

Introduction. The Halakhic Aversion to Art

<p>Maimonides - Sefer Hamitzvot, Prohibitions</p> <p>The Fourth prohibition is that we are forbidden from making an image of a human being from metal, stone, wood or anything similar, even though it was not made in order to be worshipped. The reason for this is to keep us from making any images whatsoever, so that we should not entertain the false belief held by the masses (idolators) that these images have supernatural powers. The source of this commandment is God's statement, (Ex 20:20) "Do not make a representation of anything that is with me. Do not make for yourselves silver or gold gods."</p>	<p>ספר המצוות לרמב"ם מצות לא תעשה ד</p> <p>והמצוה הרביעית היא שהזהירנו מעשות צורות מיני בעלי חיים מן העצים והאבנים והמתכות וזולתם ואף על פי שלא ייעשו להעבד. וזו הרחקה מעשות הצורות בכלל כדי שלא יחשוב בהם מה שיחשבו הסכלים שהם עובדי עבודה זרה שיחשבו כי לצורות כחות. והוא אמרו ית' (ס"פ יתרו) לא תעשון אתי אלהי כסף ואלהי זהב. ולשון מכילתא בענין לאו זה על צד הבאור אלהי כסף ואלהי זהב לא תעשו לכם שלא תאמר הריני עושה לנוי כדרך שאחרים עושין במדינות תלמוד לומר לא תעשו לכם.</p>
<p>Maimonides - Laws of Idolatry, Chapter 3</p> <p>10 - It is forbidden to make forms for decoration, even though they may not be idols, for it is written, "You shall not make with me gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold". This refers to gold or silver figures meant for decoration, so that deviants won't mistake them for idols. Therefore, one may not sculpt figures of people out of wood, clay or stone. This applies only if the figure is not protruding, an example of which would be a three-dimensional figure sculpted onto a wall, or some similar thing... however, sculptures which are impressed into the surface, or a form of colors, such as the figures which can be found on tablets and plates/slates, or which are embroidered in cloth, are permitted.</p> <p>11 - Concerning a signet ring which had the image of a man on it; if the image is protruding it is forbidden to wear it but it is permitted to seal with it, but if the image is sunken it is permitted to wear it but forbidden to seal with it, because the image made when sealing with it will be a protruding one. It is similarly forbidden to make images of the sun, moon, stars, zodiac constellations or angels, for it is written, "You</p>	<p>רמב"ם הלכות עבודה זרה פרק ג</p> <p>הלכה י</p> <p>אסור לעשות צורות לנוי ואף על פי שאינה עבודת כוכבים שנאמר לא תעשון אתי כלומר צורות של כסף וזהב שאינם אלא לנוי כדי שלא יטעו בהן הטועים וידמו שהם לעבודת כוכבים, ואין אסור לצור לנוי אלא צורת * האדם בלבד, לפיכך אין מצוירים לא בעץ ולא בסיד ולא באבן צורת האדם, והוא שתהיה הצורה בולטת כגון הציור והכיור שבטרקלין וכיוצא בהן ואם צר לוקה, אבל אם היתה הצורה ג מושקעת או צורה של סמנין כגון הצורות שעל גבי הלוחות והטבליות ד או צורות שרוקמין באריג הרי אלו מותרות.</p> <p>הלכה יא</p> <p>טבעת שיש עליה חותם שהוא צורת אדם אם היתה הצורה בולטת אסור להניחה ומותר לחתום בה, ואם היתה הצורה שוקעת מותר להניחה ואסור לחתום בה מפני שהנחתם תעשה בו הצורה בולטת, וכן אסור לצור דמות חמה ולבנה כוכבים</p>



shall not make with me"7, which means not making images of those in the firmament who serve God. **It is even forbidden to draw them on a board. It is permitted to make images of animals and any other living creatures except for man, and of trees, plants, et cetera, even if the image is a protruding one.**

מזלות ומלאכים שנאמר לא תעשון אתי לא תעשון כדמות שמיים המשמשין לפני במרום ואפילו על הלוח, צורות הבהמות ושאר נפש חיה חוץ מן האדם וצורות האילנות ודשאים וכיוצא בהן מותר לצור אותם ואפילו היתה הצורה בולטת.

Based on Tractate Avodah Zara 42-43

Havruta Sources:

Please study the following two letters. Read them. Identify the way that each have an almost identical structure. What is that pattern of ideas?

Letter #1

To the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem (1907)

By the grace of God,

To the leaders of the honored society for the study of Hebrew art, the Bezalel Association, shalom.

