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# Writings About Art

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# The Interpretation of the Second Commandment

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Avram Kampf

*Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness of anything that is in the heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath.* 

(Exod. 20:4; Deut. 5:8)

The second commandment has been interpreted strictly many times in Jewish history. Even when interpreted liberally, however, it casts a long shadow over the Jew's relationship with representational art in any form. It should be observed at the outset that, even if strictly interpreted, the commandment does not infringe upon the huge area of art which is not representational: that is, all abstract geometric or non-objective art.<sup>1</sup> But close examination of literary sources and archeological evidence makes obvious that, in practice, the commandment was never literally observed. The implications of talmudic Law regarding the arts of painting and sculpture were never clear cut. On the other hand, although there was no outright forbidding attitude expressed in the Talmud, the position of the sages had a continuously retarding and discouraging effect on the practice and development of art. However, the negative attitude of the rabbis was based not only on their equivocal feelings about the second commandment but was influenced also by their ascetic frame of mind which held the study of the Torah as being the only truly worthwhile intellectual pursuit.

While reading the second commandment in context, we can easily

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conclude that the Lawgiver, when He forbade the making of graven images, had in mind images made for the purpose of worship.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise, one would be hard put to explain the presence of the sixteen-foot-high carved olivewood cherubim in the biblical Tent of Testimony and in the Temple of Solomon (I Kings 6:23–35); also the sculpture of the twelve cast oxen which carried on their backs the molten sea (II Chron. 4:3–5); or the lions which, according to the Bible, guarded Solomon's throne (II Chron. 9:17–19). Hardly compatible with a strict interpretation of the second commandment is Ezekiel's blueprint of the restored temple, the walls of which were to be decorated with "cherubim and palmtrees; and a palmtree was between cherub and cherub and every cherub had two faces; so that there was the face of a man toward the palmtree on the one side, and the face of a young lion toward the palmtree on the other side; thus was it made through all the house round about" (Ezek. 41:18–20).<sup>3</sup>

David Kaufmann, a well-known nineteenth-century scholar and pioneer in the study of Jewish art, declared that "the fable of the enmity of the synagogue to all art till the end of the Middle Ages and well into modern times must finally be discounted in the light of the facts of life and the testimony of literature."<sup>4</sup> He added that "with the disappearance of the fear of idolatry, which had been the strongest reason for the law, the fear of enjoyment of the work of art gradually disappeared among us."<sup>5</sup> At that time (1908) his claim seemed exaggerated and his assumption based on too limited evidence. In the main, he seemed bent on normalizing the relationship of the Jew toward art. Giving the loving care of the collector and the careful scrutiny of the scholar to any artifact or artistic document that came to his attention, he seemed too much guided by his own ardent admiration for these objects. His rejection of the widely held view that Jews had no art (because according to the second commandment they were not supposed to have any) was based on his knowledge of a number of Hebrew illuminated manuscripts that had come into his hands (among them the famous Haggadah of Sarajevo<sup>6</sup>), his awareness of wall paintings in eastern European synagogues, and his knowledge of specimens of Italian synagogue art.<sup>7</sup>

He had also studied the Jewish catacombs discovered at Monte Verde and the Villa Torlonia in Rome, and the richly decorated mosaic floor of a fourth-century synagogue in Hammam Lif, North Africa, which had been accidentally discovered in 1883 by a French army captain.<sup>8</sup>

Most scholars in Kaufmann's era did not fully realize that a revision of the traditional view of art in the synagogue had already been in the making for some time, and that Kaufmann's approach was the result of a re-evaluation of traditional Jewish attitudes toward art in the light of the nineteenth-century scientific approach of Jewish scholarship.

In 1870, Leopold Löw's book, *Graphische Requisiten und Erzeugnisse*



*bei den Juden*,<sup>9</sup> had appeared. Löw, an eminent rabbi and scholar, examined post-biblical literature up to his own day, analyzing the diverse interpretations of the second commandment and the various communal disputes that had arisen from time to time as a result of the prohibition of figurative art. He found the results of his investigation both encouraging and depressing: on the one hand, Jews exhibited a need for and receptivity toward the artistic products of their time and surroundings; on the other hand, however, the attitudes of Jewish theology had a partially thwarting, discouraging effect on these endeavors. . . .

In the light of these . . . findings, it gradually became clear that no one normative interpretation of the second commandment, true for all times and all places, ever existed. The problem shifted from establishing the one exact attitude of Judaism toward the image to understanding the wide range of ways in which the prohibition against images has been observed at various times and places under various conditions [Fig. 3-1].

