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Beauty And The Rabbis

Peretz Wolf-Prusan

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for Ordination.

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

1990

Referees:

Professor Eugene Mihaly

Professor Richard Sarason

Digest: Beauty And The Rabbis

Influential icons in the fields of western history, philosophy and the arts claim that "Jewish Art" is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms engendered by the Second Commandment's prohibition of graven images which, they maintain, yields a ban on Jewish artistic expression. Yet, we have ample evidence in Jewish culture for keen sensual perception, abundant artistic talent, and the production of objects of great beauty. These critics cannot find the art and beauty in Jewish culture because their individual ethos is far out of line with Jewish aesthetics. Jewish art is an ethnic expression which derives its ethos from the same basic source that defines Judaism, namely the rabbinic literature and culture. Therefore, the ethos of the Jewish artist is only understandable, even recognizable, if one is familiar with the rabbinic core values of life and beauty.

Our search for an understanding of the rabbinic concept of beauty is centered in the literature of late antiquity, and it is here we find the imperative of hiddur mitzvah, making the commandments sensually extraordinary. Hiddur mitzvah is the rabbinic mandate for the aesthetic. To perceive Jewish art one must understand the world view of rabbis, and so this thesis is an investigation of the ethos of the Rabbis which seeks to uncovering of their aesthetics. It begins with a discussion of the myth of the Second Commandment and pursues the meaning of hiddur mitzvah,

"beautifying the mitzvot" as a rabbinic requirement, and investigates the manner by which Jews were allowed to attempt to perform it. Then it explores the aesthetics of beauty as distinguished from other categories in western philosophy, and seeks to ascertain what true "beauty" is for the rabbis as revealed in the rabbinic literature.

After establishing a taxonomy of beauty, the thesis surveys the contrast between the decorative and the expressive in the physical arts and how the rabbis value expressive art which evokes feelings and ideas. Then the question of the significance of the Temple experience for the function and form of the expressive symbols of Jewish art is explored, followed by an investigation into how the rabbis treat each of the appurtenances of holiness as bridges to God and in part symbolic building blocks of the Temple as they rebuild it in the hearts of the Jewish people through symbolic forms and actions.

Finally, the thesis follows the rebuilding in the life of each Jew of the idealized Temple through the beautiful performance of mitzvot, and dicusses how hiddur mitzvah is a necessary component in Jewish life that establishes the aesthetic criteria for Jewish art. The thesis concludes with an address on the greatest contemporary threat to hiddur mitzvah and the place of beauty and aesthetics in modern Jewish life.

A Few Notes of Gratitude

To Dr. Eugene Mihaly,

Who pointed me in the direction of the rabbinic literature to seek out hiddur mitzvah and thereby provided the roots in which to base this thesis and the wings upon which it flies.

To Dr. Richard Sarason,

Who guided me through the difficult waters of rabbinic thought and aesthetic philosophy with great hesed and enthusiasm, and who taught me that good writing is only a prelude to fine re-writing.

To all the Jewish artists I have had the pleasure of knowing,

You have been the keepers of hiddur mitzvah, and knew all along that your artistry is an avenue as potent as prayer.

To my children, Leora, Tali and Noah,

You have wondered when abba is going to finish, well, I'm finished.

To Becki,

When I first reviewed previous rabbinic theses I was astounded by the praises heaped upon the writers' spouses. Now I know why they sung these songs of praise. My turn has come to express in limited form my enormous love and gratitude:

Para amarnos en una tierra bella
muy bella, no solo por ella,
sino por tu en ella.

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Introduction

The Gordian Knot of Art and Judaism

Among the legends of the ancient Greeks is the story of the peasant Gordius who was chosen King of Phrygia. In the spirit of thanksgiving, Gordius dedicated his wagon to the god Jupiter. He firmly fastened the wagon's yoke to a beam with a rope of bark. In fact, he tied this rope so ingeniously that no one could ever untie it! This is the origin of the famous "Gordian Knot," a conundrum that cannot be resolved.

However, the full meaning of the phrase comes from the story's continuation, in which Alexander the Great figures. The Oracle told Alexander that whoever could undo the Gordian Knot would rule all of Asia. Alexander the Great sized up the situation, and decided on the correct approach to the problem. He drew his sword and slashed the knot in a stroke.

A curious phenomenon occurs when art, beauty, and Judaism are drawn together in discussion. Arguments begin as to whether or not there is such an entity as Jewish Art, and whether beauty itself is a value in Judaism. Forces pulling in opposite directions on the question of the place of aesthetics in Judaism cinch our Gordian knot tighter and tighter.

The words and opinions of influential icons in the fields of history, philosophy and the arts form one opposing force. They claim "Jewish Art" to be an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms engendered by the Second Commandment's prohibition of graven images which, they maintain, yields a ban on Jewish artistic expression. For example, one such voice belongs to Sigmund Freud, who wrote that for the Jews the prohibition against making an image of God:

> signified subordinating sense perception to an abstract idea; it was a triumph of spirituality over the senses; more precisely, an instinctual renunciation accompanied by its psychologically necessary consequences.[1]

Similarly, the Renaissance art historian Bernard Berenson wrote that:

> The Jews, like their Ishmaelite cousins the Arabs, and indeed perhaps like all pure Semites (if such be), have displayed little talent for the visual, and almost none for the figurative arts.[2]

Even if a Jewish artist was unable, according to Freud, to subordinate sense perception to an abstract idea, there isn't enough skill, according to Berenson, to create anything. Fortunately, we have ample evidence in Jewish

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[1] Sigmund Freud, Moses and Monotheism (New York, 1939), p.144.

[2] Bernard Berenson, Aesthetics and History. (New York, 1954) p. 180.

culture for keen sensual perception and abundant artistic talent.

The oft-quoted prooftext of those pulling for a ban is the "Second Commandment," (Exodus 20:4):

> You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.

The following midrash, read in isolation from the Rabbinic literature, supports this view:

> "You shall not make for yourself a graven image." This means that he shall not make one that is engraved. But may he make one that is solid? No, since Scripture says: "nor any likeness."
>
> May he make then a likeness of the angels or the Cherubim or Ofanim? No, since Scripture says: "which is in the heaven."
>
> As for that phrase, one might think that it refers only to the sun, moon, stars, and planets; therefore it says: "above," meaning, not the likeness of the angels or the Cherubim or the Ofanaim. Now, though likenesses of those things are forbidden, may he make a likeness of the depths and the darkness? No, since Scripture says: "in the water under the earth."[3]

This text prohibits the creation in form of the images of celestial and sub-terrestrial beings. Of that which is terrestrial, that is, the world in which we live, there is no

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[3] Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael, BaChodesh, Chapter 6.

mention. This is an important omission, for arguing against the presumptions of those who denigrate the idea of Jewish art is a radiant mosaic of images from the collective Jewish experience. Here is a silver coin from the Second Jewish War (132-5 CE) with a depiction of the Temple on one side and a lulav on the other, there are some bright blue tiles of the zodiac symbols from the Byzantine Bet Alpha synagogue. Over here, a gilded page from the fifteenth-century German Yahudah Haggadah, and next to it a 1648 Ketubah from Rotterdam illuminated with biblical scenes.

