, it points to something beyond itself. The Tabernacle itself was a kind of

"Art is the shadow cast by God. Religious art is never 'art for art's sake.' Unlike secular art, it points to something beyond itself."

⁵ See Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (University of California Press, 2002), and Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁶ The Pentateuch, translated with commentary by Samson Raphael Hirsch (Gates-head: Judaica Press, 1982), 1:191.

⁷ The phrase is usually attributed to Benjamin Constant (1804).

microcosm of the universe, with one overriding particularity: that in it you felt the presence of something beyond – what the Torah calls “the glory of God” which “filled the Tabernacle” (Exodus 40:35).

The Greeks, and many in the Western world who inherited their tradition, believed in the holiness of beauty (Keats’ “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”).⁸ Jews believed in the opposite: *hadrat kodesh*, the beauty of holiness: “Give to the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” (Psalms 29:2). Art in Judaism always has a spiritual purpose: to make us aware of the universe as a work of art, testifying to the supreme Artist, God Himself.

“Art in Judaism always has a spiritual purpose: to make us aware of the universe as a work of art...”

Shabbat Shalom

Jonathan Sacks



www.rabbisacks.org     @rabbisacks

The Office of Rabbi Sacks, PO Box 72007, London, NW6 6RW
+44 (0)20 7286 6391 • info@rabbisacks.org

© Rabbi Sacks • All rights reserved
The Office of Rabbi Sacks is supported by The Covenant & Conversation Trust



⁸ The last lines of Keats’ famous poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”