

Jewish Visuality: Myths of Aniconism and Realities of Creativity

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Once had occasion to speak with a Hareidi relative— I'll call him Dovid—about the elaborately painted seventeenth-century wooden synagogue ceilings in what is now Poland and Ukraine. The architecture and the decoration of these buildings is rich and colorful, producing a tapestry-like quality in wood and paint—reds, blues, greens, a panoply of animals, real and imagined, and more plants and flowers than one could possibly envision even in a daydream of the Garden of Eden. When I showed Dovid an image of the full-color diminished-scale reconstruction of the ceiling of Hodorov synagogue displayed in the Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv, he was convinced—and attempted to convince me—that this was a “Reform” synagogue, in spite of my assertions that the Reform Movement had not sprung up until a full two centuries after the building and its painting were completed. My attempts to demonstrate that the decorative scheme was

not only deeply Jewish, but (in spite of its “folksy” look) was in fact both quite learned and certainly Hassidically influenced made Dovid question my grasp both of history and reality. How could I have failed to apprehend what was patently obvious to him and, at least in theory, to any other reasonable person—the fact that no heimische or frumme Yidden would ever have produced such images—unicorns, dragons, leopards, turkeys—for a synagogue? Indeed, with the exception of the lions sometimes shown flanking the Ark and an eagle or two on a Torah crown, they would not have produced images at all.

Unbeknownst to him, Dovid was elucidating a key question regarding the place of creativity within Orthodoxy to which this journal is devoted. Dovid is not ignorant, nor is he unappreciative of creativity. He is aware, for instance, that the Hassidische court of Modzitz is highly skilled at inventing and producing niggunim (musical creativity). He sings the praises of the various maggidim who circulate in the ultra-Orthodox communities, and will tell you of their excellence in inventing and interweaving tales (narratological creativity). And he certainly acknowledges the fact that the ability to be mehadesh hiddushim (to come up with innovative interpretations) in one’s learning is the most important quality of a student of Torah (intellectual creativity). But the realm of the visual and its attendant possibilities for creative innovation are generally regarded by Dovid (as by proponents of many other “flavors” of Orthodoxy, including some representatives of “Modern Orthodoxy”) as the stuff of Gentile pride and rejoicing, inappropriate for Jews.

Just about every book on the subject of “Jewish Art” starts out by making sure we understand that the Second Commandment prohibits the production of visual art. Some contemporary Jewish artists make a career out of reporting their struggles with Judaism’s alleged aniconism, or opposition to imagery. In this, they transpose the traditional trope of the agony of the misunderstood artist: Instead of being martyred by a society that does not understand their art because it is so avant-garde, these agonized Jewish artists are victimized by a religious community whose law allegedly does not understand or countenance the making of art at all. This transforms their art (however pedestrian in actuality), into something daring and avant-garde by virtue of merely existing. Such antics are relatively easy and cheap, but they attack what is essentially a straw man.

While making art was never the profession of choice for “nice Jewish boys or girls,” and named Jewish artists are few and far between—at least

from the days of Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur of the tribe of Judah who supervises the construction of the Mishkan in the book of Exodus to those of Marc Chagall of Vitebsk and Paris—it is a fallacy to assert that Jewish culture was aniconic. Although the Second Commandment purportedly prohibits the creation of art and makes it impossible for Jews to be artists, at the end of the day, the various halakhic interpretations of that commandment in practical terms prohibit only the creation of three-dimensional objects intended for Jewish worship. As long as one doesn’t worship it, there is no prohibition of owning, say, a tribal religious artifact that was made for worship by non-Jews, or even of making religious statuary for non-Jews. Various legists interpreted the commandment more stringently, of course, but it is indisputable that in most times and places, Jews did create monuments of visual culture, and they did so with enthusiasm, encountering little or no opposition from religious authorities.