I recall the glass display case inside my parents' synagogue that contains a silver sculptured ethrog holder, a pair of black tefillin, a white tallit, a cut glass kiddush cup, and a megillah scroll. I remember the scroll best of all. The Hebrew letters were simple and elegant. The illuminations bordering the text were inventive and filled with color. The scribe who formed them had never read Freud or Berenson. Perhaps these and other critics did not know what they were missing, even if it was right in front of their eyes.

Academic arguments about the possible existence of "Jewish Art" are not our concern.* An illustration from

* For a full discussion the reader should turn to Joseph Gutmann, "Jewish Art: Fact or Fiction," Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal, Volume 35 (1964), pp.

personal experience: While standing in a sculptor's studio, I watched her as she welded a series of copper birds in flight onto the top of what was to be a Torah ark. Parts of the ark, its sides and doors, plus kiddush cups, and pointers lay about, as well as foot-high Hebrew letters in welded copper. A board member of the group sponsoring the work strode into the studio. He looked all around and bellowed, "So where is all this art we're paying for?" The evidence of artistic expression from the Jewish experience lies all around us. This fellow's problem was simply that he could not see it all about him. He was looking for what he expected and could not find it.

A collector of Judaica visiting Sotheby's auction house can bid on an occasional Hebrew manuscript of a psalm. The collector will appreciate the monetary value, perhaps find enjoyment in the color and forms, but little more. The monetary value of the manuscript has increased as it has passed from the artist to the original purchaser to others, and finally to art dealers. But the symbolic value, the religious meaning, has decreased in step. A Jew who is

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49-54; Abel Pann, "Concerning Jewish Art," The Menorah Journal, VI, (1920), p. 220; Franz Landsberger, A History of Jewish Art, Cincinnati, 1946; Stephen S. Kayser, "Defining Jewish Art, " Mordechai M. Kaplan Jubilee Volume (New York, 1953); Harold Rosenberg, "Is There Jewish Art?" Commentary, July 1966; Cecil Roth, Jewish Art, Masadah, Tel Aviv, 1961; Alfred Werner, "Jewish Art Or Jewish Artists," Jewish Book Annual, Vol 5, Jewish Book Council of America.

literate in the Hebrew language of the text and the symbolic language of the forms enjoys the possibility of reaching up with the psalmist as the text praises the ultimate Creator of all.

This perception of the transcendent is dependent upon the observer's aesthetic (and religious) sensibilities. The ability of even a Jew to perceive and appreciate Jewish art is dependent upon his or her sensitivity to Jewish aesthetics. Perception of, and empathy for, the aesthetics of Jewish art are not a function of sophistication. This is an excellent opportunity to question what we mean by art and the perception of it in forms.

Eric Newton[5] has written that humanity is a recorder of the human experience. This is equivalent to saying that we are all artists. You might rebel at this notion, saying, "But I can't draw to save my life." Newton does note that to create a record of experience involves more than a will to record. It involves skill in the making and considerable deliberation long before the act of creation can begin.

Basic to the artist's deliberations, before he or she takes up the brush or lifts the chisel, is the ethos of the artist. Ethos is the sum total of our ideals, ethics, and

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[5] Eric Newton, The Arts of Man, (New York, 1960) p. 11.

core principals, the basic values within each of us that are ultimately revealed when we use artistic skill to record the human experience. The human experience is interpreted according to the ethos of the artist. The artistic product is interpreted according to the ethos of the observer.

How each of us is touched by a work of art varies according to our ability to perceive the work as a product of the artist's intent. Michelangelo's Pieta may touch me as a mother grieving for her slain son, but for a devout Catholic this is a fundamental experience of faith upon which the Catholic perception of the world is based. A Shiite Moslem may interpret the Pieta, and any other any sculpture, as heresy, for reasons which are integral to the Islamic world view. So too the ethrog and lulav depicted in the mosaic floor of Dura Europos or held in the hand during Sukkoth today have a significance lost on the observer outside of Jewish practice. A Jewish symbol, in this case an ethrog, is someone else's lemon. This is the problem with art history: the expectation and bias of the historian.

Critics like Berenson, Freud, and our bellowing board member could not find the art because their individual ethos was far out of line with Jewish aesthetics. They sought to fulfill their own expectations and could not. This reminds me of a cartoon in the New Yorker Magazine of two matrons

looking at a wall size, Jackson Pollock-like painting. The caption reads, "Look, I see a bunny!" Unable to appreciate what they were seeing, abstract art, they sought out the concrete and the familiar.

So is the case with the studies of Jewish art. The observer is limited by expectations and intent. The subject has neither. When Jewish art is the subject before Berenson, for example, we must ask who Berenson is. An expert in the field of Italian Renaissance art, Berenson had transformed himself from a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant, arriving in Boston in 1875, to a proper European connoisseur of high culture. Berenson was received into the Catholic Church in January of 1891[6]. Yet Meryle Secrest writes that, as the Holocaust began, Berenson realized that:

> assimilation, the doctrine Berenson fervently preached, had failed. Once a Jew, always a Jew, Hitler seemed to be saying; and Berenson was discovering the same truth, but from another vantage point. He began to ask himself what cultural, religious, and racial factors were pivotal to such a definition and would therefore qualify him as "one of them." He arrived at the conclusion that "at times I seem to myself to be a typical 'Talmud Jew.' ..." At the height of the Holocaust, Berenson was coming to a belated recognition of what had been forfeited when he disowned his birthright.[7]

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[6] Meryle Secrest, Being Bernard Berenson, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979) p. 119.

[7] Being Bernard Berenson, p. 356.

The process of his assimilation and his self-confessed forfeiture deprived him of the ethos to recognize the art of the Jews.

Cultural imperialism often equates the ethnic art of the Western world with all important art. How many times has "Art History" reflected the taste and experience of Christian Europeans, and their descendants in the Americas. Meanwhile, art of Africa, the native American, or Pacific basin peoples is classified as ethnic or folk art. Classifications such as high and low culture, primitive and advanced, art and ethnic art reflect cultural bias. The anthropologist Sally Price observes that museums and writers on art regularly group together the art work of the peoples of the American northwest coast, Oceania, Africa, and the Surinam rain forest, when there is nothing that unifies those arts, except in the Western perception of things[8].

All art is ethnic. The ethnic group is the source for the ethos of the artist. Basic values are drawn, like water from a well, from an ethnos: not an ethnic group in the banal sense of skin color or spicy food, rather the people whom one calls his or her own. For example, when I was an art student in San Francisco in the early seventies, Post-

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[8] Sally Price, Primitive Art In Civilized Places, (Chicago, 1990).

