YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SPECIAL CHANUKA 5779 SHIUR**

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**Dedicated in loving memory of Abraham Gontownik z"l**

**on the occasion of his nineteenth Yahrzeit, and**

**in honor and in celebration of both the birth of**

**Jacob Abraham to Daniela and Zev, and the wedding of Ezra to Lilly Katz.**

**The Gontownik Family**

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**JUDAISM AND ART**

**From tHE PERSPECTIVE OF AN ARTIST**

**Rabbanit Yael Shimoni**

Translated by David Strauss

### Ancient art

Humanity's first encounter with the plastic arts occurred in prehistoric times. Archaeologists have uncovered, in the caves of Europe, ancient figurines and stone etchings of female figures, which symbolize fertility, and wall paintings which depict hunting.

An analysis of these ancient works has revealed that their aim was not to reproduce reality, but rather to represent it symbolically. It is evident that the sculptor did not attempt to fashion the figurine in the precise form of a particular woman, but rather tried to create a symbolic representation of the feminine body. So too the hunting scenes are comprised of schematic images of people alongside impressive drawings of various different animals.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Art historians invest great effort to understand and explain this ancient art, and they connect it to ancient religions and assorted rituals which were conducted in the caves in which these works have been discovered. It seems then that this early art is connected, historically and consciously, to idolatry. As part of the world of cultic practices, people created objects that served them in their rituals. In fact, later artifacts found among different tribes across the world have confirmed this understanding that the objective of ancient art was for the most part the fashioning of ritual objects to be used in the life-cycle rituals of the tribe.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In light of this conclusion, we should not be surprised to find that ancient Egyptian art — another clear example of religious art — dealt extensively with the Pharaohs. The connection between idolatry and art was a strong one, and when religious practice evolved from bowing down exclusively to the forces of nature and started to include the worship of human figures, these items were elevated by means of art to a divine level.

In contrast to these ancient religions, in Judaism, as we all know, the second commandment prohibits the fashioning of any graven image or likeness. This commandment, as well as the story of the Golden Calf, sharpen the difficulty of occupation with art after Israel receives the Torah. In the construction of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) in the desert, God issues a one-time allowance to engage in the plastic arts and even orders the fashioning of the *Keruvim,* the golden cherubs which sit atop the Ark of the Covenant; but there continued to be deep tension between Judaism and art. The construction of the *Mishkan* and its vessels involve an exceptional allowance within a framework of firm and well-defined prohibitions.

After the Torah was given, with the negation of the factors that nurtured art and caused it to flourish, it would appear that every Jew was prohibited to engage in the art that was being produced during that period. Jewish ritual objects — the *sukka*, *shofar*, *lulav*, and the like — are exceedingly symbolic and not at all similar to the ritual objects used in pagan religions. They make no attempt to mirror man's world, and they lack the representational dimension that characterizes great works of art. From the time of the Giving of the Torah, the possibility of occupation with the plastic arts within the framework of Judaism was closed.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Following the period of ancient Egypt, art assumed new forms, though it continued to be connected to pagan religion and other realms that were barred to Jews. In the days of Greece and Rome, art dealt with the gods and with human figures. With the rise of Christianity, European art was for the most part dedicated to Christian symbols; throughout the Middle Ages, art remained connected almost exclusively to Christian themes. Even during the period of the Renaissance, beginning in the 15th century and continuing until the middle of the 16th century, Western art was for the most part Christian. Only on the margins did there begin to develop, at that time, art portraying nature and non-religious events.

There was another factor that excluded Jews from the art world during that period, beyond the religious nature of art until the end of the period of the Renaissance. Throughout the Middle Ages, and even later, breakthroughs in the plastic arts were made under the sponsorship of the Church, or at least under the sponsorship of rulers and wealthy patrons. Clearly Jews could not participate in art being produced under the sponsorship of the Christian Church,[[4]](#footnote-4) and their standing in the lands of their exile generally prevented them from obtaining the sponsorship of some wealthy patron who was interested in their work. Throughout the period of their exile, the Jewish people occupied themselves with their survival and not with art; if Jews engaged in art, they directed their energies to the art of words, which requires far less material resources than do the plastic arts.

Nevertheless, two possibilities were available for Jewish art during the period under consideration.