We have no verifiable artifacts from Solomon’s Temple nor do we know exactly how it looked. But there are a good number of fairly corroborable accounts of the appearance of the Second Jerusalem Temple, begun in 535 BCE, dedicated in 515, and extensively renovated (really rebuilt) by Herod the Great around 19 CE. Many of its massive ashlar survive, as do fragments of carvings from the interior of some of the gates, which are quite beautiful. They feature floral motifs and even swastikas, design elements and symbols of power in many cultures—including that of the Israelites—before their co-optation and debasement by the Nazi regime.

But we don’t only have architectural design elements from the ancient period. Representational and narrative art, always in two dimensions, has also survived. In 1932, an ancient synagogue completed around 244 CE was uncovered at Dura-Europos, Syria, making it one of the oldest synagogues in the world. By way of contrast with the ancient synagogues in the Land of Israel, where little remains but columns and floors, Dura is unique in that it was preserved virtually intact, including its walls. And because its walls were preserved, we also are lucky enough to also have its extensive figurative paintings depicting narratives from the Bible.

The ancient synagogue of Bet Alpha, located in the Bet She’an Valley in the northeast of Israel, dates to the Byzantine period (c. 5–6th century CE). The mosaic floor of the synagogue was uncovered in 1929, when members of Kibbutz Bet Alpha dug irrigation channels for their fields. Here, again, we have narrative, figurative images, somewhat less sophisticated than those at Dura, but quite stunning. And at Bet Alpha and in other Byzantine-

period synagogue mosaics we also have symbolic elements, including zodiacs, the goddesses of the seasons, and—often at the physical center of the mosaic scheme—depictions of the Sun (or of Helios, the sun god) in his chariot. Scholars have agonized over such images, but again, this agony is misplaced. Their presence does not represent pagan idolatry (after all, they were right in the middle of the floor, where they would have been trodden upon constantly) but rather convention: Ask a child to draw the sun, and she or he will inevitably draw a disk with lines radiating from it (with or without a happy face.) Does the sun look like this? Of course not, but it our convention for depicting that fiery ball of celestial gasses. The depiction of the Sun or Helios also belongs, contextually, to a larger conceptual scheme in these synagogues, a conceptual scheme that includes the zodiac and the seasons as part of a more comprehensive statement about the glory of God in the universe. Imagine a contemporary synagogue commissioning a set of stained glass windows depicting such a theme: We would likely see the darkness of space sprinkled with the stars of the Milky May, Saturn with its rings, red Mars, striped Jupiter. So too, when Jews in the Byzantine period wished to portray God's glory in the universe, they depicted the zodiac, the sun, (according to their conventions), and the symbols of the seasons. The fact that these images were apparently deemed permissible in a context that was indisputably pre-modern and that shows no evidence of having been heterodox should accordingly surprise nobody, especially given their two-dimensionality and placement underfoot. Ruminating over the permissibility of such images when they appear to have been perfectly permissible is thus again a battle with a straw man, as pointless as agonizing over the exclusion of artistic expression from a tradition that clearly includes it.

What is interesting about Jewish art in antiquity then is not that it should have dared to exist, but that it—like contemporary Christian art—endeavors to blend the narrative and the symbolic in a complex and sophisticated way. It is this sort of representational art with both narrative and symbolic components that makes its way into the Middle Ages.

The lively engagement with art among Jews in late antiquity appears to have fallen dormant around the seventh century, perhaps due to the dominance of Islam in the regions in which the majority of Jews dwelt at that time. But during the early thirteenth century, by which time Jewish settlement had spread throughout Christendom, Jews in both Sepharad and Ashkenaz developed a renewed interest in narrative painting. Prior to

this time, illuminated manuscripts were generally made only in monasteries. But around the turn of the fourteenth century, illuminators started moving into urban workshops where anyone—Jew or Christian—who could afford to, could walk in and commission one of these lavish volumes. By the early fourteenth century, the rebirth of narrative, figurative art in Jewish culture reached its most articulated development. And the art that was produced teemed with an efflorescence of symbols, some imported from antiquity, others developed via rabbinic and medieval texts.

