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Beautifying *Mitzvot*:

Perspectives on Art by Jewish Leaders

Ilana Symons

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Advisor: Rabbi Kim Geringer

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter One: Historical Perspectives	13
Chapter Two: Contemporary Perspectives	50
Chapter Three: Using Art Jewishly	68
Conclusion	87
Bibliography	92

Introduction

Why Am I Here?

There have been two constants in my life: Judaism and art. My parents are both rabbis who met during their first week of rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion ("HUC"). From them, I learned to love Judaism in its many forms and places - in *t'filah*, in discussion, in books, and at home, at temple, at summer camp. I felt the pride of being Jewish very early on and the responsibility of making it my own. I knew I wanted to dedicate my life to it.

Similarly, I was surrounded by art from a young age. My parents took my siblings and me to the theater regularly. We visited museums. Our house is filled with art - Jewish and otherwise. My parents learned this from their parents. My father's father was an avocational woodworker and photographer. He was best known for making *mezuzot* which adorn doorways around the world even years after his death. My mother's mother is a painter. She always encouraged my siblings and me in the arts.

It was when I got to rabbinical school that I realized that these two constants did not have to occupy separate parts of me. They could be united. During my first year of school in Israel, I wrote an essay entitled "A Portrait of the New Jew" which explored how early Israeli painters helped to define the identity of the modern state of Israel. One of the ways I best connected with Israel itself was through art; I set a goal of visiting a museum every week. In the following years, I considered the presence of art in American Jewish spaces. With the help of the American Jewish Archives, I researched the influence of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* on the American Jewish community. As a rabbinical intern at Rockdale Temple in Cincinnati, I created a curriculum which used artistic interpretations as midrash on familiar biblical stories. I have used these lessons (and added more) at every synagogue at which I have worked since. It is always a hit with my students. I began incorporating art into my schoolwork and my sermons, even when it was not requested or required. I knew what art did for me, and I wanted to share that feeling.

Connecting my dual loves of Judaism and art gave me a better understanding of each. I realized that my Judaism exists in an artistic sphere. I need to visualize the metaphors prevalent in our liturgy and stories. I recognize that beautiful spaces and objects help me feel more connected to my actions as a Jew. I know that art is there to help me process that which is bigger than myself. And, I realized that Judaism informs my love of art. Whenever I consume art, I automatically search for its inherent Jewish themes, values, and characters. I am drawn to Jewish artists whether they are painters, novelists, or musicians. We share the two languages of art and Judaism.

Not long ago, I was reintroduced to the character of Bezalel[1] through a Kabbalistic lens. Like many Jews, I was much more familiar with his work, the *Mishkan* (the Israelites' moving sanctuary) than the character. The *Torah* describes Bezalel as the first Israelite artisan with some sort of special connection to G-d. Actually though, Bezalel is a craftsman, not an artist. In the *Torah*, G-d gives him a very clear blueprint, and he does as commanded. However, the Kabbalists - and even earlier commentators - give Bezalel the title he so clearly deserves based on the skills G-d gifted to him: *hochmah*, *t'vunah*, and *da'at*. They say that Bezalel was able to translate the Divine word into physical beauty. He took the ineffable and created something worthy of its ineffability. As any artist can, Bezalel connected the people with something far greater than any one of them.

I started to think about Bezalel beyond his work, in relationship with his contemporaries Moses and Aaron. When we think about Jewish leadership, we often turn to those two men. Using law, liturgy, and sacrifice, they connected the people to G-d. Did Bezalel not do the same thing, just with different tools?

Today, the models of Jewish leadership are generally the clergy, rabbis and cantors. For hundreds of years following its inception, the role of rabbi did not change very much. In the past fifty or so years, what it means to be a rabbi has changed significantly. I asked myself: should or could rabbis and cantors today look towards Bezalel as an innovative and no-less important model of Jewish leadership?

[1] Exodus 31:1-6; Bezalel will be explored in depth in chapter one.

Defining Terms[2]

As I approached this topic, I knew I would have to narrow my scope in discussing both Jewish leadership and art. First, I had to consider who is a leader. Traditionally, Jewish leadership has been held by rabbis. The term "rabbi" developed in the Talmudic period, well after Jewish art came to be and well before the role of rabbi came to be defined as it is today. For centuries, rabbis could only be men with a very specific knowledge base. In this work, I use "the Rabbis" to refer to the authors of and those cited in the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*.[3] Many of the historical documents we have about art in the rabbinate were written for and by this group. Today, Jewish leadership takes many different forms beyond the rabbinate, both in traditional Jewish institutions (synagogues, study halls, etc.) and beyond.

The Rabbis can be broken into three generations: the *Tannaim*, the *Amoraim*, and the *Geonim*. The *Tannaim* (1st - 2nd century CE) includes the sages from the time of the *Mishnah*; this period ended with the redaction of the *Mishnah*, about 200 CE. The *Amoraim* (3rd century CE - 6th century CE) are responsible for the material in the *Talmud*. The *Geonim* (6th century CE - 11th century CE) were the heads of the academies in Babylonia. One other title of importance is *Nasi* (~1st century CE - 425 CE), the head of the *Sanhedrin* (rabbinic court) who was appointed by Roman officials; the position died with its last holder, Rabban Gamliel.

In art history, there are a few key terms to define as well. "The plastic arts" refers to molded, three-dimensional pieces of art. Typically, the term refers to sculpture or ceramics, though it can also refer to any of the visual arts. It is a good equivalency for the "graven images" referenced in the *Torah*. "Iconoclasm" means the rejection or destruction of religious images because they are considered heretical. The creation of religious plastic arts and iconoclastic beliefs are diametrically opposed. In my research, I focused specifically on the visual arts: painting, sculpting, illumination (meaning art that is included in text-based documents), architecture, and so on. Because of the Second Commandment's prohibition of graven images, these are the fields with which

[2] The definitions of these terms can largely be attributed to *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

[3] *Encyclopaedia Judaica* clarifies: "In the *Talmud*… the title rabbi refers either to a *tanna* or to a Palestinian *amora*, while *rav* refers to a Babylonian *amora*." In order to receive the title of rabbi at the time, one needed proper ordination which was only granted in the land of Israel. ("Rabbi, Rabbinate." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. 2nd ed, Vol. 17. P. 11.

the Rabbis were particularly concerned.

Jewish art itself is an enormous field and notoriously hard to define. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* entry on the topic begins:

> "Whether there exists a form of art that can be described as 'Jewish Art' has long been a matter for discussion. What is indisputable is that at every stage of their history the Jews and their ancestors of biblical times expressed themselves in various art forms which inevitably reflect contemporary styles and fashions and the environment in which they lived."[4]

It would take years of research to examine the relationship between Jewish leaders and every form of Jewish art. Still, the question remains: what is Jewish art? In lieu of writing an entire thesis on this topic alone, I will present here a few definitions.

Anthony Julius, in his book *Idolizing Pictures*, suggests that there are three kinds of Jewish art which stem from the prohibition of idolatry throughout the *TaNaKh* (the Hebrew Bible consisting of *Torah*, Prophets, and Writings*)*. First is aniconic art, or "an art of the infinite, the unbounded, the sublime;" this is art that attempts to depict the Divine without idols or images. Second is iconic art, or "an art of ornament, illustration, or witness;" Julius calls this the 'default' of the Jewish artist as it includes decorating a synagogue and beautifying a ritual object. Jewish iconic art can be further broken down into two categories: art of witness (i.e. artists depicting their survival of the Holocaust) and art of engagement in which Jewish appropriate Christian art for their own ends (i.e. synagogue architecture which often references church/ cathedral architecture). Third is iconoclastic art, or "an art of idol-breaking;" this is art that seeks to destroy art which is used for idolatrous purposes.[5]

Later, Julius makes two additional assertions about Jewish art: Jewish art is always a part of a particular style and period; Jewish art cannot have a very precise definition.[6] As such, he concludes:

> "Jewish art is a porous and non-exclusive category. Few art works will ever be incontestably Jewish; no art will ever be merely or entirely Jewish…

[4] "Art." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. 2nd ed, Vol. 2. P. 491.
[5] Julius, Anthony. *Idolizing Pictures*. P. 41-42, 49
[6] Ibid. 94

> [However, Jewish art] can disclose affiliations and meanings in art works that might otherwise escape notice. It also has an aspirational value. It encourages the making of new art works by providing a context for them."[7]

While the question of definition still stands, Julius makes clear that Jewish art has existed since ancient times and exists, in part, to inspire Jewish artists to create.

Harold Rosenberg, an American art critic, begins his 1966 essay, "Is there a Jewish Art?" with this: "The Gentile answer is: Yes, there is a Jewish art, and No, there is no Jewish art. The Jewish answer is: What do you mean by Jewish art?"[8] The problem he elucidates is that for much of Jewish history, Jews were prohibited from making art, whether by the internal prohibitions of the Second Commandment (to be discussed at length in the first chapter) or by the external exclusion of Jews from secular high society. However, there must be a Jewish art because Jews and Gentiles alike accept the grouping of 'Jewish Art' among the numerous other ways art is classified. Rosenberg thus explains six ways art might be deemed Jewish art:

- Jewish art is art produced by Jews because it inherently conveys the creator's identity.
- Jewish art is art that depicts Jews or Jewish subject matter.
- Jewish art is any Jewish ritual object.
- Jewish art is Jewish folk art, stemming from the everyday lives of Jews.
- Jewish art is metaphysical and stems from philosophy.
- Jewish art is that which is found rather than made, as seen throughout the *Torah* (i.e. Joseph's coat, the burning bush).
- Jewish art is art that exists to counter the art of surrounding cultures. This is an anti-art tradition in which "Jewish art has always existed in not existing."

A few problems arise with Rosenberg's characterization, such as that art depicting Jewish subject matter is not necessarily made by a Jew or that art which is metaphysical simply cannot be compared to the art of other identity groups.

Rabbi Sarah Berman of Central Synagogue (who I interviewed for chapter two) uses a simplified and amended version of Rosenberg's list. She suggests just three categories which define Jewish art:

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[7] Ibid. 96-97
[8] Rosenberg, Harold. "Is There a Jewish Art?" *Commentary Magazine*.

- Jewish ritual objects made for public or private usage
- Visual art which uses Jewish themes (biblical, historical, liturgical, etc.)
- Objects Jews (could) have owned and used

Of these, she notes that the most common understanding of Jewish art is the second. Still, questions arise: is any art created by a Jew inherently Jewish art? Is there a limit to the bounds of Jewish themes and objects? Rosenberg admits that the modern era has greatly impacted any possible definition of Jewish art, for "to be engaged with the aesthetics of self has liberated the Jew as artist by eliminating his need to ask himself whether a Jewish art exists or can exist." Today, the question may be more so who the Jewish artist is rather than what Jewish art is.

In a 1922 article, Marc Chagall, the acclaimed artist, was asked to write about his opinion on Jewish art. He wrote:

> "There was Japanese art, Egyptian, Persian, Greek. Beginning with the Renaissance, national arts began to decline. Boundaries are blurred. Artists come - individuals, citizens of this or that state… and one would need a good registration… to be able to 'nationalize' all the artists. Yet it seems to me: If I were not a Jew (with the content I put into that word), I wouldn't have been an artist, or I would be a different artist altogether."[9]

To him, the existence of Jewish artists is as indisputable as the existence of the Jewish nation. The theologian Martin Buber opposed Chagall on the grounds of nationhood, having said:

> "A national art requires a homeland out of which it develops, and a heaven towards which it strives. We Jews of today have neither of these. We are the slaves of many lands, and our thoughts fly to various heavens."[10]

Nationhood necessarily begets a national art. But how is the Jewish nation defined? It can be inferred from Buber that an important part of the question "What is Jewish art?" is "What is a Jew?" That is too big and complex a question to answer here; suffice it to say that some (like Buber) think a Jewish art needs a unified understanding of a Jew.

In 1935, Chagall continued his argument in a speech for the World Conference of the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO). He said:

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[9] Harshav, Benjamin (ed). *Marc Chagall on Art and Culture*. p. 40.
[10] Mann, Vivian B. *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*. p. 144.

> "On religious grounds, Judaism struggled with ancient idolatry, whose remnants are displayed today in all museums of the world, so that it remained with no share in the treasures of plastic art. We left nothing behind us in the world's museums except for *Torah* Scrolls and the abandoned synagogues which are no longer attended. But we, the new Jews, have revolted against this, we no longer want to recognize such a state of affairs, we want to be not just the People of the Book, but also a people of art."[11]

Whether Jewish art is an aspirational category or a very tangible one, it is important to the Jewish people because Jews are a people of material culture. Jewish material culture includes not just *Torah* scrolls and synagogue architecture and things that belong to the past; it includes all of the objects that define Jewish culture and help Jews strive to be their best selves. It is constantly growing and evolving, as is art.

Important Texts

In the past century, there has been a great deal of research in the areas of the history of Jewish art and the role of art in Judaism. A few texts were especially useful to me. Vivian Mann, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, gathered Jewish leaders' attitudes to Jewish art by topic and year in *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts* (2000); the breadth of texts she included and her commentary on each were immensely useful. Jodi Eichler-Levine, Berman Professor of Jewish Civilization at Lehigh University, immersed herself in the modern Jewish crafting movement and gathered her findings in *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis: How Jews Craft Resilience and Create Community* (2020); this provided a more current, informal, and lay-leadership run approach to art. *Art in Judaism* (1975) is a compilation of ten articles by the National Council on Art in Jewish Life which were originally published in *Judaism* journal; the essays covered topics from interpretations of the Second Commandment to the importance of art in the founding of the modern state of Israel. *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (2000)

[11] Harshav, Benjamin (ed). *Marc Chagall on Art and Culture*. p. 58.

by Kalman P. Bland presented the possibility that the Second Commandment "articulated a certain Jewish aesthetic" and traced this aesthetic through Jewish history.

Of course, I also referenced various texts from the *Torah* and from the Rabbis. The *Torah*, also known as the Five Books of Moses, comprises the biblical books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The *Mishnah* (meaning "secondary" or "study") is the first written iteration of the Oral *Torah*, redacted by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi in Israel between the second and third centuries. The *Talmud* is a supercommentary on the *Mishnah* compiled between the third and sixth centuries. The structure of the *Talmud* is largely based on the structure of the *Mishnah*, and the comments which are not Mishnaic are called *Gemara* (meaning "completion"). There are two versions of the *Talmud*, the *Bavli* (redacted in Babylonia in the fifth century) and the *Yerushalmi* (redacted in Israel in the fourth century); unless otherwise specified, the passages cited from the *Talmud* are from the *Bavli*. The source of the Hebrew/ Aramaic for these texts will be cited in each case; the English translations are mine unless otherwise noted. In the Geonic period, a new form of rabbinic literature came to prominence: responsa, which are questions written to contemporary Jewish leaders and the leaders' answers in response. All of these texts are made of two primary types of literature: *halakhah* (that concerning Jewish law) and *aggadah* (that concerning the interpretation of scriptural narrative). Here, I will refer to aggadic literature as *midrash* (meaning "that which is sought out").

Outline

My research took three forms: historical investigation, present-day interviews, and applications of Jewish approaches to art for today's Jewish leaders.

First, I examined how Jewish leadership historically has viewed art. I began with the ancient Mesopotamian context and then looked at how art is utilized in the *Torah*. Then, I created an overview of the dominant voices of the *Mishnah*/ *Talmud*, the Middle Ages in Ashkenaz and Sepharad, modernity, and today. Throughout, I found a tension between the rabbis and laity as well as between Jewish leadership and the dominant non-Jewish surrounding culture regarding their ideas about the use of art.

Second, I wanted to understand the relationship between contemporary rabbis

and art. I aimed to speak with rabbis who represent a wide spectrum: those who are artists, those who work in museums, those who work in congregations, and those who work in Jewish art organizations. I ended up with a list of seven individuals: Rabbi Beaumont Shapiro, Arielle Stein, Jack Sherratt, Rabbi Emily Meyer, Nancy Katz, Rabbi Sarah Berman, and Rabbi Linda Motzkin.

Finally, using my own experiences and findings from the first sections, I set out to propose ways for a rabbi - or any Jewish leader - to use art to create meaningful experiences for their constituents, including using art as *midrash*, curating museum experiences, creating ritual objects, and creating community or healing through art.

Why Does This Matter?

As I approached this topic, a question that kept coming to mind was: why does this matter? Are there not more important topics to study? I asked this question in each interview. I worried over the responses. How would I respond? Do I think there are more important things than art in Judaism to study? Having compiled and analyzed my research, I know now that the answer is no. Rabbi Berman helped me realize that this question says more about me than about the topic itself. Art intersects with every part of being a Jew and, if we let it, can enhance our experience of Judaism. Art is a vehicle for meaning - in Jewish spaces, it is rarely the final product. But beauty is. Spirituality is. Connection is.

זֶה אֵלִי וְאַנְוֵהוּ.[12] This is my G-d; I will beautify G-d's law. This is our call.

[12] Exodus 15:2

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Chapter One: Historical Perspectives

The Ancient Mesopotamian Context

The Israelite religion came to exist in the context of other Ancient Mesopotamian religions. Before there were rabbis, before even the *TaNaKh*, there were deity-fearing nations in the Middle East. In the ancient context, art exclusively served a religious function. It reminded its owner of a god's power, invoked a blessing from a god (such as fertility), adorned a place in which a god was worshiped, or was seen as a god itself. However, one could see the lack of separation between art and religion as serving a positive purpose as well. Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso explains:

> "It's important to remember that Judaism emerged in an era when there was no word for "religion" - in other words, no idea of religion being separate from everything else in a person's life. It emerged in a time when every day, each action, all people were thought to be connected to the divine. In this understanding, anyone deeply engaged with the most powerful aspects of life - and that sounds like an artist to me - would be as mixed up with God as a priest would be, and could learn a lot from our tradition."[13]

A *midrash* about Abraham best describes the uniqueness of Israel among the nations:

> *"Haran died during the lifetime of Teraḥ his father" – Rabbi Ḥiyya grandson of Rav Ada of Yafo: Teraḥ was an idol worshiper [and a seller of idols]. One time, he went away to some place, and he installed Abraham as a salesman in his stead. A person would come seeking to buy. He [Abraham] would say to him: 'How old are you?' He would say to him: 'Fifty or sixty years old.' He would say to him: 'Woe to this man who is sixty years old and seeks to prostrate himself before something that is one day old.' He would be ashamed and leave. One time, a certain*

[13] Sasso, Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg. "Foreword." *The Artist's Torah*. P. xii.

> *woman came, carrying a dish of fine flour in her hand. She said to him: 'Here, offer it before them.' He arose, took a club in his hand, shattered all the idols, and placed the club in the hand of the largest among them. When his father came, he said to him: 'Who did this to them?' He said to him: 'I will not lie to you, a certain woman came, carrying a dish of fine flour in her hand. She said to me: Here, offer it before them. I offered it before them. This one [idol] said: I shall eat first, and another one said: I shall eat first. This big idol, who was standing among them, got up and took the club and shattered them.' He [Teraḥ] said to him: 'What, are you mocking me? Are they sentient at all?' He said to him: 'Do your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?'"*[14]

In this *midrash*, Abraham is set apart from his father's people because he sees the idols in his father's shop as art, not as deities. They only serve a decorative purpose; no person, Abraham argues, would be foolish enough to think that carved stone has the same power as the Divine. In a time when art and religion could not be separated, Abraham sought to separate the tangible from the intangible, the ephemeral from the permanent. Judaism was built upon this foundation.

Between the lines of this *midrash*, there is a lesson about values. Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish people, demonstrates that he values G-d above any human-made object. Solomon J. Solomon (20th century British artist) did not mince words when outlining this values-based distinction:

> "Early in the world's history, we find the two great models on the lines of which its subsequent civilization is developed - the Hellenic with its Pagan and perfect art, and the Hebraic with its conception of Monotheism, and with the social laws that seem destined to last as long as man. These two great forces are essentially antagonistic…"[15]

From the very beginning, paganism and Judaism were pitted against each other on the grounds of their artistic differences. Pagans believed that the Divine could be captured in the plastic arts; Jews believed the Divine absolutely could not be construed through

[14] *Bereshit Rabbah* 38 - The Sefaria Midrash Rabbah, 2022
[15] Solomon, Solomon J. "Art and Judaism." *Jewish Quarterly Review*. P. 553.

man-made objects. This distinction would inform the rabbinic understanding of art for centuries after Abraham stood in his father's idol shop.

The *TaNaKh* and Its Context

The whole *TaNaKh* begins with and is sustained by "art."

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ׃[16]

In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth…

The first act of the *Torah* is artistic. G-d shapes immense beauty out of nothingness; G-d gives rhythm to chaos. Later, G-d shapes human beings in G-d's own image, meaning we, ourselves, are art made in the form of the Master Artist. David Ebenbach elaborates in *The Artist's Torah*:

> "So it is that in the Bible everything begins as an art project. God is the Master Artist, potter and gardener, painter, and musician, creating with words and breath. We learn not only of God as Master Architect but of the human being created in the image of God. Might it be that the Bible wishes to teach us that our share in divinity is not merely as creatures formed by God, but as divine co-creators?"[17]

G-d imbued us with the ability and the need to create, with the understanding that what we create can be beautiful, powerful, and dangerous - just like the idols in Abraham's father's shop. When society imbues mere statues with Divine ability, those idols can turn wise men into fools.