Modernism was the movement of the moment. Its artists and advocates lived in their own ethnic sub-culture which included costume, language, goals and sacred rites and temples (certain galleries and museums). This art was often understandable only within the context of that group. A visitor to this world, really a tourist, needed a lengthy printed guide to comprehend the art created. Moving like an anthropologist in a foreign culture, the average observer often looked for the bunnies.

Jewish art is an ethnic expression which derives its ethos from the same basic source which defines Judaism. This selfsame well from which the Jewish ethos is drawn is the vast ocean of rabbinic literature and culture.

The ethos of the Jewish artist is only understandable, even recognizable, if one is familiar with the rabbinic core values of life and beauty. To become so, one must enter the Jewish world of late antiquity, the world of the rabbis. The Tannaim were six generations of teachers from the first through the third centuries of the common era. Their successors, the Amoraim, were teachers in Palestine and Babylonia who flourished until the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud in about 500 CE. They composed the rabbinic literature of the Midrash and the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds.

Imagine an immense body of water. Falling from high in the sky a stone plummets to its center, causing waves to flow outward towards the distant shore. Similarly, the rabbinic literature radiates from that time, and it has spread outward throughout Jewish history. It has, like the waves, collided with obstacles, had its course altered, even to the extent of nearly vanishing altogether. It always radiates. The rabbinic literature is mediated by all later Jewish literature. Nevertheless, it is the fount for all later literature: responsa, codes, and commentaries. Nahum Glatzer summarizes the main points of classical Judaism, as follows:

> Classical Judaism, as it emerges in Hillel, stands first of all for Torah: its source is the divine revelation to Israel, but its application to the ever-changing conditions of life is in the hands of man; rational knowledge is the tool by which man may approach the law. Under the law, all aspects of life are important; there is no artificial separation between "sacred" and a "secular" realm of life.
>
> Classical Judaism emphasizes learning, which is more than an instrument for the increase of factual knowledge. The Torah is more than a book; the teacher is more than a dispenser, the disciple more than a living recipient of information. The study of Torah is a living bridge between the divine and the human.
>
> In dealing with a fellow-man and with society, classical Judaism requires more than justice: it requires chesed, acts of loyalty, mercy, loving concern, a spirit of renunciation and conciliation. The poor should be helped and the underprivileged protected: by laws and statues, and the loving attitude of their fellow-man. By actions of

chesed, man emulates God.[9]

Glatzer continues, but for our purposes, this is a sufficient account of basic imperatives that visibly radiate even to our day, if we allow ourselves to perceive them.

Therefore, our search for an understanding of the rabbinic concept of beauty is centered in the literature of late antiquity. For included in this list of imperatives should be hiddur mitzvah, making the commandments that embody these imperatives sensually extraordinary. Hiddur Mitzvah is the rabbinic mandate for the aesthetic.

Although the halacha will be in one environment intensified and in another less so, it is the classical rabbinic literature that is constantly interpreted in and through a particular historical circumstance. The Jewish experience has been and will be nothing if not ever changing. The foundation of Jewish civilization, since the redaction of the Talmud, has been the culture of the Rabbis, and their literary genius our anchor.

To perceive Jewish art one must understand the imperatives set forth by the Rabbis. Our Gordian Knot can be

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[9] Nahum N. Glatzer, Hillel The Elder: The Emergence of Classical Judaism, (New York: B'nai B'rith Foundations, 1957), pp. 87 -89.

eliminated by an investigation of the ethos of the Rabbis and an uncovering of their aesthetics.

Chapter 1, " Hiddur Mitzvah: The Rabbinic Aesthetic Imperative," will discuss and dispense with the myth of the Second Commandment and pursue the meaning of Hiddur Mitzvah, "beautifying the mitzvot" as a rabbinic requirement, and investigate the manner by which Jews were allowed to attempt to perform it.

Chapter 2, "The Good, the Fine, the Pleasant, and the Beautiful," will explore the aesthetics of beauty as distinguished from other categories in western philosophy.

Chapter 3, "The Rabbis and the Beautiful," will ascertain what true "beauty" is for the Rabbis, where their categories appear in prime texts from the rabbinic literature and how the rabbis admired physical and natural beauty, or more precisely, physical attractiveness and natural pleasantness of form, as long as these were routes to a higher form of the beautiful.

Chapter 4, "The Rabbis and Art," surveys the contrast between the decorative and the expressive in the physical arts and how the rabbis value expressive art which evokes

feelings and ideas.

Chapter 5, "The Temple in Jerusalem Then and Now," answers the question of the significance of the Temple and the Temple experience for the function and form of the expressive symbols of Jewish art.

Chapter 6, "How An Ethrog Rebuilds The Temple," investigates how the rabbis treat each of the appurtenances of holiness as symbolic building blocks of the Temple as they rebuild it in the hearts of the Jewish people through symbolic forms.

Chapter 7, "The Role of Jewish Art In Jewish Life," follows the rebuilding in the life of each Jew of the idealized Temple in Jerusalem through the beautiful performance of mitzvot, and how Hiddur Mitzvah is a necessary component in Jewish life and establishes the aesthetic criteria for Jewish art.

I conclude with a chapter that addresses the greatest contemporary threat to Hiddur Mitzvah and the place of beauty and aesthetics in modern Jewish life. It is a descriptive critique of what occurs when form and function are isolated from each other and how this contributes to dysfunctional aspects of modern Jewish life. The final word is an address

to those who wish actively to take part in Hiddur Mitzvah as artisans and artists, rabbis and Jewish authorities.

Chapter 1

Hiddur Mitzvah:

The Rabbinic Aesthetic Imperative

Eric Newton has written that the human experience, being invisible and inaudible, cannot be shared until its equivalent has been found in a sensuous symbol. Of course, the same is true for the Jewish experience. Therefore the symbols of Jewish life are not merely ritual objects. They are symbolic of the prime pursuit of the Jewish experience, the covenant relationship berween God and Israel.

The Gordian knot discussed in the introductory chapter is a distraction which prevents the discovery of beauty in the rabbinic literature. While thus tied up, the sensuous symbols cannot be appreciated. From antiquity through the medieval period up to the very present, the rabbinic literature has been interpreted in consonance with time and place. The values and aesthetic philosophy of the rabbis, cryptic to begin with, are obscured by layers of subsequent interpretation. So to understand beauty and the Rabbis, we must rid ourselves of our Gordian knot by following the excellent example of Alexander the Great who cut it apart.

We begin to whittle away at the knot by a close reading of the story of Bezalel, the first Jewish artist of the

Bible, who enters the narrative of the Jewish people in Exodus 35:30:

> See the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Yehudah; and he has filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship; and to contrive works of art, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in the cutting of wood, to make all manner of artistic work.