Scholars discern two opposing attitudes on this question, each achieving dominance under different circumstances. During periods of national crises, for example, as during the time of the Maccabees and the



Figure 3-1. Zodiac and Figures of the Seasons, central section of mosaic floor, synagogue of Beth Alpha. Sixth cent. C.E. Photo by Art Resource.

anti Rome = anti image

wars with the Romans, nationalistic feeling ran high and the extreme view of prohibition prevailed. Every image was considered a symbol of the foreign invader. National and religious elements united in their opposition against the Romans when the great eagle on top of Herod's temple was pulled down in Jerusalem, and the community was prepared to offer itself for slaughter rather than permit Roman standards bearing an image to appear in the streets of the city (Josephus: *Antiquities*, XV, 8:1-2; *Wars*, I, 33:2-3). After the destruction of the Temple, such extreme views could no longer be enforced, and as the leadership passed to the rabbis, a more discerning and analytical view on art made itself felt. Yet, basic differences remained. Rabbi Menahem ben Simai, for instance, "would not gaze even at the image on one zuz," since it carried the imprint of the Roman Emperor, whereas Rabban Gamaliel II had in his upper chamber a lunar diagram, and frequented a bath house where a statue of Aphrodite was set, a matter that was of some concern to his colleagues. Two rabbis of the third century, the father of Samuel the Judge and Levi, prayed in the synagogue of Shaph-weyathib in Nehardea, Babylonia, in which a statue was set up. "Yet Samuel's father and Levi entered it and prayed there without worrying about the possibility of suspicion! It is different where there are many people together" (Abodah Zarah 43b).<sup>10</sup>

diverse views of rabbis

In their debates the sages differentiated between statues which were intended for a religious or political purpose (such statues were venerated in the ancient world) and those which were made for pure ornamentation. They prohibited the use of the former ones; and restricted the latter ones to the cities. "Rabbah said: There is a difference of opinion with regard to statues in villages, but regarding those which are in cities, all agree that they are permitted. Why are they permitted? They are made for ornamentation" (Abodah Zarah 41a). The Aramaic paraphrase of the Pentateuch, known as Targum Jonathan, expressed the outlook of the third century toward figurative representation in its rendering of Leviticus 26:1, which prohibited idols and graven images: "A figured stone ye shall not put on the ground to worship, but a colonnade with pictures and likenesses ye may have in your synagogues, but not to worship thereat."<sup>11</sup> In the same century we also find talmudic reference to actual synagogue decoration. "At the time of Rabbi Jochanan they began to have paintings on the walls and the rabbis did not hinder them."<sup>12</sup> It is, in fact, from this very century that many of the artworks in ancient synagogues come to us, most of them made under Greco-Roman influence. The third-century expression of grudging permissiveness is characteristic of this period with its more lenient interpretation of the commandment.

religious or secular?

ok

Salo Baron sums up the talmudic attitude as follows: "The talmudic teachers certainly did not encourage the painting of nude women on synagogue walls, as was done in Dura (the Egyptian princess personally



fetching Moses from the river). The text indicates, on the contrary, that the practice under the impact of Greco-Roman mores had become so deep rooted that the rabbis could not avoid legalizing it, even for Palestine."<sup>13</sup>

It was the considered opinion of the rabbis of the third century that all impulses toward idolatry had been eradicated by the beginning of the Second Temple period.<sup>14</sup> The hold of idolatry had also been weakened among the pagans.<sup>15</sup> Recent studies have shown that, due to the great demographic changes which occurred in Israel after the war with the Romans and the revolt of Bar Kochba, Jewish craftsmen, in order to be able to compete on the open market, had adopted their neighbors' methods of ornamentation. They were makers of trinkets of gold and silver and glass vessels. Scriptural as well as archeological evidence also points to the fact that these Jewish craftsmen were engaged in the making of images and idols and participated in the construction of basilicas. They did so in order to make a living. The Sages, who trusted the craftsmen implicitly, took their economic situation into account and constantly widened the meaning of the second commandment. The first tanna to whom a ruling about idolatry is attributed is Rabbi Eliezer in the following Mishnah: "None may make ornaments for an idol, necklaces or earrings or finger rings" Rabbi Eliezer says: "If for payment, it is permitted" (Mishnah Abodah Zarah 1:8).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, at Beth Netopha in Judea, a workshop has been unearthed containing the remains of lamps engraved with the emblems of the *menorah* and *shofar*, and beside them images of horsemen and nude women.