If one looks more closely, two primary sources in the *TaNaKh* explain art's impact on the human psyche; they are the Second Commandment and the role of Bezalel in the creation of the *Mishkan*. In many ways, these two passages are opposing. One is a law, the other a narrative. One sets the very foundations of Judaism against art, one builds the foundations of Judaism upon religious art. One has G-d declaring art as an opposition to the Divine, the other has G-d declaring art as a necessary aspect of the connection between humans and the Divine.

[16] Genesis 1:1 (Jewish Publication Society)
[17] Ebenbach, David. *The Artist's Torah*. P. xvi.

The Second Commandment

The Ten Commandments are written twice in the *Torah*, in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. In the former, the Second Commandment reads:

> לֹֽא־יִהְיֶה־לְךָ֥ אֱלֹהִ֖ים אֲחֵרִ֑ים עַל־פָּנָֽי׃ לֹֽא־תַעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ֥ פֶ֙סֶל֙ וְכָל־תְּמוּנָ֔ה אֲשֶׁ֚ר בַּשָּׁמַ֣יִם ׀ מִמַּ֔עַל וַאֲשֶׁ֖ר בָּאָ֣רֶץ מִתָּ֑חַת וַאֲשֶׁ֥ר בַּמַּ֖יִם ׀ מִתַּ֥חַת לָאָֽרֶץ׃ לֹֽא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶ֥ה לָהֶ֖ם וְלֹ֣א תָעָבְדֵ֑ם כִּ֣י אָנֹכִ֞י יְהוָ֤ה אֱלֹהֶ֙יךָ֙ אֵ֣ל קַנָּ֔א פֹּקֵ֥ד עֲוֹ֖ן אָבֹ֥ת עַל־בָּנִ֛ים עַל־שִׁלֵּשִׁ֥ים וְעַל־רִבֵּעִ֖ים לְשֹׂנְאָֽי׃ וְעֹשֶׂ֥ה חֶ֙סֶד֙ לַאֲלָפִ֔ים לְאֹהֲבַ֖י וּלְשֹׁמְרֵ֥י מִצְוֹתָֽי׃[18]
>
> *You shall not have other gods before Me. Do not make for yourself a statue or any depiction of that which is in heaven above or that which is on the earth below or that which is in the waters below the earth. Do not bow to them, and do not serve them for I, Adonai, your G-d, am a jealous G-d, inflicting the punishment of the fathers on the children to the third generation and the fourth generation of those who hate me , and granting kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

The Second Commandment has one intent: do not create or worship idols. That singular prohibition differentiated the Israelites from other peoples; unlike the gods of the nations, the Israelites' G-d could not be represented by anything on earth. An initial read of the prohibition does not suggest that images are without impact. Rather, as Vivian Mann writes: "the biblical prohibitions against images were not due to an insensitivity to the appeal of visual forms. Rather they stemmed from the opposite - the realization of 'the power of images' to lead their viewers to the worship of other gods."[19] The mention of G-d's jealousy implies that these images do something which warrants envy. The Second Commandment would not be necessary without the express knowledge that art has the power to change people.

In Deuteronomy, Moses, on G-d's behalf, directly lays out the rationale for the Second Commandment:

> *For your own sake, therefore, be most careful—since you saw no shape when G-d spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire—not to act wickedly and*

[18] Exodus 20:3-6 (Jewish Publication Society)
[19] Mann, Vivian B. *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*. p. 5.

> *make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever: the form of a man or a woman, the form of any beast on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth.*[20]

As in Exodus, G-d names all of the graven images G-d's people are not allowed to make, getting even more specific by naming the human form. Unlike Exodus, the rationale for this prohibition is not G-d's jealousy. Rather, the rationale is based on G-d's lack of corporeal form in the moment of revelation: "*since you saw no shape when G-d spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire.*" Moses is the only human to have seen even the smallest piece of G-d's form. Thus, were any human to try to depict G-d, they would fail.

Immediately following the first proclamation of the Ten Commandments, G-d commands the construction of the *Mishkan*. Mann adds:

> "The Tabernacle, fashioned in the relative isolation of the wilderness, is the first recorded attempt to create an ensemble of artistic and architectural elements within the strictures of the Second Commandment."[21]

The *Torah* never bans painting or the creation of decorative plastic figures; indeed, G-d's instructions for the *Mishkan* include molded and embroidered cherubim and a bronze serpent. Later, the construction of Solomon's Temple will attempt to do the same though this later construction strays even further from the Second Commandment; King Solomon's Temple contains a long list of plastic images and expensive materials.[22] It will include many naturalistic figures, from oxen to pomegranates. So how to understand this contradiction? The Rabbis looked at what is different among G-d's various mentions of art. While the Second Commandment bans all graven images, Exodus 25:18 specifically names the golden cherubim to be constructed. Thus, they say, there must be legitimate forms of art and forbidden forms of art. As is so often the conclusion, the only way to understand this classification is through the Divine word: what G-d specifically commands is permitted; what G-d specifically prohibits is forbidden.[23]

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[20] Deuteronomy 4:15-18
[21] Mann, Vivian B, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, p. 6
[22] The details of King Solomon's Temple can be found in I Kings 7:13-51.
[23] Bland, Kalman P., *The Artless Jew*, p. 62

The prohibition against graven images appears five times in the *TaNaKh*: Exodus 20:20, Exodus 34:17, Leviticus 19:4, Leviticus 26:1, and Deuteronomy 4:15-18. However, historically, the letter of this law was not followed, even in the immediate subsequent period. Archeological research has revealed a number of ancient synagogues decorated with mosaics and murals. Perhaps the most famous among these is the Dura Europas synagogue in Syria. Discovered in 1932, it is one of the world's oldest synagogues; an Aramaic inscription dates it to 244 CE. The walls of the Dura Europas synagogue are covered with biblical scenes. Even more shocking to a loyal adherent to the Second Commandment was the discovery of the Beit Alpha Synagogue in Northern Israel. It contains not just biblical depictions but also a zodiac wheel.[24] It was discovered in 1928 and likely dates to the sixth century CE. What happened to the Second Commandment in the intervening centuries?

Lee Levine, one of the preeminent Jewish art historians, offers three reasons why this might be: a limited amount of Jewish art discovered before that time as extensive as that found in the Dura Europas synagogue; a paucity of relevant literary sources, leading Jewish art historians to draw from a wide range of sources; and contemporary Christian materials which might elucidate a rationale for synagogue architecture.[25] In this period, synagogues had relative autonomy from the rabbinic elite.[26] To understand how the art of these synagogues came to be, Levine says, it would be necessary to ask the artisans or local communities why certain artistic choices were made. Unfortunately, their answers have been lost to time. Instead, we must extrapolate from the sources and artifacts which have survived.

Jewish culture has always been influenced by the cultures surrounding it. Jewish material culture is no exception. In the critical time surrounding the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jewish people were especially vulnerable to the reshaping of

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[24] Today, most would consider the zodiac to be an undoubtedly pagan symbol. It does not appear in the *TaNaKh* but does make its way into early rabbinic texts, most certainly from Greek/ Roman influence.

[25] Kalmin, Richard. *Jewish Culture and Society under the Christian Roman Empire*. Levine, Lee I. "Contextualizing Jewish Art: The Synagogues at Hammat Tiberias and Sepphoris." P. 93-94.

[26] This view was first written about by Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough in *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, a remarkable 13 volume work which documents the history of symbols in ancient Jewish life. Fine documents Goodenough's view as such: "the Pharisees dominated Judaism before the destruction of the Temple… The continuers of the Pharisees - the Rabbis - were much reduced after 70 c.e.; they did not influence anyone but themselves" (Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, 37). Many scholars, including Fine, disagree with Goodenough's assertion but maintain that rabbis were not the only or even primary decision-makers in ancient synagogues.

cultural barriers. What was Judaism without the Temple? What did Judaism look like without its key symbol? The answer: synagogues. Following the Babylonian exile[27], Jews loosely modeled their new houses of prayer and assembly after the Temple. The artistic choices made in these spaces bore great resemblance to the art of the surrounding cultures, leading to the creation of synagogues such as Dura Europas and Beit Alpha.

As synagogues came to be, so too did the title of 'rabbi,' a new, post-Destruction form of Jewish leadership. Unlike the priestly caste, the Rabbis had to show their devotion to G-d in a world without the Temple and without ritual sacrifices. Instead, they increasingly showed their devotion to G-d through prayer and study. Rabbis, importantly, could function in every Jewish community; Jewish authority became localized rather than centralized. They completely reshaped the Israelite religion into the Judaism of today which still relies on many of the texts and structures they produced. Namely, the Rabbis assembled the Oral *Torah* which is documented in the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*.

Grasping for order out of destruction, the early rabbis clung to the truth and firmness of the *TaNaKh*. Thus, a word of G-d such as the Second Commandment was taken literally; they expounded on it word for word. It was not simply a prohibition on idolatry. To many early generations of rabbis, it was a prohibition on all images, especially in synagogues. This leaves two explanations for the existence of art in early synagogues. Either, in the battle between the desires of the laity and the leadership, the former won out; or, the Rabbis were not as strict as certain texts might lead one to believe. This debate will be expanded upon in the following section.

Bezalel

Exodus 31 introduces a new character during the Israelites' saga of wandering through the desert:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר: רְאֵה קָרָאתִי בְשֵׁם בְּצַלְאֵל בֶּן־אוּרִי בֶן־חוּר לְמַטֵּה
יְהוּדָה: וָאֲמַלֵּא אֹתוֹ רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בְּחָכְמָה וּבִתְבוּנָה וּבְדַעַת וּבְכָל־מְלָאכָה: לַחְשֹׁב

[27] We do not exactly know when the first synagogues came to be. Some point to certain verses in the later books of the prophets which seem to suggest the existence of communal gathering places concurrent with the Second Temple. However, the centrality of the synagogue truly came to be after the Babylonian exile.

מַחְשֶׁבֶת לַעֲשׂוֹת בַּזָּהָב וּבַכֶּסֶף וּבַנְּחֹשֶׁת: וּבַחֲרֹשֶׁת אֶבֶן לְמַלֹּאת וּבַחֲרֹשֶׁת עֵץ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכָל־מְלָאכָה: וַאֲנִי הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי אִתּוֹ אֵת אָהֳלִיאָב בֶּן־אֲחִיסָמָךְ לְמַטֵּה־דָן וּבְלֵב כָּל־חֲכַם־לֵב נָתַתִּי חָכְמָה וְעָשׂוּ אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתֶךָ:[28]

And G-d spoke to Moses saying, "See, I have called out by name Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; I have filled him with the spirit of G-d, with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, and with every kind of craft, to create designs to make in gold, silver, and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood - to work in every kind of craft. And see, I gave to him Ohaliab, son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan; and within the heart of all those who are wise, I gave wisdom. They shall do all that I have commanded…

There are only so many named characters in the Torah; even fewer are singled out specifically by G-d, and even fewer are given a specific mission and set of skills. The fact that one of these select few figures is an artist is remarkable. "Bezalel" means "in the shadow of G-d," implying a closeness between the first Jewish[29] artist and the Master Artist of the universe. The instructions for building the *Mishkan* go on for many chapters. G-d needed a partner in this awesome task, but not just any partner - one with special, Divinely ordained skills.

The key verse of Bezalel's introductory passage which describes these skills is Exodus 31:3:

וָאֲמַלֵּא אֹתוֹ רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בְּחָכְמָה וּבִתְבוּנָה וּבְדַעַת וּבְכָל־מְלָאכָה:[30]

I have filled him with the spirit of G-d, with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, and with every kind of craft.

At first glance, *hochma*, *t'vunah*, and *da'at* are synonyms repeated for dramatic effect. Would one adjective not have been enough to explain Bezalel's worthiness? Rashi (11th century, France) said no; each word has its own meaning.

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[28] Exodus 31:1-6 (Jewish Publication Society)

[29] 'Jewish' is obviously anachronistic here. The term does not come to define the entirety of the people of Israel until the Persian Period (roughly 6th century - 4th century BCE). I am using it here for the purpose of continuity and to show Bezalel as a model throughout the Jewish people's history, even before we acquired the name.

[30] Exodus 35:31 reads exactly the same except for one letter, switching it to the third person (וַיְמַלֵּא) from the first.

חכמה. מַה שֶּׁאָדָם שׁוֹמֵעַ מֵאֲחֵרִים וְלָמֵד: **תבונה.** מֵבִין דָּבָר מִלִּבּוֹ מִתּוֹךְ דְּבָרִים שֶׁלָּמַד: **דעת.** רוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ:[31]

> Hochmah*: This is what one hears from others and learns.* T'vunah*: This is the understanding of the heart apart from the things one has learned.* Da'at*: This is the spirit of the Holy One (G-d).*

The Rabbis taught that every word in the Torah serves a specific purpose. The three attributes of Bezalel demonstrate the breadth of his ability. To rephrase Rashi: Bezalel's ability comes from his community, from himself, and from the Divine.

In *Legends of the Jews*, a super-collection of *midrash*, Louis Ginzberg also redefines Bezalel's three attributes:

> "Bezalel, furthermore, had wisdom in the Torah, insight into the *halakhah*, and understanding in the *Talmud*, but more than this, he was well versed in secret lore, knowing as he did the combination of letters by means of which God created heaven and earth. The name Bezalel, "in the shadow of God," was most appropriate for this man whose wisdom made clear to him what none could know save one who dwelt 'in the shadow of God.'"

Ginzberg hints at how Bezalel became celebrated by the Kabbalists[32] as a holder of secret, Divine knowledge. Because of Bezalel's proximity to G-d, he needed first to have a firm basis in G-d's law (as Ginzberg writes, *halakhah* and *Talmud*) before he could follow the 'secret lore.' Thus, Bezalel's attributes specifically rendered him a scholar of Jewish text. He was able to take the smallest units of Hebrew construction - mere letters - and turn them into something as powerful as the very act of the earth's creation. Metaphorically, that explains the significance of Bezalel's task. He was not just creating something beautiful. His creation echoed G-d's acts of creation.

The early Rabbis did not comment on Bezalel, as evidenced by the fact that "…his name appears nowhere in the *Mishnah*, *Tosefta*, or *Tannaitic midrashim*."[33] Ginzberg compiled all of the relevant *midrashim* in *Legends of the Jews* from later or separate

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[31] Rashi on Exodus 31:3 (M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, London, 1929-1934)
[32] Literally "receivers"; Kabbalah is the mystical branch of Judaism which seeks hidden meaning in sacred texts and often tends to be more tactile than other branches of Judaism. The movement traces its roots to medieval Europe.
[33] Fine, Steven, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, p. 100

texts.[34] However, the Rabbis of the *Talmud* and the commentators following its redaction filled in Bezalel's character. According to them, being the son of Hur made Bezalel the grandson of Miriam and Caleb. The honor of building the *Mishkan* was bestowed upon Bezalel as a reward for Hur who tried to prevent the people from building the Golden Calf. So beloved was Bezalel that G-d gave him five additional names:

> "***Reaiah***, 'to behold,' for Bezalel was beheld by God, by Moses, and by Israel, as the one who had been decreed for his activity since the beginning of the world. '**The son of *Shobal***,' because he had erected the Tabernacle that towered high, like a dove-cote. ***Jahath***, 'the Trembler,' because he made the sanctuary, the seat of the fear of God. ***Ahamai***, because, through his work, the sanctuary, Israel, and God were united. ***Lahad***, as the one who brought splendor and loftiness to Israel, for the sanctuary is the pride and splendor of Israel."[35]

Multiple times in the *midrash*, G-d and Moses put Bezalel to the test. He triumphs each time. According to Ginzberg, Moses repeatedly praises Bezalel's knowledge in the plan for and construction of the *Mishkan*.

Bezalel is mentioned by name nine times in the *TaNaKh*[36], but his work is mentioned far more frequently. The *Mishkan* serves as the initial model for the Temple and, subsequently, for the synagogue to come. Narratively, there is a gap between G-d commanding the construction of the *Mishkan* and its consecration. Bezalel is remembered by his final product. Even so, Bezalel cements the role of the artist in Judaism. Later, King Solomon will commission his own artisan in the construction of the First Temple. He calls for Hiram of Tyre who, like Bezalel, is endowed with *hochmah*, *t'vunah*, and *da'at*.[37] Unlike Bezalel, Hiram was not an Israelite; this makes his endowment with these abilities particularly interesting. Those who argue against the existence of Jewish art, like Solomon J. Solomon, cling to the fact of Hiram's otherness while conveniently forgetting about Bezalel and all the craftsmen who helped construct

[34] Ginzberg, Louis, "Bezalel," *Legends of the Jews*, Volume 3, p. 148-173
[35] Ibid. 149.
[36] Six times in Exodus (all referring to the construction of the *Mishkan*), once in Ezra (in a genealogy), and once each in First (in a genealogy) and Second Chronicles (referring to the construction of the *Mishkan* as King Solomon sought to build his own version).
[37] See: I Kings 7:13-51, especially verses 13 and 14

the *Mishkan*.[38] The mentions of artisans at all in these texts is remarkable as it was considered a lowly position in the Greco-Roman period.[39] Even if the role was outsourced to non-Israelites, it is notable that the supposedly 'artless' Israelites put this much effort into creating art.

As Ebenbach points out, in *Parashat VaYakhel*, we do not hear "...as the Lord had commanded Moses" in reference to Bezalel's actions, unlike in other *parshiyot* in which multiple builders are described as working on the *Mishkan*. Ebenbach draws two possible interpretations from this: "Maybe Bezalel didn't do just what he was told, but elaborated on the instructions and applied his own creativity. On the other hand, maybe he so instinctively did what God wanted that it didn't even need to be said."[40] Either way, Bezalel is clearly singled out in the Torah for a reason. Why not as a model of Jewish leadership?

The Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods

First Century to Sixth Century CE; Israel and Babylonia

The destruction of the Temple, the subsequent Jewish diaspora, and the development of the synagogue completely changed the tenor of Jewish conversations about art. Temple worship provided a bubble in which Jews could avoid idolatry. They would find this task much harder in the diaspora where they were interspersed among the nations of the world. An entire order of the *Mishnah*, and later, tractate of the *Talmud*, is dedicated to the discussion of idolatry; it is called *Avodah Zarah* (literally "foreign worship"). It largely concerns what to do with idolatrous objects and how to interact with idolaters. For example:

> הַמּוֹצֵא כֵּלִים וַעֲלֵיהֶם צוּרַת חַמָּה, צוּרַת לְבָנָה, צוּרַת דְּרָקוֹן, יוֹלִיכֵם לְיָם הַמֶּלַח.
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> *He who finds vessels which have an image of the sun, an image of the moon, or an image of a dragon, he should take them [i.e. throw them] in the Dead Sea*.[41]

[38] Solomon, Solomon J. "Art and Judaism." *Jewish Quarterly Review*. P. 556.
[39] Fine, Steven, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, p. 67
[40] Ebenbach, David. *The Artist's Torah*. P. 100.
[41] *Mishnah*, *Avodah Zarah* 3:3 (William Davidson Edition)

The *Talmud* instructs its readers to rid idols from their presence, to literally throw them into the sea. Anthony Julius summarizes this viewpoint succinctly: "The innocent image is ever at risk of turning into the illegitimate idol."[42] Thus, the Jewish people were not to have any image in their midst. Another Talmudic passage cites the dangers of art:

> "[There was a] king who made a feast and had spread a tablecloth upon which was portrayed all kinds of food. When the guests entered and saw the pictures on the tablecloth depicted with such verisimilitude, they were so sated with the mere looking at them, that they fell asleep."[43]

Art can be powerful and dangerous enough to make a hungry person forget their hunger.

According to Boaz Cohen, a scholar of *Talmud*, the first and second century Rabbis' literal interpretation of the Second Commandment went as such: "One may not make any image in relief or in the round, be it carved out of stone, wood, or any metal, of the heaven itself, or of the heavenly servants… or of the heavenly bodies… the earth itself…" The *Tannaim* went further, excluding "the making of images even for the purpose of ornament and beauty, as the Gentiles did in the Provinces," though with the exception of pictures used for a religious purpose. Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel (*Nasi*, 1st century CE) is an exception as his drawings of the phases of the moon are permitted.[44] The *Talmud* justifies these drawings in three ways: (1) they were made by Gentiles and displayed in public; (2) they were made in sections; (3) they were made for a specific Jewish purpose.[45]

In actuality, few Rabbis, even from this period, were as strict as this passage from *Avodah Zarah* or that which Cohen cites. For the most part, the Rabbis did not feel that all images would immediately lead a Jew down the path of idolatry. Rabban Gamaliel (*Tanna* and *Nasi*, 1st century CE), for example, distinguishes between idolatrous objects of value and worthless objects, only the former of which needed to be discarded. Therefore, a coin, which is a mundane object, could be used even with an image on it, even if that image was of a gentile god, because it would not be worshiped. So even

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[42] Julius, Anthony, *Idolizing Pictures: Idolatry, Iconoclasm, and Jewish Art*, p. 37
[43] *Art in Judaism: Studies in the Jewish Artistic Experience*. Ed. Robert Gordis and Moshe Davidowitz. Cohen, Boaz, "Art in Jewish Life, Some Talmudic Views," p. 47
[44] Ibid. p. 44
[45] Ibid. p. 47

though the Rabbis recognized the power of the image and its ability to pull a Jew away from G-d, they also recognized its limitations. The challenge was: how can Jews exist in an idolatrous society?