The Torah contains Newton's requirement for skill in the making of a record of experience. The Midrash explicates the different styles of genius required of the artist and the leader, of Bezalel and Moses.

> Twice Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive instructions from God, and twice he forgot the instructions as he descended. The third time God took a menorah of fire and showed him every detail of it and still Moses could not conceptualize the Menorah. So God told Bezalel and Bezalel built it at once.
>
> Since Bezalel had no trouble at all in fashioning it, Moses cried out. "It was shown to me so many time by the Holy One but I found it was too hard to make. You who did not see it created it out of your own mind! Surely you must have been standing in the shadow of God when the Holy One was showing me how to make it."[1]

Artistic expression is not only possible, it originates from the same source as all creation. Artistic expression is part of the physical world, and just as mysterious. Bezalel's commission was to "make all manner of artistic

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[1] Numbers Rabba 15:40

work." In the first days of the Jewish nation, constituted by the giving of the Torah in the desert, the first Jewish artist received a commission. It was a requisition without qualitative limitations or qualifications, save one. The artistic effort would be extraordinary as Bezalel was "filled with the spirit of God." To be a Jewish artist would require one to stand where Bezalel stood, and to make all manner of artistic work.

We have whittled and now we will cut through. Centuries after Bezalel, Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the Chief Rabbi of Mandatory Palestine, would answer the question of what manner of artistic work is permitted to the Jewish artist. Another Bezalel, this time an Academy of Arts and Design, was founded in 1906 in Jerusalem. Writing from Jaffa to the leaders of the newly founded school[≡], Rav Kook sought to guide them towards beauty while cautioning them that:

> Our nation has always related in a positive and pleasant way to the artistic beauty manifest in the creative works made with the human hands but [our respect for art] is also limited. Even in the more exalted and loftier matters, we are cautious of drunkenness and excessiveness. Righteousness is a guiding light but we read in the Holy Scriptures: "Do not be too righteous"(Ecclesiastes 7:16). Wisdom is the light of our lives yet we say "nor make yourselves overwise" (ibid.). "It is not good to eat too much honey" (Proverbs 25:27). This is the principal that embraces all aspects of the eternal nation's life. We will never sell ourselves to one particular idea to the extent that

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≡ Rav A.Y. Kook Selected Letters, translated by Tzvi Feldman, (Ma'aleh Adumim, Israel, 1986), pp. 190-198.

> we drown in its depth, to the extent that we lose the capacity to give ourselves a limit and to put a boundary to the extent of its authority.

Rav Kook alerts us to the danger of falling into the trap of art of art's sake. This is when art becomes the end-all and be-all. If we were to replace our ethos with another ethos we would cease to be Jewish artists, even perhaps Jews. Coffee-table-size color art books abound with the famous artist who "came from a Jewish family." This is not Jewish art, rather art by a Jewish person.

Rav Kook recognizes the Rabbinic sources to declare that artistic expression is a route to holiness, but a route with a dangerous obstacle. Rav Kook signals us to be aware of the single dangerous risk, particular to the Jewish faith, that is found in the expressive arts, while at the same time clearing the way for creative activity:

> The whole realm of adornment, ornamentation, beautification and painting is permitted to Jews. There is only one limit, one mark, seemingly very long, but distinguished in it quality and not its quantity. This limit conveys much spirituality but does only minimal harm to craftsmanship and art for all the power of its noble purpose. 'All visages are allowed, save the face of man' (Rosh Hashana 24b). In fact, only the sculpture of a complete human face [is prohibited] and there are ways of understanding [by which even this prohibition may be circumvented], such as through the help of a gentile assistant in the final stage of a prohibited sculpture.

To what "noble purpose" is Rav Kook referring? It is the liberating power of the direction that the Rabbis wish

artistic expression and the creation of beauty to take. The Rabbis want the artist to stand in the shadow of God alongside of Bezalel. Like Bezalel, the Jewish artist responds to the original commission, the service of God. The world of the Rabbis is theocentric and not egocentric. The Midrash addresses this directly:

> It is written, "Do not glorify yourself in the presence of kings, and do not stand in the place of great men."[ב]
>
> If a man is to bear himself humbly before a king of flesh and blood, how much more before God. They teach, "Be strong as a leopard, swift as an eagle, do the will of your God who is in heaven," in order to teach you that there should be no pride before God.
>
> Elijah taught, "If a man exalts the glory of God, and diminishes his own glory, God's glory will be exalted and his own too, but if he diminishes God's glory, and exalts his own, then God's glory remains what it was, but the man's glory is diminished."[ג]

Indeed, there is a ban. And it does concern the creation of images, but only when the images cloud and obscure the values and the ethos of the ethnos called the Jews. Now the Second Commandment can be read, this time with the Rabbis. We find Exodus 20:4,

> You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.

[ב] Proverbs 25:6

[ג] Numbers Rabba 4:20

restated in Exodus 20:20:

> You shall not make with Me gods of silver, or gods of gold, you shall not make these for yourselves.[5]

The Babylonian Amora Abbaye[6], comments upon this version of the "Second Commandment":

> The Torah only prohibits the making of the likeness of the four faces together. According to this, a human face by itself should be permitted.[7]

Abbaye refers to the passage in Ezekiel 1:10 where the creature who emerges from the midst of the great cloud of the North has four faces: those of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle. The Talmud continues and asks:

> So how can it be taught: (making the likeness of) all faces is permissible except that of making a likeness of a human face!' Rabbi Judah the son of Rab Joshua said: 'From Rabbi Joshua I learned: "You shall not make "itti, with me," is really "o-ti, me" but the others are permitted.'"

In this passage the Rabbis transform the verse by changing the text from aleph-vav-taf-yod ("with me") to aleph-taf-yod ("me"). Thus they redefine the prohibition of images to mortal attempts to create the physical representation of the divine. Idolatry, not artistry, is the problem.

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[5] Nachmanides claims that the verse reappears to warn against the belief, and construction of, idols.

[6] 278-338 CE, head of the academy in Pumbedita.