The ups and downs, the dominant liberal or fundamentalist reactions to the arts, were determined by the subtle interplay of internal and external forces. External pressures and strong central control brought about a hardening of the rabbinical attitude. Relaxation of tension, free intercourse with the environment, and economic considerations brought about an adaptation to the cultural possibilities offered by the surroundings and a more lenient interpretation of the second commandment. Later on we find iconoclastic tendencies in Christianity and Islam reinforcing such tendencies in the Jewish world.

These constant reversals of attitude toward art among the Jews continued into the Middle Ages and, in fact, were still apparent as late as the nineteenth century. On the whole, the attitude of suspicion and discomfort with the image remained. This outlook became deeply ingrained, and any image evoked an almost instinctive negative reaction. However, the motivation for the prohibition had shifted by the early Middle Ages. It was not because of its associations with idolatry that the image was resented, but because it disturbed *Kavanah*, the intense devotional aspect of worship. Thus, while Maimonides (twelfth century) permitted figures in the synagogue in sunk relief, painted on a board or

new reason -

tablet or embroidered on tapestry, he used to close his eyes while praying near a wall where a tapestry hung so that he would not be disturbed by it.<sup>17</sup> Authorities continued to hold opposing viewpoints: Rabbi Ephraim ben Isak of Regensburg permitted the decoration of the *bimah* and the chair of circumcision within a synagogue with representations of horses and birds, while Rabbi Eliakim ben Joseph of Mainz is mostly remembered for removing the pictures of a lion and snakes from the stained-glass windows of the synagogue of Cologne, so that it should not appear that Jews worshipped them.<sup>18</sup> In the thirteenth century, Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg prohibited the illumination of festival prayer books with pictures of animals and birds, also on the grounds that they distracted the attention of the worshipper.<sup>19</sup> However, it is quite clear from the large number of illuminated manuscripts which have come down to us that the prohibition was not very effective. In the fifteenth century, Rabbi Judah Minz of Padua opposed the installation of a *parokhet* in his synagogue. The *parokhet* was donated by one Hirsh Wertheim: it was richly embroidered with pearls, and was ornamented with the image of a deer.

About a hundred years later a stormy controversy broke on the island of Kandia, then under Venetian rule, when a wealthy and influential member of the community, who had repaired the synagogue there, ordered a sculptured crowned stone lion to be made for the top of the ark, near an inscription carrying the name of the donor. In order to resolve the conflicting views which arose over this sculpture, it was decided to ask the advice of rabbis in various parts of the world. David Ibn-Abi Zimra in Cairo, Joseph Karo in Safed, Moses di Trani in Jerusalem, Elijah Capsali in Constantinople, and Meir Katzenellenbogen in Padua were consulted. They sided with those who opposed the installation of the lion.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, in the Jewish ghetto of Florence, many Jews had their houses painted with frescoes containing scenes from the Old Testament; wealthier ones had medallions struck, and some rabbis even had their portraits painted. In the Jewish quarter of Siena above the fountain opposite the synagogue stood a statue of Moses sculpted by the fifteenth-century artist, Antonio Federighi.<sup>21</sup> Visiting Jews from Posen found it offensive (1740).<sup>22</sup>

In the synagogues of Poland built in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries we find the burgeoning of a vital folk art. The community firmly believed that such art enhanced their synagogues, and furthermore that it had been carried out with the approval of the great scholars and founders of the community who had desired to adorn the synagogue. It was a great *mitzvah* to do so.<sup>23</sup> This permissive attitude was not confined to Poland alone; any visitor to the old Jewish cemetery near Amsterdam marvels at the representational figures found on many gravestones there.



We have already noted that even the strictest observance of the commandment leaves room for all art which is not representational. The splendid thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Spanish synagogues preserved in Toledo, with their geometric and arabesque designs, showing exceptionally fine proportion and taste, are good examples. It is not design, texture, rhythm, or color which are viewed with suspicion, but rather the preoccupation with them, the quest for beauty alone and the world of material appearances as such. The idea of representational art as a humanistic endeavor and discipline in itself, divorced from religious and magical concerns and distinct from other domains of life—art as a product of imagination which reflects on reality—was an approach to art either unknown at this time or susceptible to distrust because it was not controllable. Appearances were thought to hide rather than to reveal the essential nature of things. Because the idols were considered an illusion and because representational art also can be easily understood as an illusion, representational works were suspect and discouraged. Spain