One answer is to find a way to live with art and, to some extent, even accept it. Perhaps the most famous passage from *Avodah Zarah* relates this tale of, once again, Rabban Gamliel:

> *One day, a gentile asked a question of the Rabbi while they bathed in the bathhouse of Aphrodite in Akko: "How can you bathe here when your holy book bans idolatry?" Upon leaving the bathhouse (G-d forbid someone discuss the Torah in a bathhouse), Rabban Gamliel responded to him. First, the bathhouse existed before the statue of Aphrodite did, so it entered my domain; I did not enter its domain. Second, the statue was created as an adornment for the bathhouse, not as an idol. For who would call an idol that which one urinates and defecates before?*[46]

Here, Rabban Gamliel upholds the sanctity of the Torah and proves he did not disobey its word, despite appearing to succumb to idolatry. Rabban Gamliel understands that Jews living in Greek society will encounter Greek culture, and he thus expresses some leniency compared to his rabbinic colleagues. Since interaction with graven images cannot be prohibited, Rabban Gamliel models a way for Jews to coexist with idolatry while still adhering to the Second Commandment.

Not all scholars read this tale of Rabban Gamliel as an early rabbinic acceptance of art, however. Lee Levine says that this passage is more indicative of a shift to the Patriarchal dynasty (that of the *Nasi* appointed by Roman authorities) than of a rabbinic acceptance of art:

> "The Patriarchs were not responsible for all or even most Jewish art in Late Antiquity. Yet, together with the urban aristocracy with whom they maintained a close political and social alliance, they introduced innovative and apparently, for the first time, revolutionary components into Late Antique Jewish art."[47]

[46] This is a paraphrased telling of the story. The full version can be found in *Mishnah*, *Avodah Zarah* 3:4.
[47] Levine, Lee I., *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art*, p. 449, 455

The Patriarchate was much more receptive to Roman culture and lenient in their allowance of representational art.[48] In any case, it is clear that the Rabbis of the *Talmud* strove to find ways to permit art in Jewish spaces. Similarly, Josephus (historian, 1st century, Jerusalem) "...chastised Solomon for commissioning casts of oxen for the Temple and sculptured lions for his throne... but nowhere did Josephus indicate that tradition disallowed *all* forms of domestic, secular, and religious visual art."[49]

Of the Talmudic sages, Rav Yohanan (*Amora*, 3rd century CE) and his student, Rav Abun (*Amora*, 3rd century CE), were the most lenient. In *Talmud Yerushalmi, Avodah Zarah* 42b, they permit, respectively, painting the walls of a synagogue and making mosaic designs in a synagogue.[50] Boaz Cohen argues that the Amoraim sought "...to mitigate the rigor and the austerity of the law."[51] This would explain the mosaics decorating the synagogues and the lenient rulings of Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Abun. But generational change is not as simple as two rabbis setting forth a progressive ruling. In *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Shequalim* 49b, the very same Rav Abun is critiqued for crafting decorative doors for the *beit midrash*; Rabbi Mana quotes Hosea - "Israel forgot its Creator and built palaces" - then says to Rav Abun: "Were there no men to study Torah?"[52]

Rabbi Mana presents a worry which will crop up throughout the study of Jewish art history: are there not more important things for a Jewish community to invest in than art? One would hope that even the common Jew knows not to worship images. Largely, the Rabbis accept the common sense of their followers. But, especially in the diaspora, there were many things to distract the common Jew from worship and study - bathhouses and fancy doors being just two examples. This question of priority surfaces throughout Rabbinic texts. *Pikei Avot* 3:7, for example, reads:

> "Rabbi Jacob said: if one is studying while walking on the road and interrupts his study and says, "How fine is this tree!" [or] "How fine is this newly plowed field!" scripture accounts it to him as if he was mortally guilty."[53]

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[48] Baumgarten, Joseph M., "Art in the Synagogue," *Art in Judaism*, p. 39
[49] Bland, Kalman P., *The Artless Jew*, p. 61
[50] Baumgarten, Joseph M., *Art in Judaism*, "Art in the Synagogue," p. 32-33
[51] Cohen, Boaz, *Art in Judaism*, "Art in Jewish Life, Some Talmudic Views," p. 46
[52] Levine 434; Baumgarten 36
[53] *Mishnah*, *Pirkei Avot* 3:7

Trees and fields are not human-made idols; they are G-d's creations. Even so, *Pirkei Avot* says focusing on their beauty instead of on study is abhorrent, an affront to G-d.

Targum Jonathan (3rd century CE, Israel), a translation of the *TaNaKh* which includes many pieces of *midrash*, goes so far as to alter the biblical text to show the permissibility of art which clearly serves an aesthetic purpose rather than an idolatrous purpose. For example, here is how *Targum Jonathan* brings a verse from Leviticus concerning idolatry forward into 3rd century Israel:

> Leviticus 26:1: *You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land to worship upon, for I, Adonai, am your God.*
>
> *Targum Jonathan* translation of Leviticus 26:1: "You shall not make for yourselves idols or images, nor erect statues for yourselves to worship, neither a figured stone shall you place in your land to bow yourselves toward it. **Nevertheless a pavement sculptured with imagery you may set on the spot of your sanctuary, but not to worship it**: I am the Lord your G-d."

The Leviticus verse clearly opposes idolatry in the vein of the Second Commandment. *Targum Jonathan* does not entirely lose that forcefulness but does introduce a great deal of leniency. In the period when *Targum Jonathan* was written, Jews installed sculpted pavement in the sanctuaries of the Beit Alpha and Dura Europas synagogues. In other contemporary synagogues, there is even nudity in these pavements, though it was deemed immoral by the Rabbis.[54] Though *Targum Jonathan* does not go that far, it opens the door for the use of such mosaics. The author of *Targum Jonathan* wanted to make what he saw in Judaism around him an acceptable practice according to Scripture, even if Jews had to still abide by the Second Commandment.

It is important to remember that the Rabbis largely controlled the written narrative of this period. As Levine explains,

> "Written material almost always reflects the ideas, values, and proclivities of a society's elites while archeological remains often represent the

[54] Levine, Lee I., *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art*, p. 416

> religious, cultural, and social ambience of local communities and their leaders."[55]

For example, *Avodah Zarah* 43a commands that no one make a house in the form of the *heikhal* (the sanctuary of the Temple), nor anything like any feature of the Temple. A tale of Rav (the first *Amora*) emphasizes this dictum. While officiating a service at a Babylonian synagogue, he refused to bow because the floor was paved with stones, and this decor was only allowed in the Temple.[56] Though no Palestinian text repeats this doctrine, there were many synagogues in Israel and beyond designed to look like the Temple.[57]

It appears, then, that the Rabbis were not as involved in that aspect of Jewish life as one might think. This claim is bolstered by the fact that only the Rabbis speak of their involvement in the synagogue. In other words, no non-Rabbinic texts of this period mention the role of the Rabbi in the ancient synagogue.[58] Roth states it plainly:

> "The iconoclastic ideal which the rabbis voiced was, to some extent, out of touch with reality; and the fact that eminent teachers objected to the arts no more demonstrates that they did not exist than the objections against gluttony prove that all Jews were abstemious, or the objections against talking in synagogue demonstrates that perfect decorum was at all times maintained."[59]

A record of the extreme shift to creating highly decorated synagogues can be found in the Cairo Geniza, which contains lists of silver and precious textiles used as synagogue adornment.[60]

Scholars debate whether in discussing the use of art, the Rabbis were really concerned about its possible positive uses. Levine takes the negative side:

> "Art per se is not a major topic of discussion in rabbinic literature. For the most part, it is mentioned indirectly, primarily with regard to questions concerning idolatry - making or deriving benefit from decorated objects that could be interpreted as pagan images - with most references revolving

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[55] Ibid. p. 8
[56] Cohen, Boaz, *Art in Judaism*, "Art in Jewish Life, Some Talmudic Views," p. 47
[57] Levine, Lee I., *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art*, p. 412
[58] Ibid. p. 428
[59] Roth, Cecil, *Art in Judaism*, "The Problem of "Jewish Art," p. 67
[60] Mann, Vivian B, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, p. 100

around the figural aspect of this art. Thus, owing to the silence of these sources regarding more general artistic concerns, determining rabbinic attitudes toward and perhaps their involvement in the artistic enterprises of various communities is seriously impaired."[61]

Approaches like Levine's seriously limited how people have approached the importance of art in Rabbinic literature for centuries. He suggests that art was far from the minds of the Rabbis, but the "...silence of these sources regarding more general artistic concerns" is simply not true. The Rabbis in fact explain how art can and should be used to honor G-d.

Elsewhere in the *Talmud* (*Shabbat* 133b), a phrase from the Song of the Sea becomes a justification for distinctly Jewish art. Classically, "זֶה אֵלִי וְאַנְוֵהוּ" is translated "This is my G-d, and I will extol Him."[62] The Rabbis pull the root נ-ו-י (beauty) out of the word וְאַנְוֵהוּ, retranslating the phrase as "This is my G-d, and I will beautify [His Law]." The Gemara expands on how one is to do this:

> דְּתַנְיָא: "זֶה אֵלִי וְאַנְוֵהוּ", הִתְנָאֵה לְפָנָיו בְּמִצְוֹת: עֲשֵׂה לְפָנָיו סוּכָּה נָאָה, וְלוּלָב נָאֶה, וְשׁוֹפָר נָאֶה, צִיצִית נָאֶה, סֵפֶר תּוֹרָה נָאֶה, וְכָתוּב בּוֹ לִשְׁמוֹ בִּדְיוֹ נָאֶה, בְּקוּלְמוֹס נָאֶה, בְּלַבְלָר אוּמָּן, וְכוֹרְכוֹ בְּשִׁירָאִין נָאִין.
>
> *As it was taught: "This is My G-d, and I will extol Him." Beautify yourself before Him with mitzvot. Make before Him a beautiful sukkah, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, beautiful tzitzit, a beautiful Torah scroll and write in it His Name in beautiful ink with a beautiful quill by a skilled scribe and wrap it in beautiful silk.*[63]

Not only do the Rabbis then permit art in Jewish life - they encourage it. They provide specific examples of how to bring art to Judaism. *Hiddur mitzvah* ("the beautification of *mitzvah*") becomes a halakhic obligation going forward, albeit one which is easily superseded by other more essential values.[64] This was especially true when beautifying a ritual object impacted that object's intended use. For instance, as Fine reports, gold-plating a shofar was acceptable so long as the plating did not interfere with the sound.

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[61] Levine, Lee I., *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art*, p. 405
[62] Exodus 15:2
[63] *Talmud, Shabbat* 133b (William Davidson Edition)
[64] Fine, Steven, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, p. 108-109

In a responsum, Jair Hayyim Bacharach (17th century, Germany) dates the importance of *hiddur mitzvah* to the time of the Temple, in which the menorah was made of iron in prosperous times and of wood in times of hardship.[65] Thus, he says, *hiddur mitzvah* instructs one to make their Judaica of beautiful materials; if this is not possible, perhaps because of financial constraints, it does not impact the efficacy of the *mitzvah*. Having beautiful tools to perform *mitzvot* shows G-d the depth of our love. But *hiddur mitzvah* is not obligated solely for G-d's benefit. It is for the benefit of G-d's followers, too. *Berakhot* 57b reads:

שְׁלֹשָׁה מַרְחִיבִין דַּעְתּוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם, אֵלּוּ הֵן: דִּירָה נָאָה, וְאִשָּׁה נָאָה, וְכֵלִים נָאִים.

*Three matters give a person comfort (*also translated as: prolong his life*), and they are: A beautiful abode, a beautiful wife, and beautiful vessels.*

Beauty is given a sort of healing power. It is so powerful, in fact, that even rationalists who are strongly rooted in contemporary science, like Maimonides, later emphasize the healing powers of beauty; as a physician, it was part of his prescription for self-care.[66] Even the strictest of Talmudic rabbis used art as a refuge from the hardships of contemporary life. When they envisioned a rebuilt Jerusalem, the ultimate symbol of hope, they saw something of beauty.[67]

Ultimately, what can be noted from the Talmudic era is a great tension about the place of art in Judaism. Yes, Jews should do anything and everything to show their dedication to G-d. No, Jews should not be like the surrounding nations. Yes, it is acceptable to have art in a synagogue. No, it is not acceptable if it will diminish G-d or distract one from prayer. The question is: if Jews can learn to accept graven images, should the Rabbis learn to accept them too? Or, should everyone strive to remove any graven image from their midst? Levine and many other Jewish art historians conclude that early synagogue art does not reflect rabbinic values and, in fact, stands directly opposed to them. However, the conclusion seems to be: if Jews are going to do it, then rabbis need to figure out how to allow it.

In responsa from later eras, Jews generally ask rabbis for forgiveness, not permission, as the art in question is already in use. This is not to say that they ignored

[65] Mann, Vivian B, Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts, p. 125
[66] This point will be explored further in the Middle Ages: Sepharad.
[67] Fine, Steven, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, p. 102

the dicta of the *Mishnah* or *Talmud*. They were simply pulled by both their commitment to Judaism and their desire to integrate aspects of contemporary culture. This can be seen even in the *Torah*. In Exodus 32, when the people worry about Moses on Mount Sinai, Aaron - who, as the first High Priest, is the first model of a rabbi - helps them create a Golden Calf. Aaron creates an idol despite G-d's commandments. When Moses comes down from the mountain, Aaron then blames the people for this sin, though he had acquiesced to their desires. Aaron saw that art would help the people get through this difficult time, even though neither he nor (presumably) they believed in idols. He, too, demonstrated leniency towards the Second Commandment.

As the Talmudic period came to a close, certain rabbinic views on art were written, but by no means set in stone. As with so many aspects of the early rabbinate, this stringent perspective was subject to change. Cecil Roth notes the immediate changes to the reception of art based on the Rabbis' circumstance:

> "This iconopathic interlude (as I venture to call it) seems to have come to an end in the sixth or seventh century. This was due to two factors. One was the iconoclastic movement in the Byzantine Empire, which could not fail to affect the Jews; the other was the birth and expansion of Islam, with its profound iconoclastic tendency."[68]

So it will be that once one accepts the existence of Jewish art, one must accept that it will always be influenced by the cultures around it.

The Middle Ages: Ashkenaz

Sixth Century to Sixteenth Century CE; Central and Eastern Europe

Questions about the use of art followed Jews into their experience as a diasporic people. Lee Levine explains:

> "For more than a millennium throughout the First and Second Temple periods, Israelite Jewish art was limited in its range of motifs and modest in its presentation. There was relatively little interest in displaying objects that reflected the theological ideas, social values, or historical memories of the Jewish experience. By contrast, the Late Roman period (early third

[68] Roth, Cecil, *Art in Judaism*, "The Problem of "Jewish Art," p. 67

> century CE) witnessed a significant change in the display of such art by Jews across the Roman Empire, making it comparable to the art of other contemporary ethnic and religious communities. This religious component in Jewish art assumed an even greater role in the Byzantine era."[69]

Even before the advent of Christianity, the Greeks and Romans were aware of Judaism's aniconism.[70] Regardless, one explanation for the Rabbis' real or perceived polemics against the plastic arts was their desire to differentiate themselves from Christianity. Where Christians bastardized G-d's commandments, Jews would adhere ever stronger.

Jewish art is always influenced by the cultures surrounding the Jewish people, just as every aspect of Jewish life cannot help but be affected by its neighbors. Such influence does not always provide an acculturating change in Jewish practice. As Roth says: "It may be suggested that the Jewish attitude was conditioned by two opposing forces: on the one hand, by revulsion, and on the other, by attraction."[71] Thus, in every age, Jews reacted differently to the making of art based on how the surrounding culture used art both religiously and politically. When the surrounding culture was pagan, Jews emphasized iconoclasm. When Jews permanently settled in an area, they emphasized their differences while adopting practices of their neighbors.

In medieval Ashkenaz, Eastern European Jewry found themselves face-to-face with Christianity. The art of the surrounding culture tended to include large cathedrals, intricate stained glass, and depictions of Jesus, Mary, the Apostles, and crosses. One could trace all of these elements back to the ideals of Hellenic art with the cathedral as a replacement for the basilica, Mary as a replacement for Aphrodite/ Venus, etc.[72] Much of what is known about Jewish responses to the developing Christian art in medieval Ashkenaz comes from rabbinic responsa. To effectively write these responsa, the rabbis admit "that they investigated the "art of the Other" by a number of different means: consulting with experts on symbolism and philology; reading secular texts on production techniques; or observing the sale of materials."[73] Take this responsa by Ephraim of Regensburg, for example:

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[69] Levine, Lee I., *Visual Judaism in Late Antiquity: Historical Contexts of Jewish Art*, p. 7
[70] Bland, Kalman P., *The Artless Jew*, p. 60
[71] Roth, Cecil, *Art in Judaism*, "The Problem of "Jewish Art"," p. 65
[72] Solomon, Solomon J. "Art and Judaism." *Jewish Quarterly Review*. P. 559.
[73] Mann, Vivian B, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, p. 17

> "The Question: 'Is it permissible to place covers in which there are images and fish on the reader's desk in honor of the Torah or on the cathedra for circumcisions?'
>
> The Answer: 'Concerning images of birds and horses [that you drew in the synagogue - ed. Budapest], about which you asked if it is permissible to pray there:... The figures of birds and horses are not worshipped even when they are independent images, how much more so when they are depicted on garments.'"[74]

Ephraim demonstrates a general understanding of idolatrous worship practices by knowing specifically which animals are seen as idols. He could not have known the status of birds and horses beyond Judaism without further research into pagan practices.

As for how the Jews of Ashkenaz incorporated elements of the society around them, Felice Malkin writes:

> "In Christian lands, Jews spoke and wrote in the local vernacular and their art – in illuminating *mahzorim* (the High Holy Day prayer book), *haggadot* (the guide for a Passover seder), and *ketubot* (wedding contracts), and other types of manuscripts – shows clearly the influence of their surroundings."[75]

The advent of the printing press in the 15th century made art even more accessible. Now, it was not just rabbis who had access to these documents; all Jews could have beautiful books and manuscripts in their homes. One such document that found a new life in the Middle Ages was *Megillat Esther*, a familiar story about Jews living in diaspora. The illumination of these scrolls traces back to 16th century Italy but flourished in the 17th century across Europe and into the Middle East.[76] Despite this positive addition, such close proximity to Christianity placed pitfalls before the Jews. Roth writes that the iconoclastic tradition was weak in the Protestant world of Central Europe where "...human representations [were] admitted even on ritual objects" and in

[74] Ibid. p. 39
[75] Malkin, Felice, *Contemplate: The International Journal of Cultural Jewish Thought,* "The Arts in Judaism: The First 3,000 Years"
[76] Tahan, Ilana, "Tracing the history of the Book of Esther and Jewish festival Purim," *Scroll.In*

Western Europe where human likenesses were banned on ritual objects but admitted in the home.[77]

When stained glass was introduced into German churches around 1100 CE, Jews wanted to follow suit and began bringing figurative stained glass into their synagogues. Rabbi Elyakim ben Joseph (12th/ 13th century, Mainz) would not have it. When asked whether a synagogue could have stained glass depictions of lions and snakes, he chastised the congregants for explicitly turning against the Second Commandment and the sages. No images, he said, should be on the wall towards which the one who is praying faces, lest it appear as if he is bowing to those images; in fact, all images should be destroyed so as to not tempt sin.[78] Kalman Bland suggests that even with the rabbinic concerns about Jewish art in this time and place, art could never be entirely forbidden:

> "Medieval Jews indeed placed the visual arts on their compulsory philosophic agenda; they indeed railed against idolatry. But their travel itineraries, polemical literature, biblical commentaries, and law codes proved that they did not construe the Second Commandment to mean that all visual images were forbidden."[79]

As in the Talmudic period, Rabbi Elyakim's response demonstrates a clash between the rabbinic viewpoint and the desires of congregants who, in this case, seem to have simply wanted to beautify their synagogues as they saw Christians beautify their churches. The laity were much less concerned about falling into idolatrous ways than the rabbinic elite.

For the most part, however, Jewish art in Ashkenaz was stunted by the fear of persecution and disdain for Christianity's lax approach to the Second Commandment. Bland explains:

> "The opposition to the plastic arts became dominant only later, in the Middle Ages, with the growth of persecution, coupled with the enforced segregation of Jews and the consequent constriction of the perspectives of Jewish life. With the rise and triumph of Christianity… the rigorous interpretation of the Second Commandment… gained in strength in the

[77] Roth, Cecil, *Art in Judaism*, "The Problem of "Jewish Art," p. 68
[78] Mann, Vivian, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, p. 71-76
[79] Bland, Kalman P., *The Artless Jew*, p. 7

> Jewish community as part of its unremitting struggle for the preservation of the Jewish ethos."[80]

The Jews of Ashkenaz had two main concerns - safety and maintaining their halakhic identity. Thus, even the halakhic acceptance of art in previous generations was deemed too complaisant. This is not to say that Jewish art was completely abandoned in this time. Meir of Rothenburg (13th century, Germany), for example, worried about the inclusion of images in prayer books, not because they might break a biblical prohibition but because their inclusion could distract the reader from the prayer itself.[81] Ultimately, he distinguished between graven images and "...pictures that are made merely from paints" and permits the latter. So, nothing could stop the inclusion of art in *siddurim* or in Judaism overall.

