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COVENANT AND CONVERSATION

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THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA FROM THE CHIEF RABBI

כד אדר א תשס״ה
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ויקהל
Vayakhel

The beauty of holiness or the holiness of beauty

> Then Moses said to the Israelites, "See, the Lord has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the spirit of G-d, with wisdom, understanding and knowledge in all kinds of crafts – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship." (Ex. 35: 30-33)

In last week's and this week's sedra we encounter the figure of Bezalel, a rare type in the Hebrew Bible – the artist, the craftsman, the shaper of beauty in the service of G-d, 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.

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More generally, Judaism is a culture of the ear, not the eye (for a more nuanced view, however, see Kalman Bland: *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual*). As a religion of the invisible G-d, 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. To be sure, art is not forbidden as such. There is a difference between three dimensional and two dimensional representation. As R. 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 colour lacking sufficient materiality [to constitute a graven image]'. 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. One exception is Maimonides who, in the fifth of his 'Eight Chapters' (the introduction to his commentary to the Mishneh tractate *Avot*) says the following:

> If one is afflicted with melancholy, he should cure it by listening to songs and various kinds of the 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.

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 statement of which I am aware was made by Rabbi Abraham ha-Cohen Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of (pre-State) Israel, describing his 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 G-d 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 G-d feared that the wicked would make use of it. What did He do? He secreted it for the righteous in world to come. But from time to time there are great men whom G-d 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 G-d created on Genesis day. (*Jewish Chronicle*, 9 September 1935).

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 to beautify or idealise his subjects. The light that shines from them is, simply, their humanity.

Rembrandt, as is known, had a special affection for Jews (See Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, and Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*). 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 G-d enlarge Japeth and let him dwell in the tents of Shem" (Gen. 9: 27), he comments:

> 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 G-d through the world of nations . . . Japheth has ennobled the world aesthetically. Shem has enlightened it spiritually and morally.

Yet as we see from the case of Bezalel, 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' (Ex 28:2). The very terms applied to Bezalel -- wisdom, understanding and knowledge – are applied by the Book of Proverbs to G-d 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)

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The key to Bezalel lies in his name. It means, 'In the shadow of G-d'. Bezalel's gift lay in his ability to communicate, through his work, that *art is the shadow cast by G-d*. Religious art is never 'art for art's sake'. Unlike secular art, it points to something beyond itself. The Tabernacle itself was a kind of 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 G-d' which 'filled the Tabernacle' (Ex. 40: 35).

The Greeks believed in *the holiness of beauty* (Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"). Jews believed in the opposite: *hadrat kodesh* (Ps. 29: 2), the *beauty of holiness*. 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, G-d himself.

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