[7] TB Avodah Zarah 43b, also TB Rosh HaShana 24b

The philosopher Will Herberg helps us understand idolatry when he writes that:

> Ultimately, all idolatry is worship of the self projected and objectified: all idolization is self-idolization, individual or collective. In exalting the natural vitalities of life, we exalt and lose ourselves in the vitalities of our own nature. In absolutizing the collectivities or movements of which we form part, we but absolutize ourselves writ large. In proclaiming as ultimate the ideas and programs to which we are devoted, we are but proclaiming the work of our minds to be the final truth of life. In the last analysis, the choice is only between love of God and love of self, between a God-centered and self-centered existence. Sin is egocentricity as against theocentricity. It is, in effect, denying God and making oneself in direct or indirect form, the god of one's universe.[8]

For Rabbi Judah idolatry is the reduction of God to the human and for Herberg, the enlargement of the human to the divine. Herberg's statement that "sin is egocentricity as against theocentricity" is succinctly that from which Jewish art is liberated. The rabbinic literature seeks to prevent us from using the arts to lower God to the ordinary or raise ourselves to the divine. With this principle in mind and heart, it is no wonder there simply is no interest in statuary or grand portraiture in Jewish culture. Representational art, as Rav Kook has stated, is not explicitly forbidden by the rabbis of late antiquity. Rav Kook was sitting in a Palestine which was again supporting a

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[8] Will Herberg, Judaism and Modern Man (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1959), p.96

growing Jewish society. He looked past centuries of diaspora legislation to early talmudic discussion. The rabbinic literature is not a code, but a treasury of ideas. Some later authorities issued prohibitions on every sort of image, but the original restriction was an aesthetic one drawn from an ethnic distinction: it is not the way of the Jews, it was the way of the Greeks. The rabbis of late antiquity lived in the Grecco-Roman world in which emperors and heroes were worshipped as divinities and were depicted in statuary. Yet even in this context Abbaye represents a tradition which defends human representation! But all agree that the representation of the Divine in plastic form is not to be done.

The impropriety of lowering God to the ordinary or raising the human to the divine is a key protocol of the rabbis. They would find it an indiscretion in violation of Jewish sensibilities and taste and be repelled. Here is a light illustration: My father was eating borscht one day. I respectfully inquired how anyone could enjoy a glob of white sour cream in a pool of red beets. He said that it was an acquired taste, but I for one wanted no part of it. A more profound example can be found in the work of the Renaissance artist Benozzo Gozzoli (1420-1497) who was commissioned by Piero de' Medici to paint a chapel fresco which became the "Procession of the Magi," in Florence, Italy. The ruling

Medici family's taste permitted them to use their own portraits to represent main characters in the painting. Judaism has acquired aesthetic tastes from the rabbinic literature. For Jews this practice is unseemly and inappropriate. It is not our place to paint ourselves into the sacred past but to act in holiness today. Aesthetic taste is a reflection of basic values and, ethnographically speaking, tastelessness is a direct contravention of core values. In time, and even in the medieval rabbinic literature, the protocol becomes halacha, discretion turns into legislation, and the original aesthetic obtains the force of law.

The central role for the arts in Judaism is not to debase the sacred or exalt the worldly. Jewish art creates images that are symbolic of the human potential to reflect the beauty of the divine. This potential is articulated by the Tannaim in the Mekilta on Exodus 15:2,:

> "This is my God and I will beautify Him." Rabbi Ishmael says, "Is it possible for one of flesh and blood to beautify the Creator? It means I shall be beautiful before God in observing the mitzvot. I will prepare before God a beautiful lulav, a beautiful Sukkah, beautiful tzizith, and beautiful tefillin."

In the Palestinian Tractate Soferim 36b, we read:

> It is obligatory to make beautiful tzizith, beautiful mezuzoth, to write a beautiful sefer Torah with choice ink, with a fine reed-pen by an expert penman on well finished parchments, on dyed skins, and to wrap it in precious silks; for

> Scripture states, "This is my God and I will glorify Him." This means to perform the mitzvot in a beautiful manner before God. Such is the interpretation of Rabbi Ishmael.

The Rabbis target mitzvot as vehicles for artistic expression to create a higher level of beauty. Why mitzvot? Lawrence Hoffman writes that a group's ritual symbols are items that direct their participants immediately and with no commentary or explanation to an awareness of an experience or value that they hold in common.[9] These symbols are portals into the heart and soul of the Jewish experience.

The Talmud incorporates this imperative:

> Rabbi Zera said: "For (doing a mitzvah in) an exemplary manner one should go up to a third (in cost and effort) in its observance."[10]

This is Hiddur Mitzvah, making the mitzvah sensually extraordinary, the Rabbinic aesthetic imperative.

Eric Newton writes that at the precise moment when people undertake the task of translating the invisible, inaudible experience of their existence into sensuous symbols, they are beset by a new urge. This is the urge for harmonious organization which aestheticians call form or design, and which the average person calls beauty. The

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[9] Lawrence A. Hoffman The Art Of Public Prayer (Washington D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1988) pp. 19-20.

[10] TB Baba Kama 9b

performance of mitzvot is primary for the rabbis. Since Hiddur Mitzvah, "beautifying the commandment" is a rabbinic requirement, we must discover what "beauty" is for the rabbis as distinct from other descriptive words.

Chapter 2

The Good, the Fine, the Pleasant, and the Beautiful

Around the dinner table my children say, "I love double chocolate chip ice cream." I can hear myself say in gentle reproof, "I like ice cream, I love you." They look at me and ponder. Then they say, "I love you and I love double chocolate chip ice cream." Well, it is an honest, if silly, effort to reserve the word love for, well, love. I have a friend who refuses to say that she adores anything but God. For her "adore" is a word reserved for worship and not to be wasted on mortal matters. "Love" is a word all too easily wasted. So is "beauty", and therefore the challenge is to understand "beauty" in its fullest extent for us and the Rabbis.

We have levels of love: I love my car, I love my wife, I will love the Lord my God. God's love for humanity and our declarations of love for God together constitute major themes of Jewish liturgy. These levels do not include the banal "make love," "love scene," or "love-in," (although I am just old enough to add that last example without sarcasm). We also use "beautiful" in a variety of expressions: there are beautiful days, beautiful children, and even, again in a banal sense, the "beautiful people." But there are also lovely days and lovely children. How can we create a

taxonomy of categories for the description of sensations? Let us first consider how we today in the west make aesthetic distinctions and then see if a corresponding distinction is made in the early rabbinic literature.

We will begin by referring to Immanuel Kant's[1] distinction, in the second movement to his Critique of Judgment, between the beautiful and the pleasant:

> As regards the pleasant, everyone is content that his judgment, which he bases upon private feeling and by which he says of an object that it pleases him, should be limited merely to his own person. Thus he is quite contented that if he says, "Canary wine is pleasant," another man may correct his expression and remind him that he ought to say, "It is pleasant to me."[2]

Kant presents us with my father's bowl of borscht. Cultural values of physical beauty, the pleasant form, and tasteful appearance vary all over the globe and throughout time. The feminine ideal as painted by Peter Paul Rubens is different from that of the Greeks. Foods considered basic in the United States, like the hamburger, are heresy in India. As for snails, what more must I say: food for some and garden pests for others. The pleasant is transitory and tastes

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[1] 1724-1804. Kant believed that our basic knowledge of the world is obtained through pure reason and empiricism, the theory that all knowledge is ultimately based on sense experience.