The first possibility was art that served Jewish religious ritual, what we call "Judaica." In this framework, Chanuka lamps, Kiddush cups, and other articles used in Jewish rituals were created. Of course, restricting art to Judaica sharply limits the creative possibilities, shifting it from the world of copying the images of people and animals to an aesthetic world connected to different challenges and demands. Furthermore, even the artist who is involved in Judaica is not free to fashion ritual objects as he desires, for the prohibition to make a graven image or likeness applies to him as well and limits him in his work. Moreover, generally speaking, relatively little money is invested in such works, for an artist who is asked to create a full-sized statue of a leader or a god enjoys high status and substantial funding, whereas an artist whose energies are directed to decorating Kiddush cups or Chanuka lamps remains at a far lower social and economic standing.

Another form of Jewish art that could arise, despite the Torah's prohibitions, was secular art unconnected to religion. An artist may create paintings and statues that are not religious in nature and comply with the rules of Halakha, if there is interest in such art. However, from the time of ancient art, "secular art" had been almost non-existent, and therefore this path was not open in any real way to Jews who wished to engage in art.

To summarize, owing to the prohibition to make graven images and owing to the Jewish people's vulnerable status over the course of the centuries, there was little room for significant artistic development among the Jewish people. Religious art was possible in limited scope and with little funding, and art that was not connected to religion could not develop. Therefore, until the beginning of the period of modern history, the world of plastic arts in Europe was almost completely devoid of Jews and was controlled almost exclusively by Christian artists.

### Modern and postModern Art

The French Revolution, which erupted in 1789, heralded the beginning of a new era in human history in general, and in art in particular. It is at that time that we first encounter the beginnings of the theoretical foundation that would later become the basis of non-religious art: romantic and realistic art, which tried to imitate nature and everyday reality, not necessarily religious personalities and events. At the same time the modern state began to assume the place that had previously been enjoyed by the Church and the nobility, and thus the opportunity was created for the development of non-Christian art.

The beginning of the 19th century heralded a new period in the world of art. The development of photography undermined the role of the plastic arts as copying the "real" world, and cleared a path for the beginning of abstract art.

True works of abstract art first came into being at the beginning of the 20th century. Some were totally abstract, while others dealt with everyday themes, such as portraits and still lifes. Regardless, they did not try to imitate and copy reality. These works of art reflected subjective principles, and they were no longer objective pictures. In this way, abstract artistic styles, such as cubism, expressionism and the like, were born. Each artistic movement formulated for itself the subjective principles underlying its creation. The world of content and expression changed in an unrecognizable manner, parallel to the change that took place in the artist's standing in society and in the identity of art’s economic and spiritual patrons.

The penetration of clearly abstract "secular" elements into art opened the door to the participation of religious Jews in artistic production. Now, artists could paint for exhibitions, not only for churches. At the same time, the period of the Enlightenment changed the structure of the Jewish community and created a new Jew: an enlightened and cultured Jew, who was involved in the culture of the state in which he lived. The seeds of secularization also began to be planted in this period. Jews who joined these movements could join the modern artistic conversation, and for the first time we find Jews — even traditional Jews — engaged in the plastic arts, such as Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, Maurycy Gottlieb, and the like.

In practice, however, even during this period, religious Jews did not enter the world of art in significant numbers. For the most part, Jews continued to live in depressed socio-economic conditions. Jews remained in an unstable economic state and isolated from the general society which supported such artistic processes. What is more, many Jewish communities fought against the Enlightenment and opposed young Jews studying in the academies and universities of Europe. Therefore, as stated, we do not find religious Jewish artists in significant numbers even during this period.

### Since the establishment of the state of Israel

With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Jewish people's standing in the world changed beyond recognition. In the wake of the establishment of the state, the door was for the first time opened wide to religious Jewish artistic activity. In the State of Israel, a religious Jew did not have to withdraw himself and refrain from drawing near to the power centers driving art. Parallel to the establishment of the State of Israel, various streams of Modern Orthodoxy emerged in North America, Europe and Israel, and they provided religious Jews with the legitimacy to actively participate in modern culture without it impairing their Orthodox lifestyle. Orthodox Jews began to penetrate the cultural centers in the State of Israel, Europe and North America.

From an economic perspective as well, the contemporary religious artist in the State of Israel no longer encounters the same problems that once hampered Jewish occupation in art. The State of Israel is home to many middle-class people who are interested in art. Art schools have been established all across Israel, and there are patrons in the form of governmental offices and financial institutions that support such art.