The Middle Ages: Sepharad

Sixth Century to Sixteenth Century CE; Iberian Peninsula

As in Ashkenaz, the Jews of medieval Sepharard drew influence from their Jewish predecessors and from the surrounding culture. Felice Malkin explains:

> "From the beginning of the second millennium C.E., Jewish art in its Diasporas takes on ever more strongly the color of its host society's art, both Muslim and Christian. Throughout the Islamic world, from Iraq and Yemen to Spain, Jews worked in the fields of letters, literature, and philosophy and, like their Muslim rulers (Iran excepted) almost totally shunned figurative arts."[82]

The peaceful coexistence between Jews, Muslims, and Christians in medieval Sepharad helped Jewish art to flourish in a way it never quite could in Ashkenaz. Some art forms took root in both cultures; Kalman Bland writes: "Spanish Jews were fond of decorating their biblical manuscripts with lavishly painted pictures of Temple ornaments, structures, and implements."[83] However, art in Sepharad differed from that in Ashkenaz because of the ruling party's law. Unlike in Christian countries, Islam forbade the

[80] Gordis, Robert, *Art in Judaism*, "Jewish Art and the Second Commandment," p. 11
[81] Mann, Vivian B, Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts, p. 109
[82] Malkin, Felice, *Contemplate: The International Journal of Cultural Jewish Thought,* "The Arts in Judaism: The First 3,000 Years"
[83] Bland, Kalman P., *The Artless Jew*, p. 84

creation of images. This prohibition can be found in the Hadith (a collection of statements by and stories about Muhammed) and, as in a rabbinic view, suggests that man cannot copy G-d's creations.

The cultural exchange of Jews and their neighbors continued, and there is evidence that the exchange went further than mere proximity. *La Biblia de Alba*, for example, was a collaboration between a Christian and a rabbi in translating and illuminating a bible. In a letter, the rabbi writes:

> "The Jews, my Lord, do not think or believe that God took on a human form. Everyone, scholar and peasant, women and children, must know that God has no human face or image, and that there is nothing that resembles Him… Therefore, it is not possible for me to place or commission faces and images without sinning against my Law."[84]

This rabbi demonstrates the continued centrality of adhering to the Second Commandment while also implying some leniency for the sake of this project. A book by Abraham ibn Hayyim further demonstrates the Sephardi community's desire to make the surrounding culture their own. In the 13th century, he penned *Libro de Como se Fazen as Cores* ("*The Book on How to Make Colors"*) in Judeo-Portuguese. It is unclear whether this is an original work or a translation. Either way, it is a detailed recipe book for mixing every shade needed for literary illumination. Clearly, Abraham ibn Hayyim had a desire to learn from his Muslim counterparts, and clearly, there was a popular desire for this book or it would not have been published.[85]

Maimonides is considered by many to be the greatest Jewish scholar of Medieval Sepharad. As a scientist and physician, Maimonides lived between the Jewish and Muslim worlds of 12th century Spain and Egypt. As in the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, Maimonides dedicated an entire chapter of his *Mishneh Torah* (a detailed collection of *halakhah*) to the discussion of idolatry and its bounds. He writes:

> "It is prohibited to make images for decorative purposes, even though they do not represent false deities… However, it is only forbidden to make decorative images of the human form. Therefore, it is forbidden to make human images with wood, cement, or stone. This applies when the image

[84] Mann, Vivian B, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, p. 28
[85] Mann, Vivian B, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, p. 134-137

> is protruding… In contrast, it is permitted to make human images that are engraved or painted - e.g., portraits, whether on wood or on stone - or that are part of a tapestry… it is forbidden to make an image of the sun, the moon, the stars, the constellations, or the angels… The images of animals and other living beings - with the exception of men - and similarly, the images of trees, grasses, and the like may be fashioned. This applies even to images which protrude."[86]

Maimonides remains a strict adherent to the biblical text but, as the early Rabbis did, draws his own line of leniency. For him, it falls between creating graven images of humans and creating graven images of non-humans as well as between creating plastic images of humans and merely inscribing/ painting/ weaving them into a flat surface. Interestingly, Maimonides becomes more stringent than the Rabbis of the *Talmud* in one way. While the *Talmud* permitted Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel's drawings of the moon, Maimonides forbids this in addition to any other images of heavenly bodies. This could be because they dwell closest to G-d, or because of these images' use in Muslim iconography, or for another reason altogether. Whatever the cause, Maimonides exercised his rabbinic right to interpret the Second Commandment.

Maimonides gives art a very special role. He discusses something akin to "art for art's sake" well before the idea came to be celebrated in the modern era. In the *Eight Chapters*, an introduction to *Pirkei Avot*, Maimonides writes:

> "Thus, just as the body becomes exhausted from hard labor, and then by rest and refreshment recovers, so is it necessary for the mind to have relaxation by gazing upon pictures and other beautiful objects, that its weariness may be dispelled."[87]

He speaks to the healing powers of art - a powerful position from the Sultan's physician. Maimonides' halakhic authority persists to today, but even he maintained strict guidelines while allowing for pleasure and beauty. How? Bland answers: "Confident that nothing sensory or even humanly intellectual is capable of representing G-d, but

[86] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Avodah Zarah* 3:10-11
[87] Maimonides, *Eight Chapters* 5

realistic about the somatic underpinnings of all human behavior, Maimonides was able to appreciate the sensory."[88]

Joseph Caro (16th century, Spain) followed Maimonides' model. He demonstrated the careful distinction between art for beauty and art for idolatry and permits artistry in the mundane. In the *Shulkhan Arukh*, Caro included eight laws describing the halakhic position on art. The first of these speaks to the creator's intent:

> "All the images of star worshippers found in villages are forbidden, since, apparently, they were made as idols, but those found in cities are permissible, since they were certainly made for the sake of beauty, unless they stand at the entrance of the city, and an image of a staff or a bird or a ball or a sword or a diadem and a ring is in the hand."[89]

As did his predecessors, Caro detailed which pieces of art must be immediately destroyed and which are permitted. He also included the prohibition on making a building modeled after the Temple. Caro demonstrated the evolving role of art in society at large. In certain places, a Jew will know that art is idolatry; in others, he can be sure that it is art for art's sake. In a responsum, Caro applied the same logic to a synagogue. After saying even Rabbi Elyakim (whose responsa in question is cited in the previous section) would allow images on a synagogue wall which one does not pray towards, Caro gave a taste of contemporary Jewish culture: "It is the custom throughout the diaspora to hang figured and embroidered Torah curtains, and no one has been concerned about diminished concentration on prayer as a result. Honoring the Torah is given precedence."[90] If one knows that the purpose of the art is to honor G-d (*hiddur mitzvah*) and not to diminish G-d in any way, then it is not just permitted; it is encouraged.

The Jews of medieval Sepharad were eager to celebrate the beauty of their synagogues. For example, Samuel HaLevi Abulafia (14th century, Seville) wrote a poem to commemorate the beauty of a newly constructed Synagogue El Transito in Seville:

> "See the sanctuary which was dedicated in Israel
> And the house which Samuel built
> And the wooden tower for reading the law in its midst

[88] Bland, Kalman P., *The Artless Jew*, p. 81
[89] Caro, Joseph, *Shulkhan Arukh*, *Yoreh Deah* 141:1
[90] Mann, Vivian B, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, p. 53

And its Torah scrolls and their crowns to God,
And its lavers, and its lamps for illumination,
And its windows like the windows of Ariel.
And its courts for those diligent in the perfect Law,
And a residence for those who would sit in the shade of God.
And those who see this form will almost say,
It is the image of the work which Bezalel wrought.
Go nations and come into the gates and seek God;
And it is a House of God like Bet-El."[91]

So much for the dictate not to construct a house of worship like the Temple! Abulafia is clearly awestruck by the beauty of the synagogue which was much larger than others of its day and quite extravagantly decorated. He names Bezalel as a figure to be admired. Obadiah Jare da Bertinoro (14th century, Jerusalem) was similarly taken by a synagogue in Italy as he expressed in a letter to his father: "There is no synagogue like that in Palermo, [neither] in that country [nor] in all the [other] nations; [none] that is more praiseworthy."[92]

Even after the fall of Muslim rule in Spain in 1492, Sephardi Jews remained more staunchly iconoclastic than their Ashkenazi counterparts.[93] After their expulsion from Spain and large scale settlement in Western Europe, Marranos (Sephardi Jews who were forced to convert but continued to secretly practice Judaism) deeply influenced aesthetic standards; they forbade art in their synagogues but permitted it in their homes.[94] Sephardi Jews maintained their Muslim influence and needed to demonstrate their piety before the Catholic church. In Ashkenaz, Jews were more influenced by Christian iconography, though those images were clearly not ones to be worshiped.

[91] Ibid. p. 77-78
[92] Ibid. p. 79
[93] Roth, Cecil, *Art in Judaism*, "The Problem of "Jewish Art," p. 67
[94] Ibid. p. 69

Modernity

Sixteenth Century CE to Present Day

"Art for art's sake" is a relatively recent concept. Fine writes, "There was no distinctive word for "art" in the Hebrew language until the early twentieth century."[95] Then, as Eliezer ben Yehuda crafted modern Hebrew, he coined the word *omanut* which is derived from the biblical word *uman* ("craftsman"). Until the modern era, "Jewish art" exclusively referred to art used for a Jewish purpose, such as to decorate a synagogue, to illuminate a Jewish text, or to be used as a ritual object. However, the conceptual switch wrought by post-Renaissance philosophers expanded the possibilities of Jewish art, so that it encapsulated both art created for Jewish ritual purposes and visual art created using Jewish themes. As to why this flourishing happened so late relative to the long history of the Jewish people, Daniel Sperber cites the strictness of *halakhah*; art, he says, is "an expression of release and liberation," the antithesis of a strict law code.[96] Similarly, the rise of modernity allowed for a freedom among Jews not previously experienced. No longer were they bound by the archaic laws of *halakhah*. They could choose their own ways to express their Judaism. No one better embodies this freedom than Moses Mendelssohn who, around 1750, was one of the first Jews to have a bust made of himself - a complete break from the staunch opposition to graven images of the previous millennia.[97]

Felice Malkin describes the leaps and bounds wrought by modern Jewry's acceptance of art:

> "In the 16th century, Jewish artists were painting portraits; by the 17th century, rabbis were assenting to sit for these artists.[98] From the 17th and 18th centuries there are Italian *ketubot* revealing the strong influence of Italian painting. In the 18th century we find illustrated versions of the

[95] Fine, Steven, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, p. 97; Fine adds that there was an Aramaic word for art associated with the Aramaic word for craftsman, *umana*: *avidata* ("work").
[96] Sperber, Daniel, *Art in Judaism*, "Trends in Modern Jewish Art," p. 82
[97] Roth, Cecil, *Art in Judaism*, "The Problem of "Jewish Art"," p. 65
[98] This was often so their portraits could be distributed to their admirers. (Ibid. p. 70)

> Book of Esther being printed all over Europe, including one where Queen Vashti is portrayed as Marie Antoinette at the guillotine."[99]

Likewise, one can trace the dramatic increase of Jewish artists as explained by Roth:

> "The early nineteenth century saw the number of such artists increase, however, still without producing a single name, who is of any real distinction in the eyes of posterity. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, a handful of Jewish artists of the first rank begin to make their appearance, led by Pissaro - perhaps the greatest of all - down to the present day. Then, in the twentieth century, a sudden outpouring of genius from the Eastern European ghettos storms the studios of Paris, with dazzling results."[100]

The dramatic increase in notable Jewish artists correlated with an increase in the study of Jewish art. Rabbi David Kaufmann (19th century, Hungary) exemplified this. In addition to writing prolifically about Jewish art, Kaufmann collected illuminated Hebrew manuscripts. In a 1897 article, Kaufmann wrote: "The fable of the hatred sustained by the Synagogue against all manner of art even in the middle ages and the new time should at last succumb to the evidence of facts, and of literary documents."[101] Even though Kaufmann wrote at a time when Jewish art was just beginning to be academically studied, he states that this in no way means that Jewish art only came to be in the late 19th century.

One other way to trace the secular acceptance of the academic study of Jewish art is through the advent of Jewish museums. Alexander David, a court Jew in Braunschweig, established the first Jewish museum with his own Judaica collection in 1757.[102] The next Jewish museum did not come to be until 1896 in Vienna. The first Jewish museum in the United States was founded in 1913 as a part of HUC-JIR in Cincinnati. The Jewish Women's Archive details the history of Jewish museums in the United States from that point.[103] This includes the Jewish Museum in New York

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[99] Malkin, Felice, *Contemplate: The International Journal of Cultural Jewish Thought,* "The Arts in Judaism: The First 3,000 Years"
[100] Roth, Cecil, *Art in Judaism*, "The Problem of "Jewish Art"," p. 71
[101] Kaufmann, David. "Art in the Synagogue." *The Jewish Quarterly Review*. P. 254.
[102] Mann, Vivian B, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, p. 87
[103] Franklin, Karen S. "Jewish Museums in the United States." https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jewish-museums-in-united-states

(founded 1944), which is "...the first independent address of Jewish art in America," and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., which began its journey to establishment in 1978. The late 20th century saw an explosion in the creation and expansion of Jewish museums - in part, in order to remember the atrocities of the Holocaust and to collect that which remained from destroyed communities.[104]

Perhaps the biggest debate of modern Jewry has been around the relevance and role of Zionism. Art is a necessary part of that conversation, and key figures in modern Jewish history enthusiastically shared why.[105] Alfred Werner explains:

> "Dr. Martin Buber insisted on his thesis [at the Fifth Zionist Congress] that the Jewish-state-to-be would need art and artists as much as it would need capital and labor and that no genuinely Jewish art could possibly develop except in a free Jewish commonwealth that would enable the individual to get his inspiration from the flourishing life around him."[106]

Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, agreed: "Contemplating ceremonial artifacts, [he] saw proof for the 'rich tradition of... significant and characteristic art.'"[107] Kaplan and Buber's vision became a reality. The oldest academic institution in Israel is the very appropriately named Bezalel Academy of Arts in Jerusalem. The Academy describes itself as such: "Established in 1906, Bezalel is proud to be recognized as Israel's preeminent academic institution for art, design and architecture - pioneering originality, creativity, and innovation."[108] (Another translation of the biblical Bezalel's Divinely ordained skill set?) The Academy's founder, Boris Schatz (1866-1932), was a sculptor, despite this being the last artistic field which Jews pursued because of the biblical taboo.

The vision of a Jewish state with art at its core is further demonstrated by the historical and current presence of museums. Marc Chagall (1887-1985) even pushed for

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[104] Viviann Mann explains the change in attitude of Richard Krautheimer, first Director of Research of the Jewish Museum, regarding the existence of Jewish art and the need for a Jewish art museum. Though Krautheimer first claims that Jews do not express themselves through art, he then asserts that "the presentation of Jewish life in visual form" is necessary in order to remember those lost in the Holocaust. (Mann, Viviann. *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*. 166-169)

[105] See also Saul Tchernecovsky's poem "Before the Statue of Apollo" which explores the relationship between the Jew and the idolatry of the modern world.

[106] Werner, Alfred, *Art in Judaism*, "Art - Israel's New Frontier," p. 99

[107] Bland, Kalman P., *The Artless Jew*, p. 51

[108] https://www.bezalel.ac.il/en

the founding of the Museum of Art in Tel Aviv in 1932, over a decade before the state's founding.[109] The first Holocaust museum in Israel (*Martef HaShoa*, meaning "Cellar of the Holocaust") was established just one year after the state's founding. The Israeli government established Yad VaShem, the world's premier Holocaust museum, in 1953. Yad VaShem's collection includes 14,000 pieces of art, "...the most comprehensive collection of Holocaust art in the world."[110] If nothing else, that demonstrates the dramatic shift in the acceptance of art in Judaism and of a distinctly Jewish art. Today, Israel has the highest concentration of museums per capita of any country: over 200, Jewish and secular, for approximately 9 million citizens.[111]

Nevertheless, art has not been wholly accepted by rabbis and Jewish leaders in the modern era, despite Modernism's wholehearted acceptance of art for art's sake. Philosophers like Hannah Arendt and Kaufman Kohler maintained that the dominant metaphor for truth in Judaism was audition rather than vision.[112] Bland comments on the impact of this position throughout Jewish art history:

> "Jewish aniconism implies that Jews are a People of the Book rather than a People of the Image. Proponents of Jewish aniconism deny the existence of authentic Jewish traditions in painting, sculpture, and architecture. They concede that Jews imitate, in production and reception, the foreign art of their host or neighboring cultures. They claim that Jewish attitudes toward visuality and the visual arts range from indifference to suspicion and hostility."[113]

The idea that there is no Jewish art takes the Jewish people several steps back. It suggests that Jews have not developed as other nations developed or that they are "too different" to contribute to modern society.

The lack of unity among modern Jews about the place of art can be attributed to another development of Modernity - denominations. While Reform Judaism marched into Modernity with open arms, Orthodoxy and more traditional parts of the Jewish world clung with various degrees of stringency to traditional attitudes which opposed

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[109] Mann, Vivian B, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, p. 160
[110] https://www.yadvashem.org/museum/art/collection.html
[111] https://www.masaisrael.org/8-must-see-museums-in-israel/
[112] Bland, Kalman P., *The Artless Jew*, p. 3, 44, 71
[113] Ibid. p. 3

any representation, including by the new technology of cameras.[114] This is why Rabbi Moses Sofer of Pressburg (18th/19th century, Hungary) and his contemporaries wrote such responsa as:

> "It is the practice of all idolaters to draw the thing that they worship in their places of habitation and residence… If so, any Jew who draws such an image on the entrance to his house, or on his *arma* [coat of arms], or anywhere in that country [where this idol is worshiped], violates the prohibition: You shall not follow their laws (Leviticus 18:3)."[115]

Even though Sofer wrote at a time when Jewish/ non-Jewish tensions were especially heightened, Mann suggests that Sofer's stringency relates more to the rise of the Reform Movement. In a separate responsum, Sofer allows images of humans as long as they are clearly not images which could be worshiped, like depictions of Moses and Aaron.[116] Like the Rabbis of the *Talmud*, Sofer knew where he wanted to draw the line.

This is not to say that location and neighboring cultures no longer have an impact on Jewish art. In fact, it is the opposite:

> "In atmospheres saturated with Protestant theology… Judaism is said to divert the bulk of its creative energies away from visual images in order to specialize and excel in composing music or literature. In atmospheres saturated with the dreams of integration and terrified by the horrors of racial anti-Semitism, Jewish art exists, but it is physically nondistinct… In atmospheres saturated with the ideas that only nationalities produce 'great' art and that Judaism is a religion rather than a nationality, Jewish art does not exist."[117]

Jewish art in Modernity reflects both its modern contexts and the contexts through which it arose. Thus, in addition to, for example, American influence, Sephardi shuls in America draw on Spanish design, and Ashkenazi shuls draw on Eastern European design. As American design came into its own, it began to have a bigger influence, especially on synagogue architecture.

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[114] Roth, Cecil, "The Problem of Jewish Art," *Art in Judaism*, p. 71
[115] Mann, Vivian B, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, p. 33
[116] Ibid. p. 129
[117] Bland, Kalman P., *The Artless Jew*, p. 56

The widespread migration of American Jews to the suburbs following World War II greatly impacted how large synagogues could be - and how beautiful. In a 1946 lecture, Eric Mendelsohn, a German architect of seven American synagogues, spoke about the possibilities of the suburban synagogue. They should include spaces for worship, assembly, and education, he said, and they should have two further purposes:

> "To redirect their minds to make them aware of their human limitations, to educate them toward the age-of-man we are just entering, our temples must be built to human scale… The result is bound to be stimulating and sincere - a visual proof that we Jews are full participants in this momentous period of America."[118]

According to Mendelsohn, synagogue architecture should demonstrate how Jews imagine and embody the Divine and prove that Jews fit into society at large. Objections to synagogue art have continued well into the modern era. Rabbi Moses Sofer, again taking the negative position, objected to a synagogue which installed stained glass in the shape of the sun.[119] Synagogues and their design are a means, not an end. They are a place for G-d's presence to dwell; they are not G-d.

Jews were helped by the general propensity to make American art - no longer art modeled off of European ideals - in the 20th century. In that way, American Jews did not have to carve a space for themselves in an already crowded pool of artists; they could rather emerge alongside all other American modern artists. The worry, though, became that Jewish artists were creating 'modern art' not 'Jewish art.' Only a few artisans, like Marc Chagall, incorporated distinctly Jewish themes into their otherwise modern art.

A Glimpse at the Modern Jewish Crafting Movement: *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis: How Jews Craft Resilience and Create Community*

In the modern era, Judaism and art have developed in lockstep. As Judaism became more user-friendly, so did art; as art became more abstract, so did Jewish conceptions of G-d, and so on. Jodi Eichler-Levine, the Berman Professor of Jewish Civilization at Lehigh University and a crafter, explored this simultaneous development

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[118] Mann, Vivian B, Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts, p. 99
[119] Cohen, Boaz, *Art in Judaism*, "Art in Jewish Life, Some Talmudic Views," p. 51

in her book *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis* (2020). Her research unveiled the importance of having a casual, accessible approach both to art (through crafting instead of the fine arts) and to Judaism (through activities like needlepoint, which makes Judaism's big aims more achievable and relatable).

The book's title refers to two modern Jewish artistic developments. First, she describes the Pomegranate Guild of Judaic Needlework. Much of Eicher-Levine's research includes speaking with members and attending conventions of the Guild. The guild lays out its mission as:

> "To pass needlework traditions to other generations of women and men through the sharing of knowledge and techniques needed to create handcrafted items intended for both Jewish ritual and cultural use… in an atmosphere of camaraderie with others and our joy in being Jewish."[120]

Second, Eichler-Levine describes a needlepoint depiction of a rabbi passed down from her grandmother who made it from a niche, albeit commercially available, kit. It depicts a very traditional rabbi, an old, bearded man, wrapped in a blue and white tallis and grasping a *Torah*.

