Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Vayakhel, Exodus, Chapters 35-38

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Seeing Beyond Sight in the Shadow of God

One of the fascinating elements of Rembrandt's art is the way that he plays with the theme of sight itself. As a twenty-three-year-old living in Leiden, he gave us a self-portrait, *The Artist in His Studio*, a depiction of the painter engaged in invention. As Simon Schama noted, Rembrandt, in this portrait, rather than give himself human eyes, paints himself with "blackened o's that seem to absorb rather than reflect light," thereby emphasizing that what made him special was not what he could see but what he could perceive:

> They have no convexity, these eyes. They are not gently protruded from the containing sockets like the black glass beads of a child's doll. They lie flat against the face, glitterless. They are, literally, black holes, cavities behind which something is being born rather than destroyed. Behind the drill holes, in the deep interior space of the imagination, the real action is going on, wheels with wheels; the machinery of cogitation whirring and flying like the delicately interlocking parts of a timepiece. An idea, this idea, is in genesis.

This "portrait of an artist," in other words, is meant to highlight the fact that he seeks to see what others cannot see, and to use art, a visual medium, in order to allow others to perceive beyond what they can usually see themselves. We bear this in mind as we encounter, in our *parashah*, the first artist in the Torah, who reminds us what the Jewish approach to art is all about—and therefore what sort of society Judaism seeks to build.

With forgiveness granted following the sin of the golden calf in last week's reading of *Ki Tissa*, the creation of the Tabernacle can now proceed. And we are once again introduced to a man who is to oversee the creation of this sanctuary, the first person in scripture described as endowed with artistic ingenuity:

> And Moses said to the people of Israel, See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and he has filled him with the spirit of God, with ability, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every skilled craft. And he has inspired him to teach, both him and Oholiab the son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan. He has filled them with ability to do every sort of work done by a craftsman or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of workman or skilled designer. (Exodus 35:30–35)

The legacy and legend of this biblical artist, Bezalel, looms large to this day, inspiring rabbinic reflections about the Jewish relationship with art. It was in 1906 that the artist Boris Shatz created a school of art in Jerusalem for the Jews of the Holy Land, naming it for Bezalel. It was soon after this founding that Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, still the chief rabbi of Jaffa, wrote to congratulate him. In this incredible bit of correspondence, which we discussed on an episode of Jerusalem 365, Rabbi Kook reflected on what he hoped would ultimately emerge from Zionism, from the rebirth of a Jewish state, and described how art, from a religious perspective, was also central to Jewish independence and national flourishing. Jerusalem, Rabbi Kook wrote, is "*holat mahalat ha-galut ha-marah*," "sick with the bitter illness of exile," but he saw in the new initiative a "*zerem hayyim*," "a stream of life." Rabbi Kook added that Jerusalem seeks "beauty, art [*omanut*], and thoughtful creation [*m'lekhet mahshevet*]." He further noted that there may be those who argue that the Yishuv had greater issues to address. But he insisted that this desire for art in Jerusalem—"*ha-drishah ha-ba'ah mi-lev baneha*," "this seeking that comes from the heart of her [i.e., Jerusalem's] children," "*me-ruhah asher shafkhah aleihem*," "from the spirit that poured on them"—is an "*ot hayyim*, *ot tikvah li-shuah v'nehamah*," "a sign of life and a sign of hope for salvation and consolation."

And yet in the same letter, Rabbi Kook also addressed Jewish concerns regarding the visual medium, noting that,

> towards the generality of artistic beauty as realized in concrete works, the product of human hands, our people takes an attitude which is positive and encouraging, but also restrained. We take care not to go to extremes or to become inebriated, even when dealing with the most sublime and lofty things.

Judaism is worried about bestowing, through art, purported divinity to nature, and, even more problematically, to human beings. Art, in Judaism, is meant to use beauty within the physical world to point to what is beyond it; it must teach us to see beyond sight. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has noted, it is Bezalel's name—a union of the

words "*b'tsel El*," "in the shadow of God"—that points the way toward what Judaism embraces about art, and what Judaism rejects about the classical pagan world.

> Art in Hebrew—*omanut*—has a semantic connection with *emunah*, "faith" or "faithfulness." A true artist is faithful both to his materials and to the task, teaching us, [as William Blake put it], "To see a world in a grain of sand/ And a heaven in a wild flower/ Hold infinity in the palm of your hand/ And eternity in an hour."
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> The name Betzalel means, "in the shadow of God." Art is the shadow cast by the radiance of God that suffuses all things. [As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote], "The world is charged with the grandeur of God/ It will flame out, like shining from shook foil." And as Goethe said: "Where there is much light, the shadow is deep." When art lets us see the wonder of creation as God's work and the human person as God's image, it becomes a powerful part of the religious life, with one proviso. The Greeks believed in the holiness of beauty. Jews believe in *hadrat kodesh*, the beauty of holiness: not art for art's sake but art as a disclosure of the ultimate artistry of the Creator. That is how *omanut* enhances *emunah*, how art adds wonder to faith.

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"Art in Judaism," Rabbi Sacks wrote elsewhere, "always has a spiritual purpose: to make us aware of the universe as a work of art, testifying to the supreme Artist, God Himself."

This is true not only about how we see, and artistically depict, the natural world, but also about how we see human beings. Rabbi Kook was himself known to be a Rembrandt aficionado, famously commenting that he saw in the artist's work a glimmer of the original light created by God on the first day of creation. Rabbi Sacks has suggested that the rabbi's reference to the luminance of creation referred to "the light Rembrandt saw in the faces of ordinary people, without any attempt to beautify them. His work let us see the transcendental quality of the human, the only thing in the universe on which God set His image." The goal of art, for Judaism, is ultimately to point the way toward seeing ourselves as created in the image of God; to see the sublime spirit bestowed on human beings; to see beyond sight itself.