One ray of light shines in the blackness of our darkened world. In the Diaspora, our brethren face chaos and darkness. Blood is shed, bodies are trampled, skulls crushed; the looting and plunder of homes, stores and all precious things. Our people are humiliated, trampled and savaged beneath the hooves of a wild boar that tramples. There is no one to save them. Even the assistance of friends and allies, lovers of Freedom, has failed to materialize; they stand by and do not lift a finger as they see the destruction of the Jewish People [lit. Joseph.] All the actions advanced by young Jews in Russia, for freedom and advancement, all of these have been absolutely forgotten, there in that bloodstained land... But lie a stream of fresh life-giving water falling on a beaten body, the land of Israel is awakening. Though it is an exceedingly slow process, inch by inch, punctuated by lengthy pauses, she is nonetheless experiencing a revival and revitalization, and buds of renewal are visible to those who care to pay attention. One of the clearest signs of revival is the important endeavor initiated by your honored organization — "The revival of Hebrew art and aesthetics in Israel." The very sight of our talented brothers, masters of aesthetics and art is heartwarming, as they establish their rightful position in the broad, central highway of world culture, carried by a divine spirit to Jerusalem. They beautify our holy city, a capital that is as a seal upon the national heart, with aesthetics, design, dignity and splendor which will also be a source of blessing and benefit. This is a phenomenon that everyone can appreciate and celebrate; old and young, even the coldhearted and those preoccupied with the challenges of mere survival.

MOTHER! THE DOLL!

A young girl, beautiful, beloved - the darling daughter. Now - after a long, protracted illness, her face pallid, bluish lips, burning fever, convulsions and trembling - now, her



eyes open, her tightly sealed lips part, her little hands move with renewed life, her thin pure fingers wander and find themselves, seeking their purpose. Her lips move and almost revert to their normal color, and as if from the dead, her voice is heard: "Mother, Mother - the doll! Pass me the doll. Oh! my dear doll; I haven't seen her for so long." Delight! All are overjoyed - her father and mother, brothers, sisters, and the grandparents who in their old age have forgotten their children's games – they all exclaim: "Little Shoshana is asking for her doll!" Thank God, a wonderful sign, certainly her fever has subsided. The doctor too, who has by now become a family friend, rejoices with the family just as he had shared in their pain, he concurs: "A good sign!" The crisis is over! Now there is hope that Shoshana will live, she will grow up, become an adult woman, mature and beautiful. Certainly, the doll is the first request but she will continue to ask. Her spirit and body will grow stronger and she will ask for medicine, for soup, for bread and meat, for clothing and jewellery ... and then for teachers, pens, books, work and much more. In reaction to this sight all are ecstatic... "Hurray! Little Shoshana, so sweet and beautiful, is asking for her doll!"

JERUSALEM

Jerusalem, the beloved, this lily (shoshanna) of the valley, the precious daughter of Zion has been afflicted with the bitter disease of the Exile, prolonged and stormy. Her children have forgotten her. Many of the weak-hearted have lost hope, for her life. Now a life-giving stream has gently shaken the depressed sickly bones, and she demands aesthetics and work of art. Some say that perhaps this is not the proper moment - that there are other priorities and more essential needs. Yes, perhaps, there are such needs. But this request which emerges from the heart of [Jerusalem's] children, from the spirit that she bestowed on them, is itself a sign of life, a sign of hope, salvation and comfort. How important it is to comprehend that this sign of life is not devoid of substance and content; it is productive and beneficial. Aesthetic arts can certainly bring blessings, providing a livelihood for many families here in the Holy Land... It will also open up sensitivity to beauty and purity that endows the children of Zion, it will uplift depressed souls, offering a clear, illuminated perspective of life's splendor, of nature, of work – its dignity and diligence. All these are noble principles that will fill the Hebrew soul with delight and majesty. And the good hopes that rise in my heart in light of your new and honorable movement give me sufficient courage to speak to you, honored gentlemen and beloved brothers, a few words from a different perspective, seemingly totally different from that of the creation of beauty and art: from the rabbinic vantage point. But I hope that these words will be beneficial. By stating some simple truths we will remove huge obstacles from our way, and clear the beneficial and improved path to our ideal, so that the effulgence of glory and beauty will gain strength and eventually appear over our people in our land and in our holy city. Our nation has always related in a positive and pleasant way to the artistic beauty manifest in the creative works made with human hands. But [our respect for art] is also limited. Even in the higher, refined disciplines, we must be cautious of intoxication and excess. Virtue is a guiding light, and yet, we read in the holy scriptures: "Do not be too righteous" (Ecclesiastes 7:16), Wisdom is the light of our lives yet we say: "Nor make yourselves over wise.(ibid)" "It is not good to eat much honey" (Proverbs 25:27). This is the principle that embraces all aspects of the eternal nation's life. We will never sell ourselves to one particular idea to the degree that we