To some extent, Eichler-Levine owes her interest in Jewish crafting to this piece of needlepoint, which depicted Judaism in a much less formal light. She also owes it to the long history of Jewish material culture.[121] Eichler-Levine names the Guild as Bezalel's heirs, harkening back to the biblical artisan in charge of creating the *Mishkan* and all of its fixtures. The *Mishkan* was the very first example of Jewish material culture. Even then, it demonstrated that there is more than one way to meaningfully participate in Jewish community. Eichler-Levine writes:

> "The Pomegranate Guild is a form of "everyday religion" that makes space for alternate ways of creating Jewish community and expressing pride in Jewish identities. It is a 'third place,' a space for gathering outside of either home or work where group members form bonds around a shared interest and activity."[122]

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[120] https://www.pomegranateguild.org/
[121] Eichler-Levine, Jodi, *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis: How Jews Craft Resilience and Create Community*, p. 18
[122] Ibid. 116

Crafting is an accessible form of Judaism without expectation of Hebrew comprehension or knowledge of Hebrew life.

Further, just as Bezalel and Ohaliab were not as important as their project, so too are the members of the Guild working towards something larger than themselves. Jewish objects are not about the maker or the user as much as they are about the tradition to which they belong. Eichler-Levine describes the importance of her role both because she took an ethnographic interest in the Jewish crafting movement and because she is one of the movement's younger members. As with Jewish organizations across the board, the Guild and other crafting organizations worry about their aging membership. In a similar vein, the Guild also fits within today's trend towards post-denominational Judaism.[123] Eichler-Levine describes a knitting group she joined as having "Jewish currents, more than Jewish frames," where Judaism existed in shared culture more than shared belief.[124] Even so, if this knitting group brings Jews together in a Jewish context, who could deny its value?

As a traditionally feminine activity, Jewish crafting may be one of the forces that pushed women into Jewish leadership positions. She writes:

> "At a time when women in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements were just beginning to become rabbis and women in the Conservative movement still could not quite do so, the women of the Pomegranate Guild were taking on their own mantles of leadership, study, and teaching, in their own newly created, cooperative world."[125]

Additionally, crafting can be seen negatively by those in the fine arts world, just as women and other minorities were traditionally seen as lesser by the Rabbis.[126] The inclusion of women in the rabbinate opened the door for those means of connection that were also historically seen as lesser.

The touch of material objects is a powerful tool in owning Jewish practice. Crafting, Eichler-Levine argues, is a tool for processing trauma (such as the Jewish Hearts for Pittsburgh movement following the 2018 Tree of Life/ Or l'Simcha Synagogue shooting) and personalizing ritual (such as sewing one's own *chuppah*); material

[123] Ibid. 107
[124] Ibid. 119
[125] Ibid. 115
[126] Ibid. 20

memories matter. A few of her interviewees described the meditative and beautiful processes of crafting as integral to their Shabbat practices. Interestingly, the categories of *melakhot* which specify the types of work traditionally forbidden on Shabbat come directly from the original Jewish crafter: Bezalel.[127] Even if crafting on Shabbat does not align with *halakhah*, it should not be so readily dismissed. So many key aspects of Judaism are embodied by the act of crafting, as Eichler-Levine writes:

> "Objects, from delicately embroidered prayer shawls to prepainted needlepoints of rabbis, constitute containers for emotion and also a kind of betweenness, a site where narratives and memories are transmitted."[128]

Today

2024

Today, there are hundreds of Jewish museums around the world. There are thousands of synagogues, decorated with care and attention to detail. There are countless Jewish artists who work with paint, charcoal, pastel, and, yes, even clay. Jewish art almost undeniably exists in today's world. It is demarcated by the wordless integration of Jewish themes because they are so deeply ingrained. So, a new question emerges: is any art created by a Jew Jewish art? Alfred Werner suggests perhaps not: "An orange painted in Tel Aviv is not a Jewish orange, just as one painted in Paris is not a French orange."[129] How, then, can we determine the bounds of Jewish art?

Looking back, we might see that certain past assumptions about Jewish art were wrought by Jewish elitists or even by anti-Semites who sought to disparage our people's place in contemporary society.[130] Jewish art can trace its roots all the way back to the Torah. We can also see the development of the rabbis' response (or perceived response) to Jewish art. Was their relative silence on certain issues a sign of acceptance? Did they truly disagree with their followers? Were they putting up a traditional front for the sake of the rabbi's image?

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[127] Ibid. 68
[128] Ibid. 21
[129] Werner, Alfred, *Art in Judaism*, "Art - Israel's New Frontier," p. 105
[130] Bland, Kalman P., *The Artless Jew*, p. 8

In the Modern era, the definition of 'rabbi' has changed drastically. The title is no longer limited to men who maintain a certain degree of observance. The title is not only connected to a *beit midrash* nor is it limited in function. Today, rabbis are free to incorporate art in their rabbinate in numerous ways, and importantly, today, rabbis are not the only Jewish leaders. Let us turn to the artistic Jewish leaders of today.

Chapter Two: Contemporary Perspectives

Introduction

Traditionally, membership in the rabbinate was (and in many circles, still is) limited to a very select group of people (male, white, straight) who had a very specific background in text-based study. This group defined the role of the rabbinate based on this education; according to them, a rabbi would lead individuals in traditional models of worship, study, and ritual. However, since the 19th century, what it is to be a rabbi has been ever expanding with the inclusion of new denominations and previously forbidden identity groups. Even beyond the rabbinate, the definition of a Jewish leader has greatly expanded; there is no longer just one title for Jewish leadership. As the field of Jewish leadership has expanded, so too have the possibilities for engagement.

Today, rabbis can be found working not just in synagogues or *batei midrash* ("study halls") but also in a variety of other organizations. And, those who inhabit the role of Bezalel are continuously becoming more prominent in Jewish spaces. In order to understand the diversity of ways Jewish leaders incorporate art into their work, I spoke with seven of them in the field: Rabbi Beaumont Shapiro, Arielle Stein, Jack Sherratt, Rabbi Emily Meyer, Nancy Katz, Rabbi Sarah Berman, and Rabbi Linda Motzkin. They represent a wide range of the Jewish arts: some are creators and some are not; they work in synagogues, are contracted by synagogues, or for Jewish organizations; they work with a variety of media and methodology. I spoke with each interviewee for about an hour and focused on these questions:

- Do you call yourself an artist?
- What makes someone an artist?
- How does your interest in art inform your rabbinate and the work you do?
- What is your favorite piece of Jewish art? Jewish museum?
- How does art strengthen the Jewish identities of those you serve?
- Who are your artistic inspirations?

- If someone were to say to you "the second commandment forbids Jewish art," how would you respond?
- If someone were to say to you "there are more important things for a rabbi to focus on than art," how would you respond?
- How does art inform/ enhance your own spiritual practice?
- Tell me about a favorite project/ program/ iyyun/ etc. you created that connected Jewish themes and art.
- What within Judaism inspires your passion for the arts?

Rabbi Beaumont Shapiro

Rabbi Beaumont Shapiro is the Rabbi in Residence at the Skirball Cultural Center ("the Skirball") in Los Angeles. He is the first to hold this position which was created in 2023. Ordained by HUC-JIR in 2011, Rabbi Shapiro came to the Skirball after two decades serving the Wilshire Boulevard Temple, which,coincidentally, is known in part for the figurative murals painted on its sanctuary walls.[131]

Despite the position of Rabbi in Residence being less than a year old, the Skirball is no stranger to rabbinic leadership. It was created by Dr. Uri D. Herscher, an HUC-JIR ordinee, in the 1980s and opened to the public in 1996. Dr. Herscher recently stepped down as President and CEO, but his impact on the Jewish community of Los Angeles is permanent. *The Forward* reported: "Uri set out to create an institution that brought meaning to Jews turned off by mainstream Jewish life, and that brought Jewish values to non-Jews."[132] His sense was that synagogues did not know how to attract Jews in the cultural sphere; that was the gap the Skirball would fill. The namesake of the center, Rabbi Jack H. Skirball, is also worth noting. Though an ordained Reform rabbi, Skirball is most well known as a real estate developer and, more pertinently, as the funder and namesake of Jewish (and secular) cultural institutions across the world.

As a cultural center, the Skirball hosts a variety of programs which serve the Jewish community of Los Angeles and beyond, including a permanent collection of Judaica, rotating art exhibitions, an interactive Noah's Ark replica (which Rabbi Shapiro

[131] "Time Travelling through the Temple." *Wilshire Boulevard Temple*.
[132] Eshman, Rob. "How Uri Herscher reshaped Jewish L.A." *The Forward*.

described as "education disguised as play"), multiple events spaces, and classes based on Jewish culture and tradition. Its collection of 25,000 Jewish ritual objects is one of the largest in the world.[133] Now that Dr. Herscher has moved on, Rabbi Shapiro must figure out how to bring the Jewish into the Skirball. The question continues to be: is the Skirball a Jewish institution or an institution guided by Jewish values? And, does having a Rabbi in Residence automatically make the Skirball one or the other?

Rabbi Shapiro argues that, programmatically, there is nothing the Skirball does that a synagogue could not. Instead, the draw of the Skirball is the space itself. Unlike synagogues, which may be challenging spaces for individuals with complicated relationships to organized religion, the Skirball is a neutral space. As such, the architecture of the building is arguably just as important as what happens within its walls. It was designed by Moshe Safdie, the Israeli architect known for such diverse works as the Marina Bay Sands resort in Singapore and the campus of HUC in Jerusalem. Rabbi Shapiro described the architecture as an oasis - a model which synagogues may wish to use. He described how crucial the architecture is in just getting people through the door; visitors may come for an event hosted in the beautiful space and will hopefully return for the Skirball's many other offerings.

As Rabbi in Residence, Rabbi Shapiro describes his role as having internal and external components. Internally, he is Jewish consultant and 'shtetl' rabbi - the one people go to for questions about *kashrut* or the Hebrew calendar. Rabbi Shapiro mentioned this role in connection with the Skirball's several hundred docents and volunteers. For them, volunteering comes from a desire to fill a Jewish gap in their lives. Rabbi Shapiro wonders how they can learn not just the history of the Skirball and its collections but also the story behind the objects

As unique as Rabbi Shapiro's title is, the work he does is not out of reach for any rabbi. He is concerned with upholding tradition, disseminating Jewish content, and upholding Jewish values. He is weighing what High Holy Days at the Skirball could look like in the coming years.

Rabbi Shapiro's favorite Jewish artist is Alex Israel, a friend of his. Israel is a multimedia artist based in Los Angeles.[134]

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[133] "About the Collections." *Skirball Cultural Center*. Skirball.org.
[134] More about Alex Israel and his work can be found here: https://gagosian.com/artists/alex-israel/.

Jack Sherratt and Arielle Stein

Jack Sherratt and Arielle Stein are rabbinic students at HUC (Class of 2024) and creators. Jack is, as his name suggests, a jack of all trades. Though trained as a mental health professional and now training to be a rabbi, he is also a master carpenter, beekeeper, and *sofer*. For his thesis, Jack created a set of *tefillin* entirely from scratch, from skinning a deer (a stage which he told me was "very wet") to scribing the text. Arielle is a visual artist. She received a Bachelor's degree in drawing and now dedicates her art to her pursuit of the rabbinate. She uses fine pencil and pen to create delicate figurative drawings as well as watercolor in more substantive pieces. For her thesis, Arielle created a visual *midrash* of Song of Songs. I spoke to Jack and Arielle together because of their shared pre-rabbi status (at the time of their interviews) and their different approaches to art. Jack's art is practical. Arielle's is decorative. In the case of their theses, both help others to be better Jews, either through a ritual object or through textual interpretation.

Jack and Arielle strongly disagreed about what makes someone an artist. Jack said that being an artist is about one's orientation to the world and appreciation of beauty, not about skill. Arielle argued that being an artist is about producing art. As for what constitutes Jewish art, Jack continued that the creator must be Jewish in some way and the work must be "Jewishly situated." This means that the identity politics around who is a Jew plays a role in the definition of a Jewish artist, which aligns with Jack's history working with marginalized communities. Arielle added that a Jewish artist must work with explicitly Jewish content in addition to holding the identity - so the work of a Christian artist creating a visual interpretation of *Song of Songs* should not be considered Jewish art.

In a synagogue setting, Arielle uses art as an interpretative tool with her congregants as well as by presenting them the text, a space for interpretation, and the tools to create their own visual midrash. Jack, again, turned more to ritual objects, saying he was not afraid to give a four-year-old a drill and say, "Let's build a *Sukkah*." They both have encountered the fear of imperfection in their own work and try to ensure their workshops are settings where no participant feels afraid. Activities with imprecise outcomes, like collages or papermaking are more accessible - just as using the English

translation in *Torah* study makes the text more accessible. It is important to build up the scaffolding so someone can feel comfortable with more challenging tasks. Things like ritual objects or words - small parts of a much larger picture - are entry points to Jewish experience. Feeling accomplished in those relatively small tasks goes a long way in breaking through dense emotional barriers.

Turning towards tradition, the Second Commandment, both said, is not a literal prohibition against art. Arielle urged me to just look at Jewish material history; manuscripts are covered in figurative illustrations. Over time, she said, it is clear that rabbis have set new precedents. The interpretive tradition within Judaism is there to inspire creativity. Further, art can be a spiritual practice. Jack described entering his workshop as a holy experience. For both, liturgical prayer does not provide the same Divine connection as creating art does - which is an important model for their current and future congregants. Even for many rabbis, art is an access point to Judaism when more "traditional" activities are not as successful. It is a form of communication and expression much like prayer and can be utilized even when one cannot find the words.

Very sweetly, Jack said his favorite Jewish artist was Arielle. After her, other artists that came up for both ranged from the modern - Judy Chicago, Yael Burtani - to the biblical - Bezalel, Solomon, Ezra.

Nancy Katz

Nancy Katz is a Jewish artist. She is not a rabbi but is undoubtedly a Jewish leader. The tagline on her website[135] reads: "Together we make beauty." Throughout her career, Katz has traveled around the country to guide individuals and congregations in creating their very own ritual objects. Katz primarily works with silk painting and stained glass, but her works and workshops are not limited to these media.

Katz described herself first and foremost as the antithesis to that art teacher who told so many adults when they were children that they have no skill or should never create art. Katz herself felt the same way, both within the larger art world and within the Jewish community, that what she had to offer was not good enough. On the one hand,

[135] Her website, which includes more about Katz and many examples of her work, can be found here: https://www.nancykatzwilmark.com/.

she hesitated to become an artist because of the competition of the art world. On the other hand, she worried that she could not be a successful Jew, as someone who is drawn to spirituality over text. However, spurred by the revolution of Jewish women in the 1980's, Katz found her voice as a Jewish artist. Her first foray into the field was in making *tallitot* for female rabbis. Now, her work has a pastoral side; she helps her students heal from the memory of that initial "no."

Often, when we think of making Jewish ritual objects, we think of materials that are not intended to last. While speaking to Katz on Zoom and sitting in my parents' house, I pulled out one such kiddush cup made by my sister in her youth - a flimsy plastic cup glued to a wooden base and decorated with markers and stickers. If it had ever been used, it would not have lasted more than a few *Shabbatot*. Katz notes the value of using precious materials for any person creating ritual objects; these objects, she said, should be made with longevity in mind. Even more importantly than supplying the materials, Katz gives her students permission to create. She compared it to songleaders who stand before us and say "Sing! Sing! Sing!" When presented with failure proof materials, like paper and oil pastels, even adults are ready to heed the call of "Create! Create! Create!"

Katz learned that Jewish adults are hungry for art. She was clear that "hungry" is the necessary descriptor - Jewish adults are hungry for art and thirsty for spirituality. She had the recipe to fulfill both needs and described her work as an extension of the Divine. Art and spirituality are both about finding the holy within the mundane. Both are about helping people to begin to see the world in new ways. Katz's comments reminded me of the great theologian, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who preached the value of radical amazement:

> "The roots of ultimate insights are found… on the level of wonder and radical amazement, in the depth of awe, in our sensitivity to the mystery, in our awareness of the ineffable. It is the level on which the great things happen to the soul, where the unique insights of art, religion, and philosophy come into being."[136]

[136] Heschel, Rabbi Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 1955. P. 117.

According to Rabbi Heschel, art and the Divine exist on the same plane. They require one to find the awesome in the mundane but are not limited to a select few. Similarly, I asked Katz what makes someone an artist; she answered simply, "Being alive." I asked Katz who her favorite Jewish artist was other than herself. She immediately said Marc Chagall for his delight in life, connection with the Divine, and the love evident in each of his works.

Often, as in Judaism, art must start with certain boundaries to allow the creator to feel comfortable and competent. For instance, Katz described a session she led where kids picked their favorite Hebrew letter and turned it into an everyday object. That way, the letter was not something foreign and scary but a building block for something familiar. Slowly, more colors or design choices can be introduced, allowing the art - or the Judaism - to be personalized. Katz described the power of the tangibility of ritual objects and the importance of ownership. Each object contains many layers of story which are crucial to its existence: the *halakhah* behind it, their functional purpose, and the connection to the community, the donor (if there is one), and the individual putting it to use.

Rabbi Sarah Berman

Rabbi Sarah Berman is the Director of Adult Education at Central Synagogue in New York City. Her rabbinate is inspired by her education and previous career in archeology, art history, and curation, including twelve years at the Seattle Art Museum. In her adult education work, Rabbi Berman is known for utilizing the arts and creating spaces where her congregants can explore their artistic sides.

I first met Rabbi Berman in the sanctuary of Central Synagogue during an artist talkback. The artist, Nell Breyer, is a member of the synagogue and sculptor. Her piece, "Where Lines Converge," hung from the sanctuary's ceiling for a year. The sanctuary is grand and highly decorative, but none of its decor is figurative. Breyer's piece followed suit - dozens of strings which ended with brass plumb-bobs, which the artist describes as "an ancient instrument of human measurement used, since the Babylonians, for architectural construction of a perfect vertical, marking an imaginary line that runs

straight to the center of the earth."[137] Tours of Central Synagogue sanctuary are available weekly, but this was an entirely new way to conceive of the space.

Rabbi Berman does not call herself an artist, though she undoubtedly is a curator. She says to be an artist requires physical creation and intent. Rather, she thinks of herself as an interpreter and as someone who helps others polish their Jewish lenses through which to see art. She thinks the material culture of Judaism is crucial to how Jews live. While texts provide a glimpse into the minds of men[138] at certain times and places, material culture gives us a fuller picture of who the Jewish people have been throughout history. Texts, she added, have a self-awareness while objects are honest and speak more to the actual, lived experience of their users.

Though she may not be a material creator, Rabbi Berman creates spaces that allow others to explore their artistic sides. Rabbi Berman strives to bring art into the synagogue and Judaism into the museum. One of her early attempts at the former was an immediate success. On a slow day for *Torah* study, she invited her congregants to pick a memorable line from Isaiah, which they had been studying for years, and interpret it through collage, thus allowing each participant to reinterpret a story they thought they already knew. One participant in his 80s said it was the first time he ever created art. If that participant said that his first time lifting a kiddush cup was that year, I would be appalled. I would ask: why had this man not been given access to a kiddush cup before? Art and kiddush cups are both part of Judaism's material culture; they are tools that allow Jews to be the best Jews they can be. Both are tools which add color to a Shabbat morning.

Through Central Synagogue, Rabbi Berman teaches a Jewish history course in the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art - for example, discussing the Levitical cult in the context of the Ancient Egyptian galleries. One may see this course as antithetical to Judaism. How can one study Judaism amidst foreign idols? Rabbi Berman broke the Second Commandment into three core parts: creation, graven, and

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[137] "Where Lines Converge: A New Site-Specific Art Installation." *Central Synagogue*.

[138] For much of Jewish history, and still today in certain communities, the roles of men and women have been siloed. The *beit midrash* and synagogue were male dominated spaces. In the *Talmud*, very few contemporary women (meaning not those from scripture) are named, and most of the women who are written about are written about in order to teach about a woman's role: how to purify her body, how to keep a Jewish home, etc. Unlike texts, material objects existed in spaces which included women.

images. The Rabbis, she notes, are comfortable with being around graven images and even creating them, so long as Jews are not worshiping them.

In museums, Rabbi Berman also uses the classic PARDES method of Jewish interpretation with pieces that are not Jewish but can inspire Jewish thought. After two minutes of observation of a piece like a sketch of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, she asks:

- What do you see? (*P'shat* - Plain meaning)
- What did the artist intend? (*Remez* - A hint from the author/ creator)
- What are your Jewish associations? (*D'rash* - Interpretation)
- What are your personal associations? (*Sod* - The secret meaning)

This method of "sacred looking" could easily be applied to a number of other spaces, like a sanctuary or outdoors. Rabbi Berman's perspective of art is a lot like the Jewish approach to *midrash*. She presents existing objects which her students can then use as inspiration for their own creations. Looking helps to develop one's own perspectives of the world.

When I asked Rabbi Berman who her favorite Jewish artist was, she said "We haven't even defined Jewish art yet!" After breaking Jewish art into three categories - ritual objects, visual art in Jewish themes, and objects Jews (could) have owned and used - she told me her favorite artist of the second category, Nancy Spero, who engages with her whole self in her art.[139]

Rabbi Linda Motzkin

Rabbi Linda Motzkin is a *soferet* (a female Hebrew calligrapher; the male form is *sofer*/ *sofrim*), scribal artist, and recently retired congregational rabbi. She and her husband, Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein, served as the co-rabbis of Temple Sinai in Saratoga Springs, NY. Together, they founded the Bread and Torah Project in 2004 which guides participants in the process of making a Torah scroll from scratch and in baking bread, work whose proceeds support hunger relief programs.