[2] Critique of Judgment, translated by J.H. Bernard, (London: Macmillin and Co., 1931). p.51

change. I hated coffee as a youth and now enjoy its aroma and flavor. Let us return to Kant:

> And this is the case not only as regards the taste of the tongue, the palate, and the throat, but for what ever is pleasant to anyone's eyes and ears. To one, violet color is soft and lovely; to another, it is washed out and dead. One man may like the tone of wind instruments, another that of strings. To strive here with the design of reproving as incorrect another man's judgment which is different from our own, as if the judgments were logically opposed, would be folly. As regards the pleasant, therefore, the fundamental proposition is valid: everyone has his own taste.[3]

In the last chapter we discussed taste in the context of idolatry. The Rabbis delineated a cultural and theological distaste for idolatry. It would be tasteless for a Renaissance painter to depict the Madonna as a witch. It would be tasteless for a Jewish artist to reduce God to the terrestrial by means of human representation. It is indeed difficult to explain cultural taste and aesthetic values to those who possess a different ethos and values. This may be why the myth of a ban on art amongst the Jews is so insidious: it is a simple explanation for a subtle phenomenon.

We refer once more to Kant's illustration that mere taste is a different category than the beautiful:

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[3] Kant, p. 53

> The case is quite different from the beautiful. It would be laughable if a man who imagined anything to his own taste thought to justify himself by saying: "This object (the house we see, the coat that person wears, the concert we hear, the poem submitted to our judgment) is beautiful for me." For he must not call it beautiful if it merely pleases him. Many things may have for him charm and pleasantness - no one troubles himself at that - but if he gives out anything as beautiful, he supposes in others the same satisfaction... "[4].

Each of us maintains personal and cultural tastes. There are particulars that I desire and reject based upon my own values. I yearn for or avoid these, having been brought up in a certain cultural milieu. True beauty is a value, which like cultural taste, must be universal to the group rather than particular to the individual. The Rabbis in fact draw distinctions similar to those of Kant, as we find in the following tradition: Rabbi Zutra ben Tobiah said in the name of Rab:

> "What is the meaning of the verse, 'He has made everything good in its time'?[5]
>
> It teaches that the Holy One made each man's trade good in his own eyes.
>
> Rabbi Papa said: 'This is what the people say, "Hang the heart of the palm tree on a pig, and it will do the usual thing with it."'[6]

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[4] Kant, p. 59

[5] Koheleth 3:11

[6] TB Berakot 43b

The personal and cultural tastes of a pig determine its behaviors. Both a delicacy like the heart of palm and slop are consumed in the same manner and without aesthetic distinction. The truly beautiful is, on the other hand, more than what is merely pleasurable. The former is a universally accepted cultural value while the later is a matter of personal taste. Just give a pig the heart of a palm tree and see what happens.

The question then becomes what true beauty is for the Rabbis, not what any one Rabbi believes beautiful for himself, for that is a matter of personal taste. Rather, what is aesthetically beautiful for the rabbinic community which reformulated Judaism after the destruction of the Temple? We have already stated that the experience of the relationship between the metzaveh and the metzuvah, the Giver of the mitzvah and the recipient, between God and Israel, is a central value for the Jewish people. Values require behaviors, and this is especially true within Judaism, since a mitzvah is a commandment to engage in a particular kind of behavior and to abstain from other kinds.

Mitzvot are beautiful and beautify both the metzuvah and the metzaveh, Israel and God, when performed - even more so when performed beautifully. We have noted Kant's categories of the fair, good, and beuatiful. Now we need to describe a

taxonomy of perception in the rabbinic literature, in other words, how do the rabbis define beauty?

Chapter 3

The Rabbis and the Beautiful

The Rabbis admired physical and natural beauty, or more precisely, physical attractiveness and natural pleasantness of form. After all, we read in Genesis 1:31 that "God saw all that He had made, and found it good." We find this blessing in the Talmud:

> Rabbi Judah: "Blessed art Thou who has made Thy world lacking in naught, but has produced therein goodly creatures and goodly trees wherewith to give pleasure (l'hitnaot) unto the children of men."[1]

Please note that I have made a careful distinction between "good" and "beautiful." God made the world tov, "good." And there are indeed "goodly creatures and goodly trees" that give us pleasure. We are part of the "goodly creatures" and provide "pleasure (l'hitnaot) unto the children of men." The Rabbis expressed an open appreciation for human physical attractiveness. Wrapping Jewish men and women in cloaks of black did not occur to the Rabbis of late antiquity. The Rabbis, as we shall see, appreciated physical attractiveness, even sexuality. Yet this pleasure is incomplete. We cannot be really beautiful on the basis of form and figure alone. We have in the Talmud a paridigmatic text:

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[1] TB Berakot 43b

> Rabbi Jochanan ben Nappaha was once swimming in the Jordan. Resh Laquish beheld him and jumped into the Jordan after him. Rabbi Jochanan said, "How much Torah you could learn with such a strong body. Your strength is better suited for Torah study."
>
> He (Resh Laqish), said, "Your attractiveness (shapir) is fit for a woman."
>
> Rabbi Jochanan replied, "If you repent I will ask my sister, who is even more attractive than I am, to marry you."[2]

This is how physical attractiveness (shapir) attracted Rabbi Simeon to become a famous scholar. We observe in this text that a pleasing physical form is a value and that study is a value. When combined, the individual is the embodiment of exemplary beauty. In the taxonomy of the rabbis, ultimate beauty is a combination of interior and exterior beauty.

We find this formula applied in the rabbinic literature to a group of people whose value already is evident. Simply by virtue of who they are they manifest value: the matriarchs and patriarchs. Where in the preceeding example, the value of learning was applied to the physical form of Resh Laquish, now the value of fine figure and pleasing form is applied to our ancestors, who already embody the basic Judaic values. We begin with the mother of us all, Eve:

> Rabbi Azariah and Rabbi Jonathan ben Haggai in Rabbi Isaac's name: Eve's fine physical appearance was transmitted to the reigning beauties of each

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[2] TB Baba Metzia 84a

generation.

Elsewhere it is written, "And the woman was very attractive (yafeh)"[3].

This means that she attained Eve's beauty.

Here in truth it is written, "The Egyptians beheld the woman (Sarah) that she was very physically attractive (yafeh)," which means, even finer than Eve in appearance.[4]

The Rabbis apply the quality of an excellent physical appearance to a series of biblical women:

The Rabbis taught: There have been four women of surpassing beauty (yafefiot) in the world: Sarah, Rahab, Abigail and Esther. One thought Esther was sallow and Vashti should take her place.

Our Rabbis taught: Rahab[5] inspired lust by her name; Jael by her voice; Abigail by her memory, Michal bat Saul by her appearance.[6]

There is a wonderful midrash describing Abraham's attempt to sneak Sarah into Egypt. In Genesis 12, Abraham has passed through the drought-stricken promised land and is on his way to Egypt:

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[3] I Kings 1:4

[4] Genesis Rabba 40:5

[5] It should be mentioned, at least in a note, that the Rabbis had a very clear idea of what kind of physical attraction and effect was involved with Rahab. We find this in TB Megillah 15a:

Rabbi Isaac said, "Whoever says, 'Rahab, Rahab' at once ejaculates!" Said Rabbi Nachman to him, "I say 'Rahab, Rahab,' and nothing happens to me!" He replied, "I was speaking of one who knows her and is intimate with her."