The intensely religious experience does not need to be supplemented by art. It creates its own art in that it constantly reconstructs its world and perceives the beautiful as an emanation of the divine. "The whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3). "The Heaven is My throne and the earth My footstool" (Isa. 66:1). Religious experience as such is independent of art. Religion as an institution may use art to aid the worshipper to commune with God. But when Jewish religious tradition relied heavily for the transmission of its ideas on the oral word and on the written text, and when study and discourse were themselves a part of worship, representational art was excluded from the religious value system which was in the main preoccupied with the knowledge of Torah. It was not primarily a basic inner incompatibility between the monotheistic world view and the representational image that brought art so much into disfavor with the rabbis; it was the preference for the written word as a tool for instruction and for the transmission of social and moral values that depend heavily on the spoken word.<sup>24</sup> For the purpose of reinforcing the religious experience, Jews have always used the art of music. They knew the value of the musical memory and its capacity, the ability of rhythm and harmony to sink deep into the hidden recesses of the soul and to bind the individual to his group and tradition. "He who reads the Scriptures without melody and the Mishnah without song, of him it can be said as is written: Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good" (Ezek. 20:25).<sup>25</sup> Art not needed

It has been suggested that Judaism's perception of the divine as outside of nature brings about a natural preference for speech and religious poetry as art forms.<sup>26</sup> According to this assumption, God reveals Himself not in any concrete form, "for ye saw no manner of form on the

*divine outside nature*



(must) ear over eye

day that the Lord spoke unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire" (Deut. 4:15). It is through the medium of the ear that the Jew encountered the Divine, whereas other people to whom God appeared in nature perceived Him through the medium of the eye. One kind of perception necessarily leads to the development of the art of the spoken word in religious communication and the other to the use of the plastic arts.

★ ★  
Key! → Hermann Cohen developed this idea further, and pointed to the incompatibility between the plastic arts and the monotheistic view as it emerged. For him the conflict was basic. The second commandment is an attack on art springing from the very nature of the oneness, the invisibility, and unimaginability of God.<sup>27</sup> These ideas are worth serious consideration, especially since they are not offered in support of a particular point of view or to sound a note of apology, but in an attempt to penetrate the historical setting which gave birth to a certain attitude.

★ The God concept of a people naturally has a decisive influence on its art. A faith that proclaims one God of justice and mercy Who cannot be seen and Who uses an unseen medium like the voice inevitably deprives plastic art of one of its great incentives and opportunities. In the cultural climate of the ancient world, there existed an abundance of gods who were visible to all in some concrete form.<sup>28</sup> Jews became aware of art as an independent activity only after the first centuries. However, the die had been cast, and even when the battle against idolatry was won, and the belief in the efficacy of idols had become deflated, the deeply ingrained negative attitude toward art could not wholeheartedly be revised. Feelings of suspicion and instinctive deprecation of appearances remained. Monotheism is a highly abstract idea and conflicts with man's great need for concreteness. Therefore, to avoid any temptation to compromise, plastic expression continued to be shunned. It is the nature of the plastic image to assert itself, and it is more prone than any other symbol man uses in his communication with the Divine to stand between the worshipper and reality and "catch the mind in the accidents of the symbol and confuse it instead of furthering its approach to reality."<sup>29</sup>

Post-talmudic Judaism accepted the Talmud as normative. Attitudes existing in talmudic times were not viewed as limited in validity to their time, but were accepted generally as binding for all times. Judaism enlisted those arts which would advance its central concern: To do the will of God as commanded in the Torah.

This God is one. There is no other. He is the God Who created heaven and earth. He reigns supreme over all, is everlasting, stands outside nature and time, yet intervenes in the affairs of man. He is the God of justice and of mercy. He is holy and demanding. He has created man in His own image. The central belief and concern of Israel flows from this God concept. Since man is made in the image of God, Who is just and

merciful, man must live up to this image and not deny it. Man must practice justice and mercy. He must have respect for himself and others, whether weak or strong, a native or a stranger, a master or a slave. The foundation of the concept of the rights of man, brotherhood of man, and the dignity of man is anchored in God and receives its sanction from Him. Man, by living up to this image, becomes the co-worker of God and helps Him realize His divine plan. Israel, which entered a covenant with the Lord, accepted His Torah and His commandments and must try to become a holy people, a light to the nations. Ethical concerns thus become the central theme of Judaism, which idealizes the realm of morality and holiness rather than the realm of art and philosophy. Judaism created art values only in the realm of the psalm and prophetic speech. Common to both art forms, however, Grätz observed, is the fact that their essential characteristic is truth, not poetic fiction or playful fancy.<sup>30</sup> Judaism also created an historical narrative, "which had the advantage not to be silent, gloss over, or beautify the shameful and unmoral of the heroes, kings, and nations, but tells the events truthfully."<sup>31</sup>

ethics  
over  
art +  
phil.