drown in its depth, to the extent that we lose the capacity to give ourselves a limit and to put a boundary to its dominant influence. Indeed, the limit of those things which are inherently good and ennobled is small, gentle, delicate and beautiful, "set about with lillies" (Song of Songs 7:3), "Even through a hedge of lilies they make no breach," (Talmud Sanhedrin 37a) for ... a single stroke can encapsulate a much weighty ideal, the notion of limitation ... Sometimes by one significant gesture, [Israel] expresses its ethos and achieves its objective, all this without hurting human individuality and spirit nor by shackling it in iron, or building a Great Wall of China around it.

When our nation came into being, it found mankind wrapped in the swaddling cloth of its barbaric infancy, and the wild unbridled passion for beauty, unrefined by purity and culture, conquered the globe. Beauty itself was likely to become, in the hands of the crude masses, a sort of sugary substance, a source of inebriation, were it unable to draw its sap from ethics and science. Paganism, with all its abominations, laid its dirty and blood-soaked hands on this delicate flower - beauty and fine art - and practically severed it from its pure roots. Israel, charged with the divine law turned to save the pretty lily flower ... lest it be trampled and crushed absolutely in the crude vile hands of paganism. On the one hand - "You shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall you make yourselves gods of gold. "You shall make yourself no molten gods," (Ex.ch.20) "You shall not make for yourself any carved idol," (ibid.) and on the other hand - "See the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Yehuda; and he has filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship; and to contrive works of art, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in the cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of wood, to make all manner of artistic work. And he put in his heart that he may teach, both he, and Aholi'av, the son of Achisamakh, of the tribe of Dan. Them he has filled with the wisdom of heart, to do all manner of work, of the engraver, and of the craftsman, and of the embroiderer, in blue and in purple, in scarlet, and in fine linen, and of the weaver, even of them that do any work, and of those that devise artistic work." (Ex.ch.30) Even after the victory, when Judaism had all but defeated paganism in the highly cultured world, the nation of Israel [was] left one line as an everlasting sign of the saving strength of her right hand , in accordance with the dictates of the written and Oral Law [Torah]. Even when this line becomes shorter, through [the application of] judicial wisdom in a way compatible with life's needs... it would yet retain its great and powerful spirit, that expresses the strength of its triumph in the past, and the power of its hope for the future.

The whole area of ornamentation, beautification and painting is permitted to Jews. There is only one limit, one line ... long in its quality and not its quantity. This limit conveys much spiritually but does only minimal harm to craftsmanship and art for all the power of its noble purpose. "All visages are allowed, save the face of man." In fact, only the sculpture of a complete human face, in relief, [is prohibited] and there are ways of circumvention ... such as through the help of a gentile assistant in the final stage of a prohibited sculpture. What is left, then, is only a small point of the whole long line, but God's designs are manifold: the nation of Israel shall abhor and not tolerate those images that typified the pagan world of the past or present, or of Christianity.

Therefore it is proper, and indeed our holy obligation that such statues should not be housed in the national treasury of arts in our Lord's holy city. And in general it would be



very appropriate for the honorable committee to make it known to the general and Jewish cultured world, that all those acts which fall in the narrow path where the nation's sensibilities, religion, and art coincide, will be performed according to the nation's will and general aspirations to see particularly in the city of her rejoicing of hopes the treasure of all its wealth, strength and sacredness, [that all is done] according to the teaching of the sages of the Torah, the accepted scholarly leaders of nation of Israel in its land. When we look at the practical benefit, which you wish to bring through this honorable work to our brothers who have settled in the Holy Land, it is easy to understand that only if this honorable house will not generally be considered as one which shelters things that we, as obligated by the sacred Torah, look upon with inner spiritual animosity, only then will the institution you establish be able to yield the desired benefits: to attract the many of our brothers who work in these arts, or who are talented and [seek] to perfect their talents and improve their work, as well as many [younger] students of the children of Zion, from all the communities of our nation that have settled in the Holy Land, in these honorable arts in the many branches that have spread out from the living tree of painting and arts. And honorable people, your sacred aim is to create and not to ruin, to build and not to destroy. I trust, in your exalted honors, that you will be mindful of these words that come from a heart full of love and respect for the principles of your honorable aspirations.

The holy city of Jaffa, may it be built and established. 5668/ 1907

Letter #2

Invocation at the Inauguration of the Hebrew University.