When I spoke to Rabbi Motzkin, she very clearly stated that *sofrut* (the practice of Hebrew calligraphy, particularly for Scripture) and baking are both art forms. I

[139] More about Nancy Spero can be read in the *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* entry about her: https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/spero-nancy.

agreed, even if bread making and so many other art forms are outside the scope of this project. Rabbi Motzkin described herself first as a frustrated artist who would have gone into the profession full-time if it had been an option. Instead, inspired by second wave feminism, Rabbi Motzkin attended HUC and maintained her art practice on the side. Sharing a position with her husband allowed Rabbi Motzkin the space to pursue other interests, including chaplaincy and Hebrew curricula. The latter fostered Rabbi Motzkin's interest in the artistic possibilities of Hebrew letters.

I first encountered Rabbi Motzkin as a special guest in my Introduction to Scribal Arts class at HUC, taught by the remarkable New-York-based *soferet,* Leana Jelen Tapnack. (As an aside, this is a class which Jack Sherratt, another interviewee, fought to have included in the HUC course catalog.) I remember being in awe of Rabbi Motzkin's accomplishments. She described being among the first generation of *sofrot*. At the time, only three *sofrim* in the world were willing to train women in the highly skilled craft. In those early days, Rabbi Motzkin held what she calls "the first international conference of female scribes" - four women around her kitchen table. The attendees included Jen Taylor Friedman, who, in 2007, became the first woman known to have scribed an entire Torah scroll.

Rabbi Motzkin's first *sofrut* project was a Scroll of Esther for her synagogue. That project is not included in the list of scribal projects from which women are traditionally barred, according to the *Talmud*:

> "A Torah scroll, phylacteries, or *mezuzot* that were written by… a woman… are unfit, as it is stated: "And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand…and you shall write them on the doorposts of your house" (Deut. 6:8–9). From this juxtaposition, one can derive the following: Anyone who is included in the *mitzvah* of binding the phylacteries, i.e., one who is both obligated and performs the *mitzvah*, is included in the class of people who may write Torah scrolls, phylacteries, and *mezuzot*; but anyone who is not included in the *mitzvah* of binding is not included in the class of people who may write sacred texts."[140]

[140] *Talmud* Bavli, *Gittin* 45b, *The William Davidson Talmud translation*.

As her desire shifted to scribing a Torah scroll, Rabbi Motzkin founded the Community Torah Project, in part, in order to source materials. She was firm about the need for integrity in her creations. If someone was not willing to sell *sofrut* materials to a woman, she would not deceive them into doing so. That meant she needed help to tan and prepare deer skin, to acquire quills and ink, and to proofread the panels after Rabbi Motzkin finished writing them.

Even though Rabbi Motzkin has no official certification in *sofrut*, she is very clear about the need for specialized training in order to actually scribe the letters. It is the other parts of the process which she opens up to the community. Beyond *sofrut*, Rabbi Motzkin definitively believes that art is accessible to everyone. On her misshapen pieces of parchment, Rabbi Motzkin uses letters to create art which she uses as visual *midrash* and as intentional decor for Shabbatot. As such, her definition of Jewish art is quite broad: anything is Jewish art if you slap a Hebrew letter on it. Being an artist, she says, is part of being human. Art, in turn, is forever impacted by how people view it.

Sofrut and making art, Rabbi Motzkin says, look similar from the outside but could not be more different internally. *Sofrut* has a strict set of rules which mean that every finished Torah scroll will look roughly the same; the only variations are in parchment size or certain scribal flourishes. She describes the scribing process as meditation; while she scribes, her focus shrinks to just one letter at a time. Art, on the other hand, she describes as riotous freedom. All of the elements of her art are variable: color, size, and text - and even the ability to change text. She attributed some of these differences to the different feel of solitary and communal art studios. Additionally, while her art is attributed to and signed by her, the *soferet* is merely a conduit. The Community Torah Project scroll will bear the fingerprints of many participants, but it will never be signed. In that way, it is a similar holy endeavor to the construction of the *Mishkan* -an unsigned project with one leader at the helm and bearing the fingerprints of many participants.

Rabbi Emily Meyer

Rabbi Emily Meyer is a former congregational rabbi currently based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After growing up as a "poster child" of the Reform Movement, Rabbi Meyer studied the classics and art before attending rabbinical school. During the pandemic, Rabbi Meyer gave herself a new moniker: The Doodly Jew. Now she leads online and in-person workshops for students, educators, and congregants who want a new understanding of the Hebrew letters.

Rabbi Meyer grew up in the same community as Michael Bogdanow, a Jewish artist who translates text into art.[141] His pieces are often inspired by a specific text, such as his painting entitled "Don't Be Afraid," based on Rabbi Nachman's renowned quote, "The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the essence is to not be afraid." The piece is a contrasting navy blue roiling sea and bright orange sky, bisected by a bridge in a gradient of the two colors. At the same time, it is a literal interpretation of Rabbi Nachman's words and open to the interpretation of any viewer. Bogdanow's art still impacts Rabbi Meyer.

The Doodly Jew emerged as a response to the lack of online resources for Hebrew language learning; Rabbi Meyer observed this as her children shifted to virtual school because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The idea brought together two areas of her life - her career as a day school teacher and her career as the mother of two daughters. Inspiration struck when she watched them draw along with Mo Willems, a children's book author who led workshops for students stuck in quarantine. Rabbi Meyer remembers him instructing his viewers to write out the day's date and turn it into a monster. And so, the idea emerged; why can't one do the same with Hebrew letters? (Though perhaps without monsters.)

Often, Rabbi Meyer says, Reform congregations seek to increase belonging by decreasing Hebrew - even though Hebrew words are written all throughout a synagogue. And if a congregant wishes to learn Hebrew, Rabbi Meyer describes this as a nearly impossible task because Hebrew exists in many versions: biblical, Mishnaic, Sephardi, Ashkenazi, modern, to name a few. Her doodles use Hebrew to foster a sense of

[141] More about Bogdanow and examples of his work can be found on his website: https://www.michaelbogdanow.com/.

connection by starting with the simplest foundation; letters do not come with the baggage of other Jewish symbols. Rabbi Meyer taught me that 30% of all Hebrew texts (Scripture, rabbinic commentary, liturgy, etc.) consist of just three letters: *yud*, *hay*, and *vav* (י, ה, ו). An additional seven letters make up the next 30% and the remaining sixteen letters are only 40%. Just ten letters give access to so much of Jewish text. Why spend time learning *tzadee* (צ) - which Rabbi Meyer described as appearing once in a blue moon - when you could spend time playing with *yud*?

Doodles, like letters, are sketches often meant to convey something more complex; they are simple, casual pieces of art that anyone can create. Rabbi Meyer's use of doodles ranges from multiple sketches for the same letter to using doodles as a visual acrostic for a word (such as the three letters of Shabbat: *shin*, *bet*, *tav* - שבת) to doodling a visual *midrash* for an important word from each *parasha* in Genesis. Art, she contends, lowers the barrier to entry in Judaism. Her main concerns for her students are not with perfection or even beauty but rather with ownership and belonging. She mentioned the importance of choice in this methodology - so the "*shin*" of Shabbat could be transformed into *shalom* (the peace of the day) or *shemesh* (the sun shining on a Shabbat walk) or any other "*shin*" word. Doodling helps whatever letters and words are chosen to stick. One of her favorite projects was doodling with all the meanings of the word "Israel": *Am*, *Eretz*, and *Midinah* ("people, land, and state").

"Artist" can be an off-putting term; instead, Rabbi Meyer urges her participants to see themselves as playful creators. She describes her own love of art as a love of playing with materials. Kids know they can do anything and are willing to jump into play; adults are not always as confident. So, Rabbi Meyer said that often the first task she gives her students is to play with the markers in front of them, to just see what they can do. Playing allows students to practice creating before formulating a firm idea. Rabbi Meyer drew a parallel between this and Judaism. Like creators, Jews need space to practice using the wide array of materials before them. I would expand the parallel to the terminology Rabbi Meyer uses. Not everyone is an artist just as not every Jew is a rabbi, or a "professional Jew;" however, everyone can create, and every Jew can create their own understanding of Judaism. The word "creator" even evokes the ultimate Creator, linking mere doodles to the acts of G-d.

Though she herself refrains from drawing representations of G-d, Rabbi Meyer does not prohibit her students from doing so. Her chosen representation of G-d is a rainbow for a few reasons: rainbows' connection to the covenant G-d made with Noah; their visibility only in the right time and conditions; and the human need to imagine them. Another way she embodies G-d on paper is by laying out the tetragrammaton vertically so it looks like a human (*yud* as the head, *hay* as the arms, *vav* as the torso, *hay* as the legs). That way, she literally depicts the concept of *b'tzelem Elohim* (that humans are made in G-d's image) without needing to draw a representation of G-d.

According to Rabbi Meyer, Jewish artists should also expand their idea of a canvas. The Reform Movement's siddur, *Mishkan T'filah*, for example, is full of blank space - especially pages like those with the *Shema*, which is already written in the shape of Rabbi Meyer's chosen depiction for G-d. (She did want me to note that she uses photocopies of the pages.) For Rabbi Meyer, Jewish art is anything that engages with Jewish tradition. Because the definition of a doodle is broad, so too is the definition of Jewish art.

Summation and Analysis

As I conducted these interviews, I noticed threads woven between the interviewees - a metaphor chosen intentionally. Certain "truths" were cited by each interviewee; for instance, that art can be a tool of connection between Jews and Jewish spaces, between Jews and the world around them, between Jews and their beliefs/ practices, between Jews and other Jews, and so on. Some questions led to a variety of answers based on the interviewees' backgrounds. For example, the question, "What makes someone an artist?" elicited different answers based largely on whether the interviewee was trained as an artist or whether their art is considered fine.[142] I learned that the ways in which art has been and can be integrated into Judaism are many and varied. The nonnegotiable truth is that art has a place in Judaism.[143]

[142] "Fine art" is art that is not used for another purpose. It stands opposed to the decorative arts (such as pottery, furniture making, etc.) or to the applied arts (which applies art to practical objects). Fine art also may be distinguished by the materials used.

[143] I realize that I did not speak with any people who I knew would disagree with this premise. Certainly, their absence created a bias in my research. I would argue that the Rabbis opposed the presence of art in Judaism for long enough - it was time to hear this new perspective.

I begin this analysis by noting the demographics of the interviewees. Most of my interviewees were women, though I do not know if this was due to chance or the reality of the demographics of Jewish leaders in art. Of the two men I interviewed, one does not come from an arts background and the other does not work with the fine arts. It seems that there is a correlation between the rabbinate accepting women in the 1970s and Judaism accepting more creative avenues of Jewish practice - both of which parallel the explosive creation of Jewish museums in the late 20th century (as described in the previous section). Multiple interviewees cited this shift as a reason for the work they do. Similarly, Eichler-Levine described the participants in the Jewish crafting movement at large as "...inheriting both the countercultural collectivist tendencies of the 1970s and this older biblical notion of communal fabrication."[144] The Pomegranate Guild was founded in 1977.

As liberal denominations have become more accepting of other Jewish minorities as well (Jews of color, LGBTQ Jews, Jews from interfaith families, etc.), even more arts and creative interpretations of Judaism have been brought in. For instance, The Workshop was founded in 2021 as a space for North American JOCISM (Jews of Color, Jewish-Indigenous, Sephardi, & Mizrahi) to create and share their art.[145] It was founded by rabbi and artist, Kendell Pinkney, who saw the lack of opportunities for JOCISM in creative, Jewish spaces and the potential for a space where they could receive mentorship and express their ideas. In a 2021 article, *Hadassah Magazine* shared how important the arts are in ensuring that there is a space for all Jews, no matter their intersecting identities.[146]

One comment made by many interviewees centered around a visceral memory of having been told as children that they could not do art. Then the discussion would turn to how this experience parallels many individuals' experience of Judaism - that somehow they were made to feel unable or unworthy, and so they stopped trying. Rabbi Motzkin applied her work as a *soferet* to this memory. Just as *sofrim* blot out the name of Amalek before beginning a Torah scroll, blot out this negative memory! I think Katz is right that it is the job of both Jewish artists and clergy to ask about these perceptions of

[144] Eichler-Leine, Jodi. *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis*. 127
[145] More about The Workshop and its core fellowship can be found on their website: https://theworkshopny.com/corefellowship.
[146] https://www.hadassahmagazine.org/2021/09/30/black-jewish-identities-converge-art/

inability and then put themselves in opposition to them. Art should not make anyone feel less than, just as Judaism should not make anyone feel less than. Instead, breaking down the barriers around art creation can help break down the barriers to feeling a personal sense of ownership of Judaism.

The halakhic standards of Judaism are quite rigid. Similarly, some aspects of art are quite rigid. For example, to be a classical artist, one must abide by the rules of classicism as established by the Greeks: balance, harmony, proportion. To call someone a Jew or a classical artist may be perceived as coming with great expectations. As Rabbi Meyer mentioned, even just calling someone an "artist" can be off-putting; the title suggests a high skill level. But neither Judaism nor art need be off-putting based on titles or rules; they both are constantly evolving and dividing into new movements. If one is not a classical artist, perhaps they can find their voice in the abstract. If one is not inspired by text study, perhaps they can find inspiration in prayer or in a different denomination of Judaism. As Eichler-Levine puts it, "Judaism functions as a horizon, not a container."[147] No one should feel stuck based on a perceived universal stringency of certain rules.

Take, for example, the perceived stringency of the Second Commandment. I asked each of the interviewees about this law against graven images: how would you respond to someone criticizing what you do because of the prohibitions of the Second Commandment? A few of them laughed at this question because it seems so ridiculous in our modern context, surrounded as we are by graven images. Most turned towards the long history of graven images within Judaism, an extraordinary precedent. However, just like the Rabbis of old, it seemed that all of the interviewees did decide to draw a line somewhere. Rabbi Meyer, for instance, draws a rainbow to represent G-d. As in ancient times, the line is not the same for everyone. While Rabbi Berman praised the beauty of the non-figurative decor in Central Synagogue's sanctuary (which abides by the Second Commandment), Rabbi Shapiro spoke with pride about the dramatic figurative murals in Wilshire Boulevard Temple.

Jewish art plays an important role in connecting us to the past. And, it can connect Jews to other Jews and to Jewish organizations. In a world where synagogue

[147] Eichler-Leine, Jodi. *Painted Pomegranates and Needlepoint Rabbis*. 12

membership is declining, art can be a tool to engage those otherwise uninterested in traditional organized religion.[148] Nancy Katz talked about the importance of ownership; when one can see the brushstrokes which they added to a Torah cover, they feel a sense of ownership for the cover and for the scroll it holds. Further, art provides a path into Judaism that does not have the negative connotations sometimes associated with synagogues or organized religion. This is one of the elements Rabbi Shapiro is most excited about in his new position. The Skirball, unlike the synagogues of Los Angeles, is a neutral space where Judaism may be more approachable.

Eichler-Levine, however, raises a related concern. She writes:

> "If we consider the fact that a preponderance of Jewish Americans do not affiliate with a synagogue but that huge numbers of Jews and non-Jews visit Jewish museums and see ritual objects there, then a yad in a museum might - meaningfully - reach a large number of visitors, both Jews and non-Jews. However, the sensory experience is different in each case: in a ritual Torah reading, a yad is grasped by the reader, entailing touch; in a museum case, a yad is examined visually, entailing sight. A ritual object in a case is different from a ritual object being used in a ritual. It retains strong cultural power, but it has been altered."[149]

So even if Jews are getting Jewish experiences from neutral spaces like museums, there is something lost in the experience. They do not get to touch the objects nor use them in ritual. Judaica does not belong behind glass; it deserves to be used. Only through tactical interaction will these objects make their users into proud, practicing Jews.

The question of "What makes someone an artist?" is a very similar question to the question of "What makes someone a Jew?" Both imply that the title requires a qualification. In many cases, the qualification is real. An artist who does not regularly produce art will not find their work in a museum; a person who does not have a Jewish parent and has not converted cannot be called up to the *Torah*. Boundaries maintain the purity of these sacred titles. However, boundaries which are too strict often serve only to

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[148] The Pew Research Center study, "Jewish Americans in 2020," reports: "About one-third of U.S. Jews (35%) say they live in a household where someone is a formal member of a synagogue." The whole study can be found on their website: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/. Specific data about synagogue membership is in "Chapter 3: Jewish Practices and Customs."

[149] Ibid. 78-79

push people away. One cannot pursue Judaism nor art if they are firmly told “no” without any course of redemption. Jewish leaders have a responsibility to maintain certain boundaries but also to find inroads for those who demonstrate a true desire to join.

Chapter Three: Using Art Jewishly

Introduction

Through researching the history of and speaking with today's artistic Jewish leaders, one thing is clear: art is undoubtedly a part of Judaism. What that means has changed over time. Once, the Jewish people built the *Mishkan* and the Temple; today, the Jewish people build synagogues and museums. Once, figurative art was seen as directly contradicting the Second Commandment; today, the lines around the Second Commandment are blurred, and figurative art is used as a form of Jewish engagement. The definition and uses of Jewish art will surely continue to evolve as long as there are Jews to use and create it.

Only recently have Jewish art and Jewish museums been seen as a valid and meaningful path of Jewish leadership. The Jewish Women's Archive articulates the beginning of this shift:

> "Although the academic field of Jewish art was advanced in pre-Holocaust Europe, its American version was not advanced until Rachel Wischnitzer, former curator of the Berlin Jewish Museum, began teaching at Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University in New York City, at age seventy-one… During Wischnitzer's time, access to Jewish arts education remained rare until the development of Jewish studies programs in the 1970s and beyond. Many leading Jewish museum professionals trained in related art fields. Olga Weiss, curator of exhibitions at the Spertus Museum of Judaica, worked as a volunteer before earning a master's degree in art history. Susan Goodman studied primitive art, beginning her career at the Guggenheim Museum and later joining the staff of the Jewish Museum, where she serves as chief curator. Female leadership at both these institutions encouraged Goodman's professional development. Samantha Baskind, a professor at Cleveland State University, laments that in order to study Jewish art, she had to find a work-around by applying for

> a PhD in the related field of American art; today she lectures and writes about this dearth of professional and scholarly opportunity in the field and explains that the situation is changing."[150]

These women and their museums created an entirely new path for Jewish engagement. Like Bezalel, they are models for all Jewish leaders. One of the major questions for Jewish leaders today is how to meaningfully engage Jews with their Judaism. I heard this throughout the interviews. In a world where *halakhah* is not necessarily binding, and Jews divide their time between many activities, how can we remind them that Judaism is here for every moment? I suggest that art be used as a tool to connect Jews and Judaism.

The following section contains five methods which I have used to engage Jews through art or which I have gleaned from my research. The intent is for these methods to be used by Jewish leaders - and for these mere five suggestions to inspire even more creativity around the intersection of art and Judaism.

Art as Midrash/ Torah Commentary

While I was a rabbinic intern at Rockdale Temple in Cincinnati, I was tasked with developing and teaching an adult education course. Ultimately, the course centered on artistic representations of familiar biblical stories. I picked five stories to explore through art over the course of the summer: Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, the *Akedah*, David's seduction of Bathsheba, Jacob's dream, and the life of Miriam. With some tweaks, I have used this methodology (as I will describe) again and again. As an example, the following is a description of teaching the *Akedah* through art.

This topic has become my favorite *Torah* study lesson. The *Akedah* is perhaps the most challenging story in the *Torah*, a father made to choose between his love for G-d and his love for his son. The text implies that Abraham passes this test but we modern day readers often reach a more complicated conclusion. Unlike some other biblical passages, this story is rife with detail. However, like many other biblical passages, there are gaps which are left up to personal interpretation. How did Abraham feel when he saw his son laid out upon the rock? Was Isaac a willing participant? Where was Sarah

[150] https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jewish-museums-in-united-states

when all of this was happening? Is this meant to be a cautionary tale, or is the moral of the story to be devoted to G-d above all else?

To begin, we read the text in question, in this case, Genesis 22:1-19 and perhaps a rabbinic commentary on the text to situate the artists in the midrashic tradition. Then, we start to think about the text artistically. I ask the following questions:

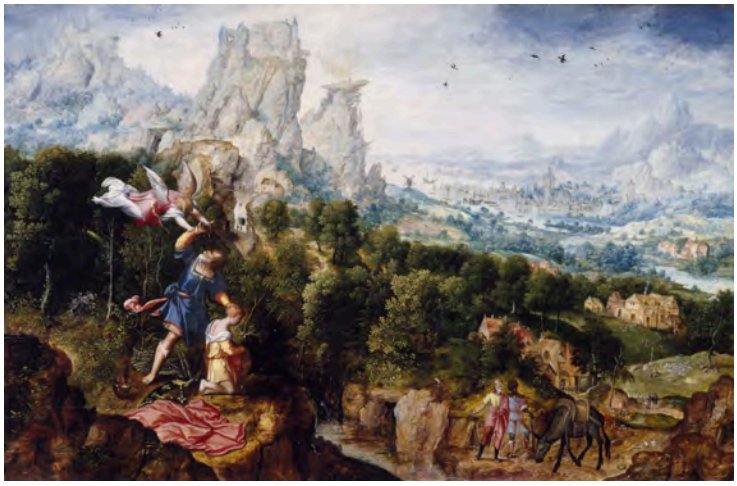
- What is the setting, including place, time of day, and any set pieces?
- Who are the characters? What do we know about them?
- What emotions are written in the story and which do we infer?
- What, if anything, is left out of the story?
- What is the tone of the story?