It would seem then that a religious artist can now happily create art. Art no longer requires the fashioning of three-dimensional images of humans and animals, and it is no longer connected to any religion whatsoever. Art has become a cultural arena in which a society finds its voice. It deals with the day-to-day alongside the sublime, and the artist is free to choose the style, the content and the statement one wishes to make.

In practice, however, even in this almost-ideal situation, the religious artist still faces a significant hurdle — the problem of one’s audience. In light of the fact that throughout the ages the Jewish religion played no part in the plastic arts, the education that is needed to understand and to appreciate art does not exist. Those individuals born with a natural inclination toward art understand the language of art as a mother tongue and often operate in an auto-didactical manner. Observant Jewish artists seem to be blessed with the ability to understand and appreciate art, but their religious community remains distant from such understanding.

The plastic arts are a language. The ability to contemplate art, to experience it and to criticize it is an acquired skill. An artist must maintain a constant dialogue with society in order for an artist to achieve significance in it. In order for art to flourish, it must be supported by an excited audience that visits exhibitions, opens galleries and museums, acquires works, engages in art criticism, and most importantly interests itself in the field of art and the new developments within it. Contrary to popular belief, an artist is not a lone wolf. The artist is the mouthpiece of the culture in which the artist lives. A religious artist, who ends up without a community, without a context, without a society and without criticism cannot create and develop.

The problem of an audience is even sharper in the case of modern and postmodern art. Art of this type cannot provide experiential recreation, as can a concert or play that people can enjoy simply by sitting in their seats. Abstract plastic art requires activity and knowledge on the part of the spectators in order for them to understand it.

As a rule, the religious community has great regard for the capacity to imitate reality, but little esteem for different types of art. Religious people well understand the value of a fine portrait, of a precise nature painting, or of an aesthetic picture, which belong — stylistically — to the romantic and realistic periods, to expressionism, to impressionism, or to the beginning of the modern period.

But when we are dealing with contemporary art — conceptual abstract art, protest art, art that does not revolve around the aesthetic and imitative dimensions — the esteem is replaced by puzzlement. The majority of the religious public does not believe in art in its cultural sense, but only in its aesthetic sense. Modern art is perceived by it as a joke. Art that creates discomfort or criticism is not fit to be hung in one's living room. Art the value of which lies not in the reflection of an aesthetic event, but rather in a deep emotional or conceptual operation, cannot serve as a decoration or as Judaica.

This is art that invites conversation, and currently it lacks a religious home and community that is capable of understanding it and is interested in stimulating itself to talk to it. It is possible that long-standing detachment makes it difficult to acquire the language of art. It is also possible that underlying the religious community's distancing itself from modern art is the fear of legitimizing the image of the bohemian, egotistical and megalomaniacal artist. In my opinion, this detachment intensifies the ignorance and the stigmas in the religious community about artists and art. Of course, this approach is also responsible for the fact that religious people do not invest money in the plastic arts, and this places great obstacles before the very existence of religious plastic art and its ability to develop.

Today, wishing to engage in the plastic arts makes oneself detached — with respect to one’s principal occupation — from the religious community in which one has grown up. Such an individual is isolated and forced to seek dialogue in the secular world or overseas, in cultures different from the one to which that person belongs. Modern art which deals with the difficulties of the religious community, with its deep struggles and with its soul is left orphaned, without readers and without lovers. The secular community, which is unfamiliar with religious language with all its variations and richness, is incapable of appreciating such work and truly understanding it; the religious community, who is familiar with its symbols and its soul, is incapable of deciphering the language of art and connecting to it.

In my opinion, a religious person can feel at home with contemporary art, more so than with any other stream of the plastic arts. After art freed itself from the yoke of idolatry and the Christian Church, and after it opened its doors before the abstract and the conceptual, an opportunity was created which had not existed for many years: to create religious Jewish art and to integrate religious Jewish artists in the artistic mainstream. Unfortunately, as long as the religious community — for the most part — does not study art and does not know how to appreciate it, and as long as religious society fails to decipher the language, beauty and power of modern art, contemporary religious art will continue to lose out in both directions.

1. Detailed information and photographs of these works are found in *Encyclopedia Le-omanut Ha-tziyur Ve-hapisul*, Vol. 2, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Even if we see in the construction of the First and Second Temples an opportunity to revive the plastic arts, once again we are dealing with one-time events, and even then relatively little room was given to human creativity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Avoda Zara* 19b: "One should not make jewelry for an idol [such as] necklaces, earrings, or finger rings. Rabbi Eliezer says: For payment it is permitted." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)