This symbolic language is indigenously Jewish, even though it responds at times to what is going on in Christian art. Art historians have often been troubled by the question of how “Jewish” medieval Jewish art could have been, given the fact that it was frequently produced by non-Jewish artists and craftspeople. But art was expensive, and so even if it was commissioned from Christian artists, it was necessarily produced under the close supervision and scrutiny of the Jewish patron. Art historians also tend to be troubled by the fact that art produced by Jews in the Middle Ages is quite stylistically similar to the visual culture of the societies in which it is found. But “similar” is, of course, not “identical,” and medieval Jewish and Christian visual did not mean the same thing. If Congress commissions a mural containing an eagle and an American flag to hang in the rotunda of the Capitol Building in Washington, and a bunch of kids paint the same images on the wall of an abandoned building in the barrio, no one but the terminally dim among us would argue that both eagles and American flags mean the same thing. The eagle in the Capitol clearly embodies “the American Dream” but the eagle in the barrio might comment further on the Dream deferred, sadness over inequities in the ability to attain the Dream, or hope that the Dream may be more universally applied.

The primary function of both medieval Jewish and medieval Christian art was, of course, to “illustrate sacred history,” to translate the scriptures and the history of God's people into visual terms. But medieval Christian art was believed capable of doing something additional that might, on first consideration, seem unparalleled in Jewish culture with its long-standing taboo on imaging the divine: It evoked the numinous, even, in many cases, embodying the presence of Jesus or the saints, and verifying their continuing sacred power. Accordingly, images were often objects of veneration, believed to have actual potency to heal, to witness, to come to life, if necessary.

Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to point to Jewish visual culture as explicitly depicting the sacred in the manner of Christian visual culture. The depiction of the divine is assiduously avoided, and there is a careful distance maintained between the representation as a signifier and the thing signified even in the case of non-divine figures. Instructive in this respect is the biblical description of the most explicitly angelomorphic of “holy images” in the Jewish tradition, those of the cherubim, the golden figures on the top of the Ark of the Covenant in the Wilderness Tabernacle and later in both Temples: Scripture deliberately describes the disembodied voice of God speaking not from the mouths of these figures, but from the handbreadth of empty space between them. This neatly obviates the possibility that the cherubim themselves embodied God, or were actual angels in some constrained and physical form.

Still, in spite of the apparent reticence of the Jewish tradition to speak of art as embodying the sacred, there is a sense in which medieval Jewish visual culture does precisely that, in as striking (if not so explicit or anthropomorphic) a manner as it did for medieval Christians. Herein lies the creativity of medieval Jewish art. Working within the bounds of halakhic propriety, wherein representation (in two dimensions, not intended for worship) was certainly countenanced, but in which embodiment was patently taboo, Jews were yet able to manifest creativity in the realm of the visual in such a way as to give rise to forms that were analogous in higher theoretical function to the interventions of Christian art when it moved beyond the realm of the representational into the sphere of the embodying.

It can be argued that in making art that gave visual expression to sacred narratives, medieval Jews created something that performed a function analogous to the embodiment of the sacred person in Christian icons. The practice of visualizing scriptural narrative manifested and “incarnated” what was most numinous for Jews: the biblical text, the concrete expression of God’s revelation to and continuing relationship with Israel.

Witness the opening folio of the Book of Numbers in a South German Pentateuch with Megillot, illuminated around 1300 and now Add. MS 15282 in the British Library. Here, four knights hold banners with the symbols of the major tribes camped around each of the four sides of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, safe within small aediculae from the deprecations of the grotesque hybrid monsters that surround them. Scholars have labeled these dragons “merely decorative,” yet their size and promi-

nence, as well as the fact that the standard-bearers are specifically depicted as knights may hint that the artist intended the dragons as symbolic representations of the difficulties the Israelites encounter in the saga of the book of Numbers. Perhaps they represent the fiery serpents in the desert. Or, as the human parts of the hybrids seem in some cases to correspond to caricatured ethnic types, perhaps they represent the occupants of the Land of Canaan whom the Israelites would vanquish in battle. As the dragons rage outside, the knights stand calmly within small golden aediculae lined with red. Thus the artist evokes a sense of divine protection commensurate with the spirit of both the biblical verse, “[God] led you through that great and terrible wilderness in which there were venomous serpents” (Deut. 8:15) and the eschatological prophecy of Zechariah 2:9, “And I will be for you, says God, like a wall of fire around you.”