Ethical values have become so all-pervasive, then, that all other values have to conform to them, may not stand in contradiction to them, or compete with them. Nor can any other value be considered apart from them. To the intensely religious person, an amoral, neutral value does not make sense. If he cannot integrate it into his scheme of thinking and feeling, it threatens him. Thus, he tends to close his eyes to works of art.

Since the knowledge of the Lord leads to the imitation of His ways, the rabbis elaborated in great detail the ways of truth and justice that man should follow. Religious vision had to be expressed in right living. The attainment of the beautiful was not to be found in the harmony of the form, but in the articulation of human needs and of right conduct in accord with the laws of the Torah, which were interpreted and reinterpreted as circumstances changed. Rabbinical interpretation of the Law is considered as binding as the Law itself. The bondage in Egypt, the wandering in the desert, the encounter with the Lord and the prophecy have created a persistent theme, a mode of living, feeling, and thinking. Confronted with works of art the rabbis weighed them against human needs. "When Rabbi Joshua b. Levi visited Rome he saw there pillars (apparently meaning statues) covered with tapestry in winter so that they should not contract and in summer they should not split. As he was walking in the street, he spied a poor man wrapped in a mat, others say in half an ass' pack."<sup>32</sup> He could not but be aware of the contrast between the concern for the statue and for the man. Art was obviously seen by him as a luxury that one could do without; only actual human needs really mattered.

beauty  
in  
good  
life  
not  
form

Rabbi Hama ben Hanina, the wealthy amora of the third century,



pointed out to Rabbi Hoshaiiah II a beautiful synagogue in Lydda, to which his wealthy ancestors had contributed. His colleague exclaimed: "How many lives have thy ancestors buried here? Were there no needy scholars whom that treasure would have enabled to devote themselves to the study of the law?"<sup>33</sup> R. Abin reproached a friend on similar grounds for installing a beautiful gate in his large school house and applied to him the verse: "For Israel hath forgotten his Maker and builded palaces" (Hos. 8:14).<sup>34</sup>

Throughout these ethical concerns there is an awareness of means and ends, a scale of values in which human needs predominate. The Talmud, which has very little to say about the architecture of synagogues, points to the necessity of making the cult objects things of great beauty that will appeal to the human eye. "This is my God and I shall glorify Him" (Exod. 15:2) from the Song of Moses was interpreted by the rabbis as follows: "This is my God and I will adorn Him—adorn thyself before Him in the fulfillment of precepts. (Thus) make a beautiful *sukkah* in His honor, a beautiful *lulav*, a beautiful *shofar*, beautiful fringes and a beautiful scroll of the Law, and write it with fine ink, a fine reed (pen), at the hand of a skilled penman, and wrap it about with beautiful silks" (Shabbat 133b).<sup>35</sup> This seems to be a call for art and beauty based on God's word, and it has been quoted often and is known as *Hiddur Mitzvah* (adornment of the Divine Commandment). It is interesting that a dissenting view is expressed in the Talmud: Abba Saul reading the Hebrew אֲדוֹנָי (I will adorn Him) as a combination אֲנִי וְהוּא (I and He have to act alike) adjusts the passage to the primary concern of Judaism, the relationship of man to God, and he interprets "I will be like Him: just as He is gracious and compassionate, so be thou gracious and compassionate."

Judaism's real concern is not with objects, which are only means to an end. "One may even sell a Torah if one wants to continue one's studies or wishes to marry."<sup>36</sup> The battle against idolatry was extended from the idol, the god of wood and stone to any object which man erroneously made his ultimate concern.

## Notes

1. Ernst Cohn-Wiener, *Die Jüdische Kunst* (Berlin, 1929).
2. The full text reads as follows: "Thou shalt not have other Gods before Me. Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; thou shalt not bow down unto them, nor serve them; for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me" (Exod. 20:3-5).
3. Yehzekel Kaufmann, with his unusually sharp insights, comments on these seeming contradictions as follows: "Moses did not repudiate the accepted belief of his age that