April 1, 1925

The prophet of consolation prophesied: "Lift up your eyes and look about; they have all gathered and come to you. Your sons shall be brought from afar, your daughters like babes on shoulders. As you behold, you will glow. Your heart will fear and rejoice—for the wealth of the sea shall pass on to you; the riches of the nations shall come to you." (Isaiah 60:4-5) Today's great event, the opening of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem on Mount Scopus, in such glorious ceremony and splendid festivity, amidst a gathering of tens of thousands of our sons and daughters from all parts of the land of Israel and from all the lands in the Diaspora, is—on a reduced scale—the living fulfillment of the holy vision of this prophecy. True, not all have gathered together, and the beginning of the ingathering of the exiles is on a small scale, yet this very ingathering is a sure sign that the set time has come, and that the gates of redemption are opening before us. Our hopes are strengthened that the great day is near when all the exiles will gather together and join us, the redeemed ones joyously going up to Zion.

We note in this first step today the fulfillment of the prophet's words: "As you behold." With our own eyes we behold the wonders of the Redeemer of Israel, who has performed this great deed on our behalf. He has raised up the glory of His people among the nations of the world. He has given us a portion in Judah, and girded us with strength and spirit so that we can begin to rebuild the life of our nation, as before, in the Holy Land. We also note the fulfillment of the prophet's words: "You will glow." The glowing joy on the faces of the thousands gathered here is an expression of gratitude and esteem to such distinguished guests as Lord Balfour, the representative of the great nation that issued the Declaration; His Excellency the High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel ; His



Excellency Lord Allenby; and the distinguished rabbis and sages whose presence graces this festive gathering. Their presence causes the souls of all those gathered here, as well as the souls of tens of thousands of our brethren from afar who will hear about the great glory of our nation on this day, to glow. But why "fear"? Why did the prophet preface the phrase "Your heart will rejoice" with the notion of fear? When, however, we look back in retrospect at past generations, and at the spiritual and intellectual movements that have influenced us, we readily understand that the notion of fear, in conjunction with rejoicing, is appropriate.

Two tendencies characterize Jewish spirituality. One tendency is internal and entirely sacred; it serves to deepen the spirit and to strengthen the light of Torah within. Such has been the purpose of all Torah institutions from earliest times, especially the fortresses of Israel's soul—the yeshivot. This includes all the yeshivot that ever existed, presently exist, and will exist in order to glorify Torah in its fullest sense. This spiritual tendency is fully confident and assured. "Those who love Your Torah enjoy well-being; they encounter no adversity" (Psalm 119:165). Despite such confidence, Rabbi Nehunyah ben Haqanah, upon entering the house of study, used to pray that nothing go awry with his presentation and that it not lead to error. The second tendency characterizing Jewish spirituality served not only to deepen the sacredness of Torah within, but also as a means for the propagation and absorption of ideas. It served to propagate Jewish ideas and values from the private domain of Judaism into the public arena of the universe at large. For this purpose we have been established as a light unto the nations. It also served to absorb the general knowledge derived by the collective effort of all of humanity, by adapting the good and useful aspects of general knowledge to our storehouse of a purified way of living. Ultimately, this absorption too serves as a means of a moderated propagation to the world at large. Toward the attainment of this end, the Hebrew University can serve as a great and worthy instrument.

Here, dear friends, there is room for fear. From earliest times, we have experienced the transfer of the most sublime and holy concepts from the Jewish domain to the general arena. An example of propagation was the translation of the Torah into Greek. Two very different Jewish responses to this event emerged. In the land of Israel, Jews were frightened—their world darkened. In contrast, Greek Jewry rejoiced. There were also instances of absorption. Various cultural influences, such as Greek culture and other foreign cultures that Jews confronted throughout their history, penetrated into our inner being. Here too, many Jewish circles responded to absorption with fear, while other Jews rejoiced. When we look back on the previous generations, and reckon with hindsight, we realize that neither the fear nor the rejoicing was in vain. We gained in some areas and lost in others in our confrontation with foreign cultures. This much is clear: Regarding those circles that welcomed absorption and propagation joyously, with unmitigated optimism and with no trepidation, very few of their descendants remain with us today, participating in our difficult and holy task of rebuilding our land and resuscitating our people. For the vast majority of them have assimilated among the nations; they found themselves caught up in the waves of the "wealth of the sea" and the "riches of the nations" that have come to us.