These hybrids are not “merely decorative” elements. If we are to look at this iconography as a sort of text, how might we read them? They serve as protagonists, introducing a narrative tension into a static and hierarchical tableau. They convert the whole scene from a mere diagram of the relative positions of the Israelite tribes around the Tabernacle to a representation that summarizes in iconographic shorthand the entire premise of the book of Numbers—the various trials the Israelites faced in the desert, and how God preserved them from these perils. So this particular configuration of symbolic elements is, in essence, a shorthand depiction of the principles of divine protection and providence, the predominant theme of the Book of Numbers. Accordingly, it is appropriate that they should appear with the opening rubric of the book.

But we can go a bit further, and in doing so, reveal the true creativity here of the dance between the materialized and the abstract, between what is permissible to depict and what is forbidden. In our illumination, the Tabernacle is represented not as an architectural edifice, but as a word: the opening word of the Book of Numbers, “Vaydabber”: “and [He—(God)] spoke.” This is not just any word; it represents the Logos—the word of God—manifest as the sacred center of everything. It literally stands in for the Tabernacle in the center of the Israelite camp, which was, after all, built to enshrine the Tablets of the Covenant: a physical manifestation of God’s word. It represents, by extension, the centrality of scripture—of God’s words to Moses—in the Israelite experience, in this biblical book, in the entirety of Pentateuch, and in subsequent Jewish tradition.

This concept is profound in itself, but it is most fascinating that the Jews who commissioned this manuscript, most likely from Christian artists, were insistent on “disappearing” the physical Tabernacle while at the same time they opted to represent the concept of the centrality of scripture visually: they chose to represent the primacy of the word in the tradition via the image.

In Christian tradition, a sacred image bears the imprint of historical tradition; it verifies the dreams of its beholders; it intervenes miraculously, raising a hand, crying out a word, inclining an ear, or shedding a tear. Art thus testifies to the continuity of revelation, and to the continuing relationship between God and God’s people through God’s saints, as represented by their images. Just as many are habituated to believe that art cannot embody the sacred in Judaism, many likewise labor under the assumption that there can be no miraculous images in Judaism, no statues of saints who raise a hand to affirm a prayer. Although this is generally true, again, (as in the case of art embodying the sacred by visually manifesting sacred scripture), there is an analogy with Christian visual culture. The embodiment of sacred narrative in art also testifies, in its own way, to a continuity of revelation. Art is a form of exegesis; as such, it can serve the miraculous function of making continuously audible the still soft voice of divinity: reflecting, commenting upon, and even amplifying the revelation of God’s will through scripture. Images became the mirror of revelation in history.

Deuteronomy 5:19 says of the revelation at Sinai, “These are the words that the lord spoke . . . and God did not add [velo yasaf] to them.” The first-century Aramaic translation/commentary on this verse by Onkelos reads “and God did not add [velo yasaf]” as “and God never ceased [velo passak].” This subtle emendation totally subverts the text, which seeks to terminate revelation at Sinai, by opening it up to a seemingly infinite expansion. Yet it is completely in keeping with the rabbinic attitude toward the Sinaitic revelation; revelation is understood to continue through the exegesis of subsequent generations. The legal aspects of apprehending the divine will were understood to unfold via the halakhic process. The biblical narrative, too, was rendered interminable by means of midrash, the rabbinic method of scriptural interpretation, which was born during the period of the formation of the Mishnah in the second century of the Common Era, and by means of parshanut, the verse-by-verse

commentaries of medieval scholars. The remaining monuments of Jewish visual culture from the Middle Ages are a testament to the creative ways in which Jews could employ the forbidden/permitted mode of visual representation alongside these traditional modes of text commentary. And where word and image converge, and iconography serves as exegesis, each speaks for and interprets the other, and both contain within themselves an echo of eternity, a manifestation of the continuing voice of Sinai.