

Parashat T'rumah and Jewish Art

Parashat T'rumah is dominated by God's instructions concerning the building of a portable sanctuary:

And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. Exactly as I show you – the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings – so shall you make it. – Ex. 25:7-8, *Etz Hayim* p. 487

The entire reading is devoted to enormous detail about the materials, colors, and dimensions to be used; so much detail that one might wonder if there was room for human input in the design of the tabernacle. Dr. Vivian Mann, Director of the Master's Program in Jewish Art and Visual Culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, points out that the reading leaves questions that seem answered via human partnership with God in the design of the sanctuary. She writes [Mann]:

At first reading, God's commission to Moses may seem too detailed to allow for any architectural or artistic innovation on the part of its earthly builders. All the materials to be used in building the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and creating its furnishings—the Ark of the Covenant, table of the shewbread, menorah, and altars—are specified, as are the dimensions of each constituent part. Ten curtains would form the sides, each 28 cubits long and 4 cubits wide. They were to be made of blue, purple, and scarlet linen and woven with representations of cherubim. Despite the specificity of these requirements, we are left with questions: What did the cherubim look like? How big were they relative to the size of the curtains? Where were they placed to form a pleasing composition? ...

To take another example, the Ark of the Covenant was made of acacia wood and was 2½ cubits long and 1½ cubits wide (Exod. 25:10). This wooden form was then overlaid with gold within and without, and a gold “crown,” presumably some sort of ornament that projected from the outer gold layer, was added (25:11). But how was the surface of the gold covering worked? Was it smooth, or did it have a pattern? What did the crowning ornament look like? And who decided on its appearance—God or the human being who carried out God's will?

Apparently, Moses was overwhelmed by the volume of detail specified in our *parasha*. Midrash teaches:

Twice he ascended Mt. Sinai to receive instructions from God, and twice he forgot the instructions on his descent. The third time, God took a menorah of fire and showed him every detail of it. And yet Moses found it hard to form a clear conception of the menorah. Finally God told him: “Go to Bezalel, he will make it.” When Bezalel had no difficulty in executing it, Moses cried out in amazement: “To me it was shown many times by the Holy One, blessed be He, yet I found it hard to grasp, but you without seeing it, could fashion it with your intelligence. Surely you must have been standing in the shadow of God [bezal-el], while the Holy One was showing me its construction. – *Midrash Numbers Rabbah* 15:10; *Midrash Tanhuma Beha'alotekha* 62; BT *Berakhot* 55a; cited in [Gutmann, p. 15]

Joseph Gutmann writes [Gutmann, p. 15]: “... although Moses excelled most men in nearly every aspect, he was ... inferior to Bezalel in the realm of art.... The midrash implies that the artist is God-directed and God-inspired.” Professor Mann [Mann] agrees. She writes: “The naming of Bezalel and the words used

to describe him are an acknowledgment that artistry—the ability to conceptualize visually and then to create that which is envisioned—is a talent given only to some. Only Bezalel, the man of artistic vision, was capable of carrying out God’s commands.”

The commandment against making graven images has often been used to discourage Jewish artistic expression, and has contributed to the notion, fashionable in some circles although contrary to massive evidence, that there is no Jewish art, or that there should be none.

- Our school wing has a monument to Judah Touro acknowledging him as a benefactor of one of our predecessor congregations. In 1860, a synagogue in New Orleans considered erecting a statue in tribute to Touro. Leading European rabbis, including Samson Raphael Hirsch of Frankfurt (leader of German Orthodoxy), Zacharias Frankel of Breslau (a pioneer of what would become Conservative Judaism), and Nathan Marcus Adler of London, discouraged the proposal as against “ancient Jewish custom and usage” and “according to Jewish law, prohibited.” [Gutmann, p. 2]
- Prominent historian Heinrich Graetz wrote, “Paganism sees its god, Judaism hears Him.” [cited in Gutmann, p. 2]

Opposing such views are the following of some great Jewish artists.

- Jacques Lipchitz:

In Paris ... we had a society of Jewish artists to which I belonged.... We often had meetings to discuss the question of what is Jewish art.... We concluded that Jewish art was a bit *nebish* - ... broken down and melancholy.... I said that I was not a *nebish* and it was time others outgrew such a feeling. - Quoted in [Gutmann, p. 13], from A. Katz, “Jacob Lipchitz, Jew,” *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, May 13, 1960, p. 2
- Marc Chagall:

Were I not a Jew ... I would not be an artist at all.... what this small people has done! ... Can it then be that it would not show the world some sort of art? Kill me, if not. [Chagall, p. 332]
- Daniel Doron [Doron, p. 15] writes about Shalom of Safed:

When asked if he did not infringe on the commandment against graven images, Shalom insisted that he “did not paint paintings, but retold the story of the Bible in color and line.” In making this distinction, he shed light ... possibly on an important intention of the second commandment. To Shalom, as to other believing Jewish artists, indeed to its Talmudic interpreters, the second commandment did not prohibit all forms of representation. It objected to idealized, sculptural imitations of nature which might attempt to outdo God’s work, and which the ignorant, in mistaking for “the real thing,” might idolize and worship.

As we consider building a new *Beit Tefilah* for our congregation, we should consider the role of art and the concept of *chidur mitzvah* (beautification of mitzvah) in a new building. As Professor Mann concludes [Mann]:

For a people who had just received their religious constitution, the Tabernacle designed by God and executed by man was a joint effort based on two different artistic senses, that of God, the architect and designer, and that of man, who added the details. This “partnership” became a concrete symbol of the Jewish people’s commitment to God, and of God’s willingness to dwell among them. At the same time, the partnership evident in the building of the Tabernacle may be seen as a paradigm of the ongoing relationship between God and Israel. God is the lawgiver; the people “embroider” on His words—or interpret them.

References

[Chagall] Marc Chagall, “What is a Jewish Artist?”, in *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life & Thought in Eastern Europe*, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, ed., Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, 1967

[Doron] Daniel Doron, “Introduction: The Innocent Eye of a Man of Galilee,” preface to Elie Wiesel, *Images from the Bible*, Overlook Press, Woodstock, NY, 1980

[Gutmann] Joseph Gutmann, “Is There a Jewish Art?”, in *The Visual Dimension: Aspects of Jewish Art*, Clare Moore, ed., Westview Press, Boulder, 1993

[Mann] Vivian Mann, “When Humanity Creates With God,”
<http://learn.jtsa.edu/content/commentary/terumah/5776/when-humanity-creates-god>