[6] TB Megillah 15a

> As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what an attractive (yafat-mar'eh, literally "good looking") woman you are." If the Egyptians see you and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live.[7]

How good looking was she? The midrash says:

> "And it came to pass, that when Abram was coming to Egypt"[8]. And where was Sarah? He had put her in a box and locked her in it. When he came to the customs-house, they (Egyptian custom agents) demanded,
>
> "Pay the customs dues."
>
> "I will pay," Abram replied.
>
> "You carry garments in that box?"
>
> "I will pay the duty on the garments."
>
> "You are carrying silks!"
>
> "I will pay on the silk."
>
> "You are carrying precious stones!"
>
> "I will pay on the precious stones."
>
> "It is imperative that you open it and we see what it contains!" As soon as he opened it the land of Egypt was irradiated with her splendor (zayin-yod-vav).[9]

A positive version of Pandora's box! Even a woman already known for her lovely appearance becomes more beautiful in rabbinic aggadic elaboration. The Talmud[10]

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[7] Genesis 12: 10-12

[8] Genesis 12:14

[9] Genesis Rabba 40:5

[10] TB Megillah 13a

asks:

> "Why was Hadassah called Esther?"
>
> "Because the nations declared her to be as lovely as a star."

The Rabbis did not ignore the male of the species! If Eve's fine physical appearance is transmitted to future heroines, so is Adam's handsome appearance transmitted to the Patriarchs (even to the Rabbis themselves). We read in the Talmud:

> The handsome appearance of Rabbi Kahana was simply a reflection of handsome appearance of Rab;
>
> The handsome appearance of Rab was simply a reflection of the handsome appearance of Rabbi Abbahu;
>
> The handsome appearance of Rabbi Abbahu was simply a reflection of the handsome appearance of our father Jacob;
>
> and the handsome appearance of our father Jacob was simply a reflection of the handsome appearance of Adam.[11]

And so the handsome form of Adam is passed, although diminshed a bit in each transmission, to Jacob, Jacob to Rabbi Abbahu, Abbahu to Rab, and Rab to Rabbi Kahana. Yet the most infamous of the really good-looking Rabbis would have to be Rabbi Jochanan. He claimed of himself: "I am the only one remaining of the resplendent (shupiray) of

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[11] TB Baba Batra 58a

Yerushalayim." The text agrees, continuing:

> He who desires to see Rabbi Jochanan's resplendence must take a silver goblet as it emerges from the crucible, fill it with the seeds of red pomegranate, encircle its brim with a chaplet of red roses, and set it between the sun and the shade: then its lustrous glow will be like Rabbi Jochanan's resplendence.[12]

We also find that, similar to Sarah, Rabbi Jochanan's resplendence would affect those who came close to it like the warmth from a radiant fire:

> Rabbi Jochanan used to go and sit at the gates of the mikveh. When the daughters of Israel left the bath he would say, "Let them meet me so that they may bear sons as resplendent as I."[13]

In each case the attribute of beauty that is found in the spiritual character of an individual and the attribute of beauty in the physical form are joined to form a higher form of the beautiful. The rabbis attribute beauty and importance even to those meritorius women in the Bible who are Kenites or prostitutes! Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, is blessed by the prophetess Deborah[14] and Rahab the prostitute is married to Joshua and becomes the ancestor of the prophet Jeremiah[15].

We began this inquiry into the lovely and resplendent

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[12] TB Baba Metzia 84a

[13] TB Baba Metzia 84a

[14] TB Nazir 23b

[15] TB Megilah 14b

appearance of the human form after reading words attributed to Rabbi Judah:

> Blessed art Thou who has made Thy world lacking in naught, but has produced therein goodly creatures and goodly trees wherewith to give pleasure unto the children of men.

The following Mishnaic passage is often used to discredit the value, for the rabbis, of appreciating nature:

> Rabbi Jacob said: "He who walks by the way studying and breaks off his study and says: 'How lovely is this tree, how lovely is this tilled soil' is accounted by the Scripture as one who has rendered himself guilty."[16]

It is not hard to see how, in isolation, this appears to be a condemnation of an appreciation of nature. Really what we have here is simply a ranking of values. One very high value is appreciating the works of God's hands, but an even higher value is the study of Torah. Recall Glatzer's analyses of classical Judaism:

> Classical Judaism emphasizes learning, which is more than an instrument for the increase of factual knowledge. The Torah is more than a book; the teacher more than a dispenser, the disciple more than a recipient of information. The Study of the Torah is a living bridge between the divine and the human.[17]

Within Rabbinic culture, study of Torah is the ultimate pursuit. For example, even in grief or joy, study continues

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[16] Avot 3:9

[17] Glatzer, p. 87

unless circumstances make it impossible:

> When scholars are sitting in study, and a funeral procession goes by, or even a wedding parade, they should not interrupt their study if there is a sufficient number for the coffin or the bridal party. But if there are not enough, then the scholars may break from their studies.[18]

It is also important to note that this formula, "How lovely is this tree," makes no reference to God as the creator of the tree. On the other hand, we have evidence in the midrash showing that nature itself has a divine purpose:

> "God said, "All creatures have been created to praise me, as it is said, 'God has made everything for its own end[19].'"[20]

Even Tractate Avot, which includes a condemnation of interrupting study to contemplate nature, indicates an aprreciation of the divine source of beauty in creation:

> All which the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world He created only for his own honor.
>
> As it is said, "Everything that is called by my name, and that I have created for my own honor, I created it and fashioned it"[21].
>
> And it says "The Lord will rule for ever and ever[22]."[23]

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[18] Avot de Rabbi Natan, rescention B, chapter 8 (edition Shecter) p. 11b

[19] Proverbs 16:4

[20] Tanhuma Vayikra, edition Buber, 5b

[21] Isaiah 43:7

[22] Exodus 15:18

Nature itself is a tribute to its Creator. The appreciation of a creator's creation is a way to appreciate the creator. In fact, the Rabbis proclaim in the Talmud that to appreciate anything created without giving the creator His due is very wrong indeed:

> Rabbi Chanina b. Papa said: "One derives joy from the world without a blessing is like a thief to the Holy One Blessed Be He, and the community of Israel.
>
> It is written, "Who robs his father or his mother and says 'It is no transgression' is a companion of the destroyer."[24]
>
> "His father" can only mean the Holy One Blessed be He, as it is written, "Is not he your father who brought you?"[25]
>
> While "his mother" can only be the Community of Israel, as it is written "My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother[26]."[27]

Even physical attractiveness is appreciated by the rabbis, regardless of race, creed, or color:

> Rab said, "One is forbidden to say 'How pleasant (nun-aleph-hay) is that idolatress!"
>
> The following objection was made:

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[23] Avot 6:11

[24] Proverbs 28:24

[25] Deuteronomy 33:2

[26] Proverbs 1:8

[27] TB Berakot 35a, and also TB Sanhedrin 102a

> It happened that Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel[29], while standing on the step of the Temple mount, saw a heathen woman of a very goodly form (na'ah) and said:
>
> "How great are your works, O Lord"[27]
>
> Likewise when Akiba saw the wife of the wicked Tineius Rufus[30], he spat, then laughed, then wept.
>
> "Spat" because she began from a fetid drop[31]; "laughed" because he foresaw that she would become a proselyte and that he would marry her; "wept" that such a attractive form (shapira) would decay into dust.
>
> What then of Rab's ruling? (There is no contradiction, because) Each simply offered thanksgiving. For a master has said: He who sees pleasing creatures should say "Blessed be He who has created such in His Universe"[28].