Only from those who resided securely in our innermost fortresses, in the tents of Torah, enmeshed in the sanctity of the law, did emerge the truly creative Jews—that great



portion of our nation who are loyal to its flag—who work tirelessly to build our great edifice. Among these were many who propagated and absorbed. They exported and imported ideas and values on the spiritual highway that mediates between Israel and the nations. Their attitude, however, toward this undertaking was never one of rejoicing only. Fear accompanied their joy as they confronted the vision of the "wealth of the sea" belonging to the "riches of the nations." Quite rightly did the prophet say: "As you behold, you will glow. Your heart will fear and rejoice—for the wealth of the sea shall pass on to you; the riches of the nations shall come to you." But how does one overcome the fear? How do we assure the safety of the nation against the mighty stream engulfing it?

As a representative of the Jewish community, standing on this honored platform, I submit to you the reflections of many distinguished segments of the community of traditional Judaism. It must be understood that the Hebrew University by itself cannot fulfill all the educational requirements necessary for the success of our national life. We must realize that, first and foremost, it is the great Torah yeshivot, those that now exist and those to be constructed that are worthy of the name—including the Central Yeshivah which we are establishing in Jerusalem, which shall be a light unto Israel in all areas of Torah, whether halakhah, aggadah, Jewish action, or Jewish thought—that uphold the spirit of the nation and provide for its security. Moreover, the Hebrew University must maintain standards so that the name of Heaven, Israel, and the land of Israel are sanctified, and never desecrated, by it. This applies to administration, academic staff, and students alike. In particular, it is essential that academicians teaching Jewish studies, ranging from biblical study—the light of our life—to talmudic study, to Jewish history and thought, aside from their academic excellence, be personally loyal emotionally and intellectually to traditional Judaism. Only then will the fear we experience, together with the magnificent vision we behold this day, lead us to glow and rejoice in blessing.

These are our aspirations regarding the institution crowned today with the glory of Israel by the "wealth of the sea" and the "riches of the nations" that have come to us. May the prayer of Rabbi Nehunyah ben Haqanah be fulfilled in us: May my presentation not lead to error.

"Then my people shall dwell in peaceful homes, in secure dwellings, in untroubled places of rest" (Isaiah 32:18). May we witness the joy of our nation, the rebuilding of our Temple and our glory, to which the nations shall stream in order to receive Torah from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem, Amen.



Supplementary Sources

Babylonian Talmud – Berachot 55a

Said Rav Yehuda in the name of Rav: Bezalel knew how to join the letters with which heaven and earth were created. Concerning him it says that he was filled with 'a spirit of God, with wisdom, insight and knowledge', and concerning God's act of Creation it says 'God with wisdom founded the earth, and with insight established the heavens' (Mishle 3:19). Furthermore, it states: 'with knowledge did He uncover the Deep' (Mishle 3:20)" Talmud Berachot 55a

Hamizrach (1903) pp 352-354

Literature, art and sculpture can actualize the spiritual concepts that are deeply embedded in the inner recesses of the human soul. If at any moment, there is even a single etching harbored in the depths of the soul that has not been exposed and actualized, Art has an obligation to produce it.

Rav Kook recounted (Jewish Chronicle London; 13 September 1935, p. 21)

"When I lived in London I used to visit the National Gallery, and my favorite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a Tzadik...We are told that when G-d created light, it was so strong and pellucid, that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous when the Messiah should come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that was originally created by God Almighty."

A.D. Gordon. People and Labor

A vital culture, far from being detached from life, embraces it in all its aspects. Culture is whatever life creates for living purposes: Farming, building, and road-making - any work, any craft, any productive activity is part of culture and is indeed the foundation and the stuff of culture. The procedure, the pattern, the shape, the manner, in which things are done - these represent the forms of culture. Whatever people feel and think both at work and at leisure, and the relations arising from these situations, combined with the natural surroundings - all that constitutes the spirit of a people's culture. It sustains the higher expression of culture in science and art, creeds and ideologies. The things we call culture in the most restricted sense, the higher expressions of culture (which is what is usually meant when culture is discussed in our circles) - this is the butter churned out of culture in general, in its broadest sense. But can butter be produced without milk? Or can a man make butter by using his neighbors' milk and still call the butter all his own?

תלמוד בבלי - ברכות נה.

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: יודע היה בצלאל לצרף אותיות שנבראו בהן שמים וארץ. כתיב הכא וימלא אתו רוח אלהים בחכמה ובתבונה ובדעת, וכתיב התם ה' בחכמה יסד ארץ כונן שמים בתבונה וכתיב בדעתו תהומות נבקעו

המזרח (1903) עמ 352-

הספרות, הציור והחיטוב (כלומר, הפיסול) עומדים להוציא אל הפועל כל המושגים הרוחניים המוטבעים בעומק הנפש האנושית, וכל זמן שחסר גם שרטוט אחד הגנוז בעומק הנפש שלא יצא אל הפועל, עוד יש חובה על עבודת האמנות להוציא.