For the *Akedah*, we mention that the events begin with Abraham's encampment, continue through the desert trek, and conclude on Mount Moriah. Though the events begin early in the morning, the story takes place over three days. The important objects are the wood and the knife. We might begin to question if the ram is a prop or a character, leading us into a discussion of the rest of the characters: Abraham, Isaac, the servants, the angel, and G-d. We mention that Abraham is an old man by this point, and Isaac's age is debatable. None of the characters' feelings are expressed straightforwardly, so instead, we discuss what we can infer about their emotional states from the events of the story. We note Sarah's absence and the absence of G-d until the very end. Finally, we discuss the story's meaning and tone. Is it a story about obedience? Or should we look down on Abraham for choosing G-d over his own son?

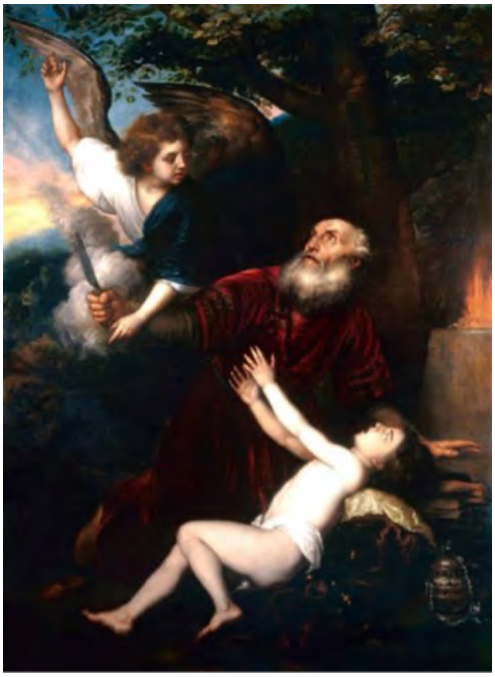
With this foundation established, we move into using art as *Torah* commentary. Typically, I present 10-15 images which range in age, style, perspective, scene, and so on. My greatest resource in preparing these sessions is the TALI Visual Midrash website. TALI (an acronym for "*Tigbur Limudei Yahadut*" - "Enhanced Jewish Studies") is an Israeli organization whose mission is to bring Jewish studies into secular schools. Their website gathers a huge spectrum of art on biblical subjects and includes essays about the over 300 artists and their subjects. I also have other museum databases which I use in my preparation, including the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, the Jewish Museum in New York, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Finally, there are certain artists whose work I love to include which may not have come up in these searches. Some of my

favorite visual *midrashim* are by Marc Chagall, Archie Rand, and Adi Nes. Once I have gathered all of the pieces, I will order them in any of a number of ways: chronologically by creation, chronologically within the story, from classical to more abstract, and so on. For the *Akedah*, I find that the pieces flow best when presented from classical to abstract. I additionally try to think about which pieces are a good juxtaposition for one another, either because of their similarities or differences, and which may have been inspired by other works.

Then, we dive in. Here is a taste of the pieces I chose and the discussion that follows:



Herri met de Bles
Landscape with the Offering of Isaac
Circa 1540

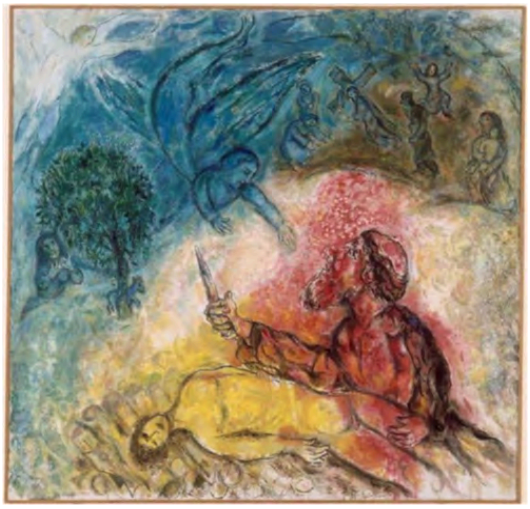


Jan Lievens
Sacrifice of Isaac
1635-1643

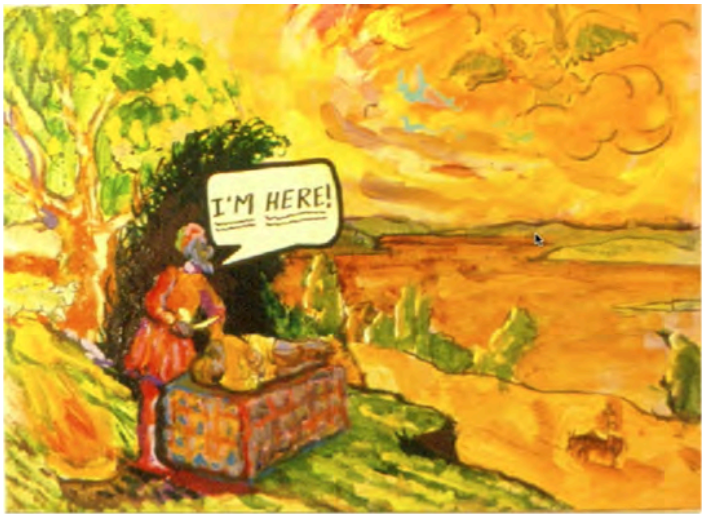
I discovered this first piece while wandering through the Cincinnati Art Museum. Herri met de Bles was a 16th century Flemish painter. The piece reveals much about the world in which de Bles lived. Though the lines and colors of the piece draw the viewer's eye to the scene in the foreground, it is small compared to the rest of the piece. The viewer's eye may instead wander to the city in the background or to the surrounding forest, though these are not accurate to the text. He includes the two servants and the

donkey as well as three much smaller figures right behind them. The scene is split into two color stories: the pastel blue of the sky and the dark, rich tones of the foreground. The darkness may give a hint to de Bles' interpretation of Abraham's actions. He captures Abraham just as the angel stays his hand. Isaac's back is to us so we cannot determine his emotional state.

About a century later, Jan Lievens painted a piece with the same arrangement of characters, though with very little background. Here, we can see Isaac's full facial and bodily expressions; the viewer's eye is drawn to the bright white of his garment and skin. Though he looks with worry at his father, his hands reach out either to the knife or to the angel. Abraham looks quite old in this piece while both Isaac and the angel look quite young. Lievens' interpretation is quite literal. It is what readers may picture in their head, a scared boy and a repentant father.



Marc Chagall
The Sacrifice of Isaac
1966

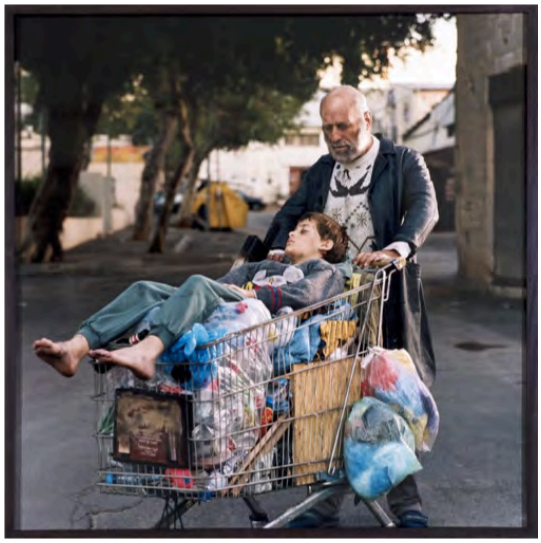


Archie Rand
I'm Here (The Sacrifice of Isaac)
1992

Moving towards the modern era, we have a piece by Marc Chagall whose work is familiar to most every participant I have taught. Chagall primarily uses color to tell his version of the story. The angel is blue, using the sky to symbolize the Divine. Abraham is red, perhaps signaling anger or fear. Isaac is yellow, again pointing towards fear or innocence. Chagall includes the ram behind a tree and a woman, generally considered to

be Sarah or Rebekah. We also see in brown a completely new addition to the story: a march through Jewish history including Jesus bearing the cross and Hassidim dancing.

Archie Rand's work takes these familiar stories and makes them cartoonish and almost comedic. He introduces text to the artistic interpretation. He translates Abraham's "*Hineni*" as an emphatic "I'm here!" Like Chagall, Rand's color choice is intentional. The piece is mostly in shades of a bright, mustard yellow, whose vibrancy may suggest G-d's presence. The setting looks a lot more like the text. Rand makes an interesting choice for Abraham's dress and the altar upon which Isaac lays; they seem almost Renaissance.



Adi Nes
Abraham & Isaac
2006

Richard McBee
Abraham and Isaac After
1996

Finally, we move towards the truly avant-garde interpretations of this story which take Abraham and Isaac completely out of their textual setting. Adi Nes is an Israeli photographer best known for "The Last Supper," a photo in which Israeli soldiers are posed around a table, as Jesus and his disciples were in Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the same name. Here, he imagines Abraham and Isaac in the modern world as a father and son living in poverty. Instead of wood and a donkey, Abraham leads Isaac to an

unknown destination atop plastic bottles and a shopping cart. Nes's *midrash* speaks to the sacrifices parents make for their children to give them a better life.

Richard McBee's piece again depicts Abraham and Isaac as we have not seen them. The viewer can assume this piece takes place in a *yeshiva* (a Jewish academy), as hinted at by the bookshelf in the background. Abraham, here a rabbi, extends a hand to Isaac. Isaac, though, is folded in on himself and does not extend a hand back. His feet are positioned to walk out of the frame and away from his father. The piece suggests a familiar modern day tale: a religious parent wants their child to follow them but the child rejects that path.

These pieces are a small taste of the art depicting the *Akedah*. These artists represent a spectrum of nationalities (Flemish, Israeli, American), styles (classical, photography, impressionist), and interpretations of Abraham's act. An unfortunate trend I have found is a dearth of female artists, as this group suggests, though this varies depending on the subject matter. Each of these pieces is also up to the viewer's interpretation. For example, is Nes's photograph before, during, or after the sacrifice? In Lievens's painting, is Isaac a willing participant, reaching for the knife to complete the deed, or a scared boy, reaching for rescue?

My final questions for each of these sessions are: which piece struck you the most, and if you were to paint/ sculpt/ create your own version of the *Akedah*, what would it look like? How would you capture your feelings towards this story? For some participants, the answers to these questions are straightforward, because their interpretation of the story is straightforward: I want Abraham depicted in shadow; I want Isaac struggling under his father's hand; I want a barren landscape behind the scene. Some want to forget Abraham and Mount Moriah and imagine what a painting of Sarah would look like in this moment. Most of them will return to the text itself.

Each time, I worry that certain participants will be turned off by this approach to *Torah* study. It is not a traditional text study; it may remind them of the art teacher who told them "no." However, the only resistance I have encountered is to pieces that participants passionately dislike. The tools for interpreting *midrash* are the same, whether the *midrash* is visual or textual. I have found that this is a low-stakes approach both to *Torah* study and to art. Stories like the *Akedah* are stories that participants have thought about and likely discussed many times before. Art provides a new perspective

on a story which, for them, may feel overworked. It also, in my view, makes everyone an artist without requiring technical artistic skill. If there were endless time, I might give participants the tools to create their own visual *midrash*, but I find the discussion just as impactful.

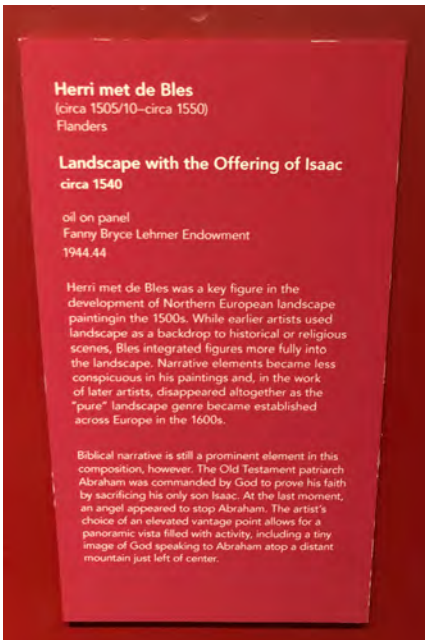
Synagogues as Museums

My favorite room in the Jewish Museum in New York is within the permanent collection. Stepping into it feels like stepping into a treasure chest. The walls are a deep crimson and the room is filled with Judaica made of precious material - as well as two wooden boat models for some reason. The one thing I do not like about that room is that the Judaica sits behind glass. It is beautiful to see and fascinating to learn about the origins of the collection, but those objects are not serving their intended purpose. Though they can now serve viewers as teaching tools, Jewish ritual objects are intended to be touched.

The main difference between synagogues and museums is that in a synagogue, one actually gets to "do" Judaism with the Judaica. For the most part, a yad (a pointer used for reading from a *Torah* scroll) does not stay behind glass; it is used to read *Torah*. The fingerprints of all who have used it are part of its story. Even so, most every synagogue today has a space like that in the Jewish Museum. In my home congregation, Temple David in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, there are glass cases as one enters the sanctuary with silver Judaica and little placards explaining what they are. The objects within lose so much potential in those cases. Not only are they not being used for their intended purpose (other than a few which are taken out during specific times of year); they have been demoted from usable ritual objects to teaching tools to mere decor because they are ignored. What are used as teaching tools at Temple David are the displays actually designed to be teaching spaces, as in a museum. First, there is a Holocaust memorial made of a trunk and *siddurim* which survived. Second, there is a stained glass piece designed by a congregant and put together by the whole congregation as a memorial to the eleven lives lost in the Tree of Life/ Or l'Simcha Synagogue shooting of 2018. The purpose of these match their use. They are powerful and interesting and capture the gaze of those walking by.

Certain larger synagogues contain a full museum, such as Temple Emanu-El in New York or Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia. The first has a separate wing dedicated to a permanent collection and rotating exhibits. The collection of the second exists throughout its halls. Both of those synagogues also run tours of their highly decorative sanctuaries. Other synagogues have fully become museums because the community is no longer based in that space or no longer exists. For example, the Eldridge Street Synagogue in New York City has been largely repurposed as the Museum at Eldridge Street; its mission now centers on using the building as an immersive teaching tool rather than as a worship space.[151] Another example is the Lillian & Albert Small Capital Jewish Museum which is housed in the former Adas Israel synagogue in Washington D.C. Visitors may now sit in what was Adas Israel's sanctuary and learn about its history through a multimedia presentation.[152]

What is clear to me is that the line between synagogue (really, any house of worship) and museum is blurry. Some people enter a synagogue solely for observational or educational purposes. Others may focus more on sanctuary design during a service than worship. The question arises: is there anything to gain from treating a synagogue like a museum?



Perhaps the most obvious sign that a space is a museum are the little placards placed next to a piece. They look like this (left) placard which describes a piece by Herri met de Bles.[153] There is a largely standardized way to make these placards. The Art Institute of Chicago lays out the questions a museum placard should attempt to answer:

- Who made it?
- Where is the creator from?/ Where was it made?
- What is it called?
- When was it made?
- What is it made of?

[151] https://www.eldridgestreet.org/about
[152] https://capitaljewishmuseum.org/about/
[153] This can be found in the Cincinnati Museum of Art. The relevant piece can be seen in the above section.

- Who currently owns it?
- How did they come to own it?

The placard will also include an accession or object number which includes the year the museum acquired the object.[154] The Art Institute also describes the "chat" of the placard, the paragraph which addresses the 'how' and 'why' of the artwork. They continue:

> "The contents of chats can vary as widely as the works themselves and, like the rest of the label, are crafted by museum professionals at the Art Institute. They collaborate to create engaging displays in which the arrangement of both art and information helps visitors connect with what they see and learn about how it fits into stories ranging from the personal to the global and historical. Whatever the focus, the chat aims to provide readers with a launchpad for thinking, talking, learning, and writing about the work—and, above all, to prompt closer looking at the art itself, encouraging you to look again and again and see more each time."

"Chat" feels like a remarkably appropriate name for the descriptions which accompany Judaica. Afterall, each Jew is part of an eternal conversation with tradition.

If a synagogue has a museum or display case, it likely has placards like this, answering the same questions as those posed by a museum. I propose that the questions of a museum placard could be adapted even further for synagogue use. If we were to translate the Art Institute's questions into a Jewish context, they might read as follows:

- Who made it? - What was their connection to Judaism?
- Where is the creator from?/ Where was it made? - What is the Jewish community of that place like?
- What is it called? - And, what does it do? What is its purpose as a Jewish ritual object?
- When was it made? - What was the global Jewish context at that time?
- What is it made of? - How are these materials holy?
- Who currently owns it? - What is our community or family connection to Judaism?
- How did they come to own it? - Was it donated or gifted for a special occasion?

[154] Hoffman, A. Robin. "How to Read a Label." *The Art Institute of Chicago*.

This harkens back to Rabbi Shapiro's comment about the museum docents being able to tell the story of the objects they are presenting. To understand how an object's story fits into the story of the Jewish people, one needs to ask this second layer of questions.

Treating Judaica as art opens up a whole new perspective. Instead of, or in addition to asking questions of halakhic use, one could ask: what materials is it made of? What design elements do you see? Is it part of a set? How is it similar to or different from other objects of this kind? Who made it? For whom was it made? What is the history of its ownership? The answers to these questions reveal the story behind the object and make it far more interesting. They also make the object more relevant. An observer could notice how the object is similar to their own Judaica or find a connection to its past users.

Museums as Spaces for Holy Connection

Both Rabbi Shapiro and Rabbi Berman spoke about how museums can be used as spaces for holy connection, though they approach that connection from different positions. Rabbi Shapiro starts from the museum and imagines how he can bring people in, especially those who may otherwise not belong to a Jewish organization. Rabbi Berman starts from the synagogue and brings her congregants out to explore the many treasures of New York City. In both cases, museums represent that neutral space that Rabbi Shapiro described. They are low-pressure places where Judaism can easily be applied to many other facets of one's life.

Take, for example, the Skirball. Its mission makes clear that it is not just a place for art or artifacts.

> "The Skirball Cultural Center is a place of meeting guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger and inspired by the American democratic ideals of freedom and equality. We welcome people of all communities and generations to participate in cultural experiences that celebrate discovery and hope, foster human connections, and call upon us to help build a more just society."[155]

[155] https://www.skirball.org/about

In addition to this mission, the Skirball lists six essential Jewish values and their textual source: Welcome the Stranger; Honor Memory; Seek Learning; Pursue Justice; Build Community; and Show Kindness. It may be surprising that neither *hiddur mitzvah* nor anything about aesthetic beauty are included in these values, given the Skirball's core function as an art museum.

This absence can be noted again in the mission statement of the Jewish Museum in New York City.

> "The Jewish Museum is an art museum committed to illuminating the complexity and vibrancy of Jewish culture for a global audience. Through distinctive exhibitions and programs that present the work of diverse artists and thinkers, we share ideas, provoke dialogue, and promote understanding."[156]

Though the Jewish Museum describes itself as an art museum, the mission is about teaching rather than aesthetics, and cultural diversity rather than a set standard of beauty. In this way, it reads somewhat similarly to the mission of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM):

> "The Museum's primary mission is to advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy."[157]

Through all three mission statements, the key ideas revolve around sharing information, preserving memory, and the responsibility of anyone who enters the museum to make the world more just.

These three institutions are also united by their membership in the Council of American Jewish Museums (CAJM). In 1977, six American Jewish museums established CAJM to "encourage support and further development of Jewish museums in collection, preservation, and interpretation of Jewish art and artifacts for public education and

[156] https://thejewishmuseum.org/about
[157] https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/mission-and-history

[the] advancement of scholarship."[158] Today, CAJM has over seventy member museums while its mission has stayed largely the same:

> "To strengthen, position, and champion America's Jewish museums as invaluable public and Jewish resources."

Its vision, however, has expanded:

> "A society made more vibrant, inclusive, just, resilient, and understanding by Jewish museums and their allies."[159]

That sounds much more like the museums above by including the language of justice and diversity.

Then, the question arises, what makes CAJM or its member museums different from non-Jewish art museums? The mission of the Metropolitan Museum of Art ("the Met") provides a perfect contrast. The Met is not a Jewish museum, though it contains Jewish objects and art by Jewish creators. However, its mission sounds quite similar to those above:

> "The Metropolitan Museum of Art collects, studies, conserves, and presents significant works of art across time and cultures in order to connect all people to creativity, knowledge, ideas, and one another."[160]

The glaring difference is that the mission of the Met does not include the word "Jewish" - though interestingly, neither does that of the USHMM.[161] Like the Skirball, the Met has a set of core values: respect, inclusivity, collaboration, excellence, and integrity. Unlike the Skirball, these values are not supported by biblical prooftexts. This all returns to the question addressed in the Introduction: what is Jewish art? And, what distinguishes it from other art?

For the other side of the comparison, we can turn to Central Synagogue, Rabbi Berman's congregation, which does not have a mission statement but has statements of vision and values:

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158 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a19a4fd8a02c70db7bc18bc/t/5e67c13995aba23ba9392e94/1583857977349/CAJM+history+version+3-10-2020.pdf

159 http://www.cajm.net/about

160 https://www.metmuseum.org/-/media/files/about-the-met/annual-reports/2021-2022/mission-statement-annual-report-2021-22.pdf?sc_lang=en&hash=9EFB954AB368BD347508B474CC1A9243

161 To be fair, other parts of the website mention that the Holocaust mainly, though not exclusively, impacted the Jewish community.