One of the most striking aspects of Rembrandt's portraits is that some of his most incredibly beautiful works are of seemingly unbeautiful people. As Simon Schama notes, no painter before or after Rembrandt "ever mapped physiognomy, and the work that merciless time makes of it, with quite the same avid and detailed relish." And yet these paintings are beautiful; Schama points to one of Rembrandt's stunning portraits, of an eighty-three-year-old Dutch woman named Aechje Claesdochter, her weathered face adding to the profundity of her seeming meditation on her mortality.

Other artists, Schama notes, "might have hesitated to make so much of the crow's foot or the bulbous nose. The cosmetically averse Rembrandt, however, saw these not as compromising the moral nobility of his sitters, but as describing it. In his sympathetic eye there was no grotesque."

This, then, is the light that shines from Rembrandt's portraits.

If we bear this in mind, then one verse in our *parashah* suddenly takes on a new sublime significance. Much of the reading seems repetitive; Bezalel, along with Oholiab, crafts, creates, and builds based on the blueprint already outlined in previous *parshiyot*. But when it comes to the creation of the *kiyor*, the laver used for the ritual washing of priestly hands and feet, suddenly a specific source of material is mentioned that didn't appear previously:

> And he made the laver of brass, and the foot of it of brass, of the mirrors of the women assembling, which assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. (Exodus 38:8)

In this small, remarkable detail, we are told of women who assembled daily at the Tabernacle—apparently in prayer—seeking to give of their own treasure to support the creation of Bezalel's works of art. What they gave was their mirrors: the very item utilized for physical inspection. Thus was an object utilized for seeing, and studying, beauty transformed by an artist whose name asks us to look beyond the superficial, to see the light within us all, and to encounter the God who dwelled in the Tabernacle, and ultimately the Temple.

The difference between the Jewish and Greco-Roman approaches to art and architecture helped create entirely different cultures in the classical world. The historian Martin Goodman once observed that a visitor to Herodian

Jerusalem might mistake it for another Roman city; but if one understood the centrality of the Temple of the One True God to Jerusalem, one would realize that it proclaimed a very different approach to the world:

Rome's buildings and arches, in other words, were made in celebration of empire and might, in an attempt to divinize man, whereas Jerusalem was a city celebrating sanctity, and the human relationship with a just and good God.

> Despite all the differences between the cultures of the two cities, a casual visitor to Rome and Jerusalem in the last decades of the first century BCE might have been more struck by similarities, since it was during these years that both cities metamorphosed from ramshackle agglomerations into shining testimonies to massive state expenditure. Rome, which up to the mid-first century BCE had been an unimpressive collection of brick buildings divided by winding alleyways, clustered around a small public area in the Forum and on the Capitoline hill, was remodeled with a series of new monumental public buildings and grand public spaces. Similarly, Jerusalem was expanded and transformed by Herod, to make it, as a Roman observer, the elder Pliny, proclaimed after its destruction in 70 CE, "by far the most famous city of the East." Both cities used the most up-to-date techniques of urban planning, borrowed architectural styles from the most impressive city of the previous generation, Alexandria in Egypt, and used vaulted arches to erect platforms out from the side of hills to form level public spaces. These two ancient cities were reborn at the same time and in similar ways, but the origin of the glory of Rome was wholly different from the foundation of the splendour of Jerusalem. . . .
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> The rationale of Rome, the grandiose capital city of a huge empire in which the boastful architecture of triumphal arches celebrating human achievements competed with the numerous temples and shrines that housed the images of many gods, could hardly have been more different from that of the Temple city of Jerusalem, . . . the sources of [whose] wealth and importance lay not in conquest but in religious enthusiasm.

Rome's buildings and arches, in other words, were made in celebration of empire and might, in an attempt to divinize man, whereas Jerusalem was a city celebrating sanctity, and the human relationship with a just and good God. This means that the two cities, even when their architectures were connected, represented two entirely different worldviews, and therefore, no matter how many how many Roman-style buildings Herod created, Jews thought differently than Romans did, approached beauty differently than Romans did, approached holiness differently than the Romans did.

And because Jerusalem taught Jews to see what truly was worth celebrating, worth revering, because Jews were trained to see beyond sight, therefore they were able to maintain a vision of Jerusalem even after it was destroyed by Rome, somehow visualizing all that it could be again. The writer Yossi Klein Halevi describes

his visit to the home of David Rubinger, who in 1967 had famously photographed the three soldiers at the Western Wall. Halevi describes how all over the home were photos of Israel's leaders, and seemingly truly iconic moments in Israel.

> There, on the wall, were Israel's defining images: the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat whispering to Prime Minister Menachem Begin; Begin tenderly placing a shoe on the foot of his wife, Aliza. . . . "Which one is your favorite?"
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> Wordlessly, he led me into his study and pointed to the lone photograph hanging over his desk. It depicted a blind boy, a new immigrant in the 1950s; wearing a *kova tembel*, the conical kibbutzniks' hat, his mouth open in wonder, he strokes a relief map of the land of Israel.

> "I call it, 'Seeing the Homeland,'" Rubinger explained. For a photographer, blindness holds a special terror; yet this boy, Rubinger was saying, was teaching us that love provided a deeper way of seeing than mere physical sight.

The love that sees beyond sight is born in Bezalel, and it is a gift that is bound up with Jewish endurance itself.

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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

Additional Resources

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Bezalel, "God's Shadow," February 2011. Click here to read.

Yossi Klein Halevi on David Rubinger, "The Photograph: A Search for June 1967," *Azure*, Summer 2007. Click here to read.