> "Judaism Matters. Central Matters.
>
> Central Synagogue works toward a world in which Judaism is central to our lives and is a profound and positive force for humanity. We are constantly evolving as we pursue that goal. Together, we learn, worship, serve, and continually redefine what it means to be Jewish today, both within our community and far beyond our walls."[162]

In certain ways, this sounds like all of the museum mission statements above. It centers education; 'positive force for humanity' evokes pursuing a just world; redefining Judaism and going beyond the synagogue walls evoke the value of diversity. Declaring the centrality of Judaism in its members' lives and the inclusion of worship make this statement very different from the above.

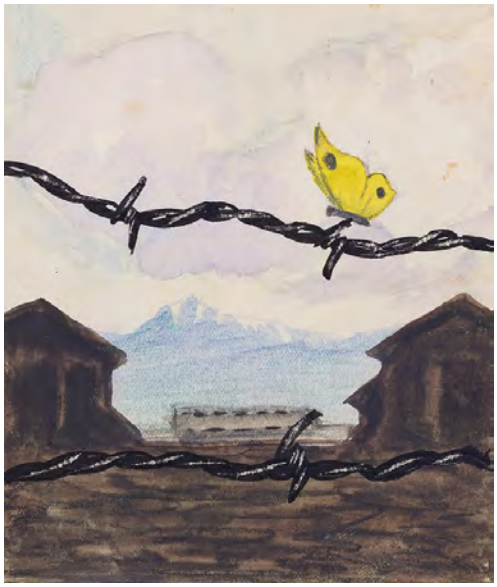
The similarities between a museum mission statement and a synagogue mission statement does not entirely surprise me. Both institutions seek to curate a specific experience for their "patrons." Stereotypically, in a museum, this is through exhibitions while in a synagogue, this is through ritual and worship. However, in both, art can be and already might be a valuable vehicle for the values the institution hopes to convey; it is not the end point. One might argue for the value of art for art's sake, but even this idea seems to be a fallacy. Art, no matter where it is, exists to convey a message bigger than itself, whether that is about a communal experience, the value of beauty, or a connection with the Divine. The early Rabbis knew about the power of art. That is why they sought to keep it far from their flock, so as not to lead them astray. Perhaps, instead, Jewish leaders can use art to bring their flock closer.

Jewish Art as an Educational Tool

There is a distinct category of Jewish art which was created by those who perished in or survived the Holocaust. Anthony Julius calls this an art of witness, where images are used to capture the horrors which survivors endured. Holocaust art can feel out of place in Jewish art collections, not because it is an unimportant part of the Jewish experience, but because it does not necessarily fit with the themes of beauty or Jewish joy. This category can also feel out of place in Holocaust museums which are rife with

[162] https://www.centralsynagogue.org/about-us

facts and figures, dates, stories, photographs, and objects. For example, this painting by Karl Robert Bodek and Kurt Conrad Löw hangs in Yad VaShem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem.[163] Bodek was murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau; Löw survived. They painted this piece, entitled "One Spring," in the Gurs Camp in France in 1941. It is a piece of juxtaposition - the entrapment of the barbed wire against the freedom of the butterfly,the darkness of the buildings against the light pastels of the sky. In this piece, I see the unwavering hope of the Jewish people.



"One Spring" does not provide any facts about the Holocaust; it teaches little about its creators other than this small glimpse into their experience. However, it provides a great insight into the human condition; it allows its viewers to feel what prisoners of the Gurs Camp may have felt. It teaches the deeply Jewish value of resilience. Rabbi Meyer spoke passionately about the power of art as a teaching tool; it helps us to feel and remember in a way that is stronger than other pedagogical methods. Indeed, Yad VaShem offers a curriculum about teaching the Holocaust using art. This is its overview:

> "Focusing on three individual artworks, Elsby demonstrates how exploring the artistic aspects of each painting, together with the context in which they were created and the questions they raise, combine to deepen our understanding of the Holocaust as a human event."[164]

What is important to note, as in the previous discussion of museum mission statements, is that this description does not mention the Jewish people specifically. Art is a language every person can share, no matter their background. The fact that there is so much art from the victims and survivors of the Holocaust is a tool of which Jewish and non-Jewish educators should take full advantage.

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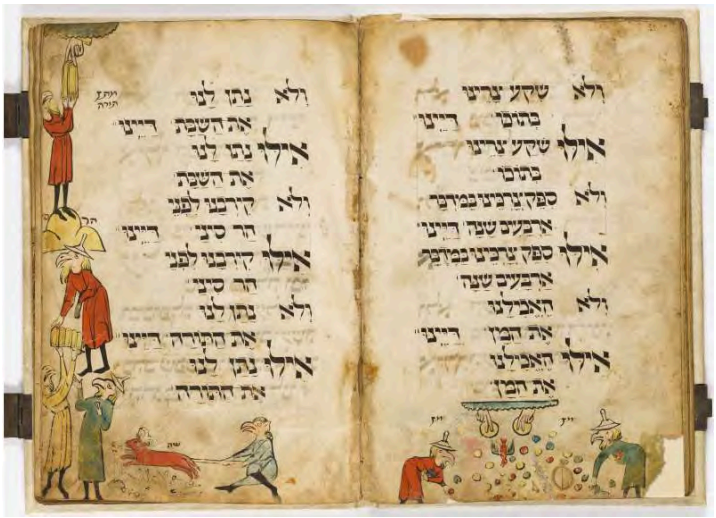
[163] Bodek, Karl Robert and Low, Kurt Conrad. "One Spring." *Art from the Holocaust: Works from the Yad Vashem Collection*.
[164] "Teaching the Holocaust Using Art." *Yad VaShem*.

Art from the Holocaust is but one, relatively recent example of using Jewish art as a teaching tool. It is something that is built into the very foundation of Jewish practice. This is evidenced by the history of the *seder* plate. G-d commanded the celebration of Passover in the book of Exodus with certain rituals and special foods. In the *Mishnah*, the Rabbis solidified the actual ritual of Passover and distilled the *seder* into three core parts: "Rabban Gamliel would say: Anyone who did not say these three matters on Passover has not fulfilled his obligation: the Paschal lamb, *matza*, and bitter herbs."[165] This means that the *seder* leader must explain the connection between each of these foods and the story of the Exodus - and implies that the *seder* participants must eat them. But if every attendee must eat them, how shall they be presented? Initially, the custom was to display these things (as well as an egg, *charoset*, and a leafy green in salt water) in a wicker basket, akin to the basket which held Moses as he floated down the Nile. Around the 16th century, Jews began to use plates instead of baskets. Following the orders of *hiddur mitzvah*, most seder plates today are made of fine materials and beautifully decorated. It is not enough to display the foods; the display must be beautiful.

Historians learned about the origins of the *seder* plate from illuminations in contemporary *Haggadot*, the guide to the Passover *seder*. The *Haggadah* is a Jewish education curriculum in and of itself. It is also typically a richly illuminated book. When I asked her about the Second Commandment, Arielle Stein pointed specifically to the history of illuminated *Haggadot*. The Israel Museum in Jerusalem has a room dedicated to illuminated manuscripts, including many well-known *Haggadot*. One fun example is what is commonly called "The Bird's Head *Haggadah*," a relic of 13th/ 14th century Ashkenaz. Not only is it an early example of illuminated *Haggadot*;



[165] *Mishnah*, *Pesachim* 10

it is the first illuminated *Haggadah* produced separately from a prayer book.[166] The pages included here feature various bird-headed characters acting out the verses of the song *Dayeinu*. One is receiving the Torah, one is gathering *manna* for Shabbat, and so on. If the Haggadah had only given us the order of the *seder*, it would have been enough! But, in the decades following the Bird's Head *Haggadah*, Jews have consistently included images in their *Haggadot*.

The *mitzvot* of many other holidays also center on ritual objects and how they can be used not just for ritual but as teaching tools. This extends beyond the visual arts as well. For instance, the commandment regarding the *shofar* is to hear it, not to sound it; the *mitzvah* is in hearing the music. But it also extends to that which is bigger than any one ritual object. The rules of synagogue architecture have been up for debate since the advent of the synagogue, as evidenced by third century synagogues and by discussions about the topic which are already included in the *Mishnah*. There are certain ritual objects that most every synagogue contains: an ark, a *bimah*, an eternal light, etc. These all can and should be used as teaching tools. The ark is not only present during prayer services, and the *Torah* within is not its only value. Students should be brought to the ark when learning about the *Mishkan* or about becoming b'nei mitzvah. Students should consider why their synagogue's ark looks the way it does and what feelings the design of the ark evokes.

In addition to what it can teach us about our own communities and the shared history of the Jewish people, synagogue architecture provides a glimpse into the lives of other Jewish communities across time and space. The Rabbis knew this too, as so many of their comments and *responsa* revolve around how their communities integrated elements of the surrounding culture into their houses of worship: through mosaics, embroidery, stained glass, and the structure of the buildings themselves. There is a different type of learning that happens when a ritual object is also seen as a piece of art. It teaches about how context deeply impacts the Jewish people. It teaches students to look at the world through different lenses and to always ask questions. And, it teaches the sacred value of *hiddur mitzvah*.

[166] https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/199815-0

Jewish Art as a Healing and Identity Affirming Tool

Above, I spoke about art of the Holocaust as a powerful teaching tool. However, art is not only created for the benefit of the creator; it is also created as a means for the artist to express what cannot be said in words. In short, art can be a pathway to healing. Looking at Bodek and Löw's piece, the viewer does not know if the artists actually saw a butterfly that day in the camp, but through depicting a real or imagined butterfly, the two men were able to remind themselves of the importance of hope even in the darkest times. Art as a tool for coping with immense tragedy is a powerful defense of the kind of Jewish art which was deemed degenerate by the Nazis. One should never forget the very real emotions behind every piece of art.

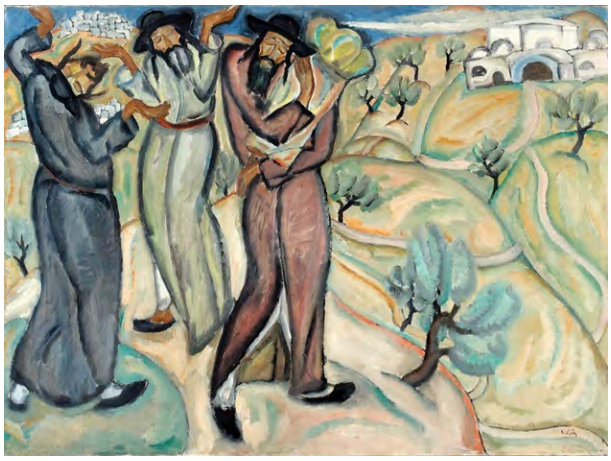
Still today, art is used to process tragedy and trauma in the Jewish community. For example, Hinda Mandell and Ellen Dominus Broude organized the Jewish Hearts for Pittsburgh project in the wake of the Tree of Life/ Or l'Simcha synagogue shooting in 2018. In a moment when people did not know how to cope with the worst antisemitic attack in American history, Mandell and Broude devised a tactile response. Through their efforts, thousands of crafted Jewish stars with hearts in the center were hung throughout Pittsburgh. Their idea has been replicated again and again. Even though antisemitism seems, at times, everpresent, art is one of the most powerful tools we have in healing from tragedy. In the wake of Hamas' brutal attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, this continues to ring true. One of the most powerful examples of art as healing in the midst of this tragedy has been an installation set up in communities across the world; it features an empty Shabbat table with chairs for each of the hostages still in captivity. Some of the place settings include objects personalized to the hostages, like high chairs and toys for the youngest victims.[167] When tragedy feels far away or close to home, art is more tangible than thoughts or prayers.

Art is often used as a means for Jews to better understand their identities. As previously mentioned, the first academic institution established in the modern state of Israel was the Bezalel Academy. Upon Israel's founding, an Israeli art movement quickly emerged. In the aftermath of the Holocaust and the emergence of a new world order, in

[167] More about the installation and the organization behind it, Mosaic United, can be read here: https://www.timesofisrael.com/200-seat-empty-shabbat-tables-set-for-hostages-held-by-hamas/.

a time where global Jewry had the option to no longer live in the Diaspora, Israel needed to figure out its national identity. So in part, it turned to art, as so many nations have done in their early years. The first wave of Israeli art has a very specific tone. It has a warm color palette, steeped with browns and greens. It sought to clearly characterize the "New Jew" as strong, hard-working, and beautiful. Ephraim Moshe Lilien, commonly referred to as the first Zionist artist, embodies these ideals in his work which includes depictions of powerful biblical characters.

The first wave of Israeli art also shares certain themes. Many of its pieces include depictions of hard labor, traditional Jewish characters in modern contexts, and the beauty of the Israeli landscape. Reuven Rubin, one of the first Israeli artists, encapsulates both the tones and the themes of Israeli art in his piece "Dancing with the Torah at Mount Meron." He puts traditional Jewish figures in their new context of the modern state of Israel. He contrasts the ancient Torah with new construction and the joy of dancing with the backbreaking labor of cultivating an olive grove. Jewish Israelis are not alone in using art to understand their identity. Jews in every place synthesize their identity - whether old or new - through the creation of art.



Conclusion

When I began my research, I conceived of Bezalel - the artisan - as a model for the rabbinate. He is, like Moses and Aaron, a biblical prototype of leadership.[168] Instead of sacrifice or law, Bezalel guided the people in physical creation and artistry. G-d chose him to bring the people closer to holiness. That is how Rashi explains the three qualities with which Bezalel was endowed: "*hochmah* - what a person hears from others and learns; *t'vunah* - understanding a concept on his own amidst all the other things he has learned; *da'at* - holy spirit [or Divine inspiration]."[169] In essence, this is what the rabbi of today does: learns from others; comes to their own conclusions; and creates holy connections.

What I have discovered is that it is more accurate to conceive of Bezalel beyond the traditional Jewish leadership model which began with Moses, continued with the priests and the prophets, and ultimately evolved into the figure of rabbi we know today. There are lines of connection between the role of Bezalel and the role of the rabbi: to bring the community together; to make Judaism accessible; to shape the mundane into the holy. It is similar to how the many roles of artist connect to the many roles of rabbi; for example, both require the presentation of a specific viewpoint amidst a vast base of information. Throughout my research, I have also considered how the functions of an artist overlap with the functions of a Jewish leader and the functions of just being a Jew. Both Judaism and art have an unfortunate tendency of pushing away those who have a desire to join based on skill or knowledge. Both exist in a broad base of tradition but must be influenced by current trends and personal experience. Both have an element of the holy, of something that is beyond comprehension, and is bigger than any individual.

In finding these parallels, I realized that Bezalel is certainly a link in the chain of Jewish tradition, but it does not do justice to his contributions to lump him in with the path which led to the rabbinate. When we do this, it is too easy to say that simple arts

[168] Exodus 31:1-6
[169] Rashi on Exodus 31:3

and crafts for Jewish children or a beautiful sanctuary are enough to connect Jews to Judaism. They are not. The arts should not be a short-term project or a temporary tool used by Jewish leaders in children's education. They should be celebrated and used in a way that helps Jews of all backgrounds develop a deeper understanding of themselves as Jews.

Not every Jewish leader is a Bezalel. In fact, for centuries, the Rabbis attempted to distance themselves from Bezalel and his project. In part, this might have been because of the devastation wrought by the destruction of the Second Temple. Because its design inspiration is traced back to the *Mishkan*, perhaps it was simply too painful to think of the beauty that had been. Another reason was the Rabbis' determination to differentiate the Jewish people from other peoples. When the Greeks and Romans expressed their religious beliefs through what the Rabbis considered to be idolatry, Jews had to make every effort to distance themselves from those pieces. When Christians depicted the Jewish G-d and G-d's son figuratively, Jewish art firmly turned away from any depiction of G-d or G-d's creations. The Second Commandment was a useful tool for erasing Bezalel's legacy. The prohibition of graven images took such precedence that it can be found throughout the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, while Bezalel is barely present.

However, the outside world always has a way of creeping into Judaism. In the *Torah*, the Israelites created a Golden Calf, defying the law before it was even set. In the Greek and Roman periods, the Rabbis found ways to accept idolatry as a necessary part of society, as in the infamous Rabban Gamliel bathhouse story. And there is the early record of synagogues, including mosaics of images, at which the Jews of today balk. Throughout the Middle Ages, the responsa literature indicates a divide between leadership and laity as synagogue decor developed; while Jews desired figurative images in their synagogues, their Jewish authorities stood firmly by the Second Commandment. The laity requested justification from their authorities - not permission - in making their diasporic synagogues beautiful. The value of *hiddur mitzvah*, which is only briefly defined in the *Talmud*, becomes the justification - bring in art if art will demonstrate dedication to G-d. As texts became more readily available with the advent of the printing press, so did Jewish art.

In the modern era, art came to hold an important place in Judaism, perhaps in part because Judaica became more commodified. As Judaism entered the home in a

more personal and tangible way, Jews wanted their Jewish ritual objects to be beautiful. For example, *ketubot* became more intricate over time as printing and artisans became more accessible. Items like the needlepoint kit of a rabbi which Eichler-Levine described made it possible for Jews to craft their own Jewish art. Perhaps less cynically, this shift can be seen as one aspect of the acceptance of "art for art's sake" and the revaluation of art as a valid and important cultural pursuit. Even more, art began to be seen as a way to express that which cannot be expressed with words. Art became a means of communication and connection for those for whom other means did not work as successfully. So we have the Bezalel Academy which crafted a visual Zionist identity and the Jewish crafting movement in America which created a new option for Jewish engagement.

Bezalel runs through all of this. He sits like a conscience on the shoulder of the rabbinate, whispering bits of inspiration. Art was ever-present in Judaism even as our ancestors wandered in the desert. Art has always been a way for people to connect with the ineffable. Today, Jewish leaders have the freedom to follow Bezalel's model; they are no longer limited to the prototypical model shaped by the Rabbis of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods. For this, we can thank the 20th century expansion of the rabbinate to women, the LGBTQ+ community, Jews of color, and so on. As our tent expanded, so did what occurred inside.

Today, we have Jewish artists, like Nancy Katz, who fully exist in the model of Bezalel; they use art to make Judaism accessible, as Bezalel used the *Mishkan* to make G-d accessible. We also have rabbis who have learned from Bezalel's model and live out his legacy. Some committed themselves to the arts even before they committed themselves to the rabbinate, but now can share both with their congregants. Rabbis who learn from Bezalel are able to expand even beyond the traditional synagogue model, like Rabbi Beaumont Shapiro, who knows how engaging Jewish art can be even for those who otherwise would not be connected to Jewish communities.

Ultimately, any Jewish leader can choose to hear Bezalel's call through the ages or fully model themselves on him. Jewish leaders *should* choose to listen to Bezalel because the contemporary activities done in his spirit have been proven effective. They are engaging. They inspire creativity. They foster a unique sense of ownership. They promote self-reflection and healing. They bring individuals together. They infuse

Judaism with joy and a renewed sense of purpose. Art has the power to cross countless boundaries which might otherwise seem impermeable.

Paths for Further Research

There are many Jewish leaders in the field whom I would have loved to interview. Though I am happy with the career diversity of my interviewees, I know the list could have been even broader. Here are just a few individuals with whom I hope to speak in the future and whose work is certainly relevant to this line of research.

- Rabbi Adina Allen: co-founder of the Jewish Studio Project which "cultivates creativity as a Jewish practice for spiritual connection and social transformation"[170]
- Rabbi Matt Green: rabbi at Congregation Beth Elohim (Brooklyn, NY) who founded The New Jewish Culture Fellowship, an outgrowth of Brooklyn Jews which seeks to support contemporary Jewish artists[171]
- Rabbi Kendell Pinkney: theater-artist and founding director of The Workshop, "North America's first arts fellowship centering the work of JOCISM (Jews of Color, Jewish-Indigenous, Sephardi & Mizrahi) artists & culture-makers"[172]
- Rabbi Shmuel Polin: recent HUC ordinee whose capstone project was recreating an ark which was destroyed in the Holocaust[173]
- David Wander: New York-based artist who works closely with rabbis in interpreting text through illumination; he is best known for his *Haggadah in Memory of the Holocaust* (1985)[174]

I also recognize that I was limited by the confines of my topic, specifically by focusing on the visual arts. In order to move forward with this research, I would be interested in tracing the history, speaking with leaders in the field, and creating suggestions for other types of art as well. Ones that came up throughout my research

[170] https://www.jewishstudioproject.org/
[171] https://www.brooklynjews.com/culture
[172] https://theworkshopny.com/corefellowship
[173] https://judaicainthespotlight.com/meet-the-artist-rabbi-rabbi-shmuel-polin/
[174] https://www.davidwanderart.com/

were music, theater, baking, digital media, and creative writing. Within the visual arts, I would also be interested in pursuing certain fields further such as textual illumination (certainly, there is much to be said around *Haggadot* if not other texts), sculpture (the Bezalel Academy, especially, has a fascinating approach), and architecture. The distinction between crafting and the fine arts arose multiple times; I wonder if there is more to be said there from a Jewish perspective as well.

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Pesachim 10

Pirkei Avot 3:7

Talmud (William Davidson Edition)

Avodah Zarah 42b

Avodah Zarah 43a

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