The Rabbis acknowledge the physical attractiveness and pleasing form of the human body, but they insist that it is the Creator to whom praise is to be given.

We have seen that the entire world is a paean of praise to the Creator. When we enjoy it and benefit from it we

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[27] Psalm 104:24

[30] The Governor of Judea in the first century CE

[31] As in Pirke Avot 3:1 "Akavy ben Mahalalel said: 'Keep in view three things and you will not come under the power of sin. Know from where you have come from and where you are going. Know before whom you are to stand before in for judgement and consideration. "From where you have come," a fetid drop. "Where you are going," to the place of dust worms and maggots.'"

[28] TB Berakot 58b

acknowledge this with a blessing. The Talmud[33] comments on Mishna Berakot 6:1,

> "What blessings are said over fruit? Over the fruit of the tree one says, 'Who creates the fruit of the tree,' except for the wine, over which one says, 'who creates the fruit of the vine.'
>
> Over that which grows from the ground: 'Who creates the fruit of the ground,' except for bread, one says 'Who brings forth bread from the earth.'
>
> Over vegetables, 'Who creates the fruit of the ground.' Rabbi Judah says instead, 'Who creates different kinds of herbs.'"

by asking:

> "From where do we learn this? As the Rabbis have taught: 'In the fourth year all its fruit will be set aside, holy, for praises to the Lord."[34] This (the plural "praises") means that they require a blessing both before and after partaking of them.
>
> Rabbi Akiba said: 'One is forbidden to taste anything before saying a blessing over it.'"

Not only do the Rabbis spend extraordinary effort to determine the correct blessing for every kind of food, but as we have already seen, they do this even for beholding non-Jewish women of radiant appearance[35]. In addition there are

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[33] TB Berakot 35a

[34] Leviticus 19:24. As part of the legislation for the Israelites when would live in the land of Israel, this rule forbids for human consumption of the harvest all fruit until its fifth year.

[35] As we have read previously, Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel, while standing on the step of the Temple Mount, saw a heathen woman of a very goodly form and said: "How great are your works, O Lord."

different blessings for seeing the Sages of Israel[36], non-Jewish kings[37], elephants or apes[38], and lightning[39].

Even the works of human hands can be pleasant and pleasing, as here the case of the bread of non-Jewish bakers:

> Rabbi Kahana said in the name of Rabbi Jochanan: Their (non-Jews) bread was not permitted by the Court. Is it to be deduced from this statement that anybody does allow it? Yes, because when Rabbi Dimi came he said, "On one occasion Rabbi went out into the field, and a heathen brought before him a loaf of bread baked in a large oven from a se'ah of flour. Rabbi exclaimed: How very pleasant is this loaf..."[40]

We even have the ability to take the elements of creation and refashion them to be more pleasing to ourselves. We find Rabbi Akiba and a unnamed Roman discussing circumcision. When the Roman observes that the need to circumcise is proof that human beings, part of God's creation, are imperfect, Akiba responds that:

> To man the work of man is more appealing than the work of God's; and, putting before his opponent a sack of wheat on one side and a row of very

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[36] TB Berakot 58a: "Blessed be He who imparted wisdom to those who fear God."

[37] "Blessed be He who has imparted of His Glory to His creatures"

[38] TB Berakot 58b: "Blessed is He who makes strange creatures"

[39] TB Berakot 59a: "Blessed is he whose strength and might fill the world."

[40] TB Avodah Zarah 35b

appealing pastry on the other, he asked the Roman to make his choice."[41]

It should be noted that the brit milah is not a cosmetic change, rather it is the sign of the covenant between the sons of Abraham and God. It is also an avenue for beautification mentioned in the midrash[42] on the verse "You are beautiful my love[43]." The midrash says that we can be beautiful through mitzvot, and among them is being "beautiful through the law of brit milah." The works of our hands, be they in the sacred act of the brit milah or in the writing of a sefer Torah or in the fashioning of a lulav, can be beautiful.

Thus far we have found the Rabbis professing a deep appreciation for the loveliness of nature, its flora and fauna, all of which are of God's handiwork. The words used all described loveliness, handsomeness, and attractiveness. People can be resplendent and radiant, and even more so when physical attractiveness is combined with higher values such as Torah. What of beauty?

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[41] Midrash Tanhuma: Tazria

[42] Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba 1:15

[43] Shir Ha-Shirim 1:15

Earlier we read from the Talmud that Rabbi Jochanan said to Simeon ben Laqish, "Return in repentence (to study) and I will ask my sister, who is even more attractive than I am, to marry you." Thus, his physical attractiveness is only a preliminary step to beauty, only achieved when he became a scholar. Handsomeness led to the mitzvah of Torah study. Now he has the opportunity to become beautiful. We can propose at least two levels of beauty that are acknowledged in the rabbinic literature. The first is the collective of adjectives that are attached to all God's creations, as we have described in this chapter. The second is when natural beauty combines with or leads to the observance of mitzvot. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that:

> "The perception of beauty may well be the beginning of the experience of the sublime. The sublime is that which we see and are unable to convey. It is the silent allusion of things to a meaning greater than themselves. It is what things ultimately stand for... It is that which our words, our forms, our categories can never reach."[44]

It is a mitzvah to dwell inside the sukkah. This is the imperative given by the metzaveh, God. When a Jew performs and experiences the mitzvah, the mitzvah acts as a bridge to join metzuvah and metzaveh together. Heschel defines beauty itself as a bridge to the sublime, and so a beautiful sukkah may act to form even a finer bridge.

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[44] Abraham Joshua Heschel God In Search Of Man (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1976) p. 39

The taxonomy of the rabbis places attractiveness and fairness of physical form, the splendor of the natural world, and beauty into different catagories. Without using the language of aesthetics employed by later philosophers, they delineated the beautiful as an ultimate catagory in the language of their literature.

As all translation is interpretation, the task is to determine what words used by the rabbis in which context are to be understood as meaning beauty. The Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael[45], the Babylonian Talmud[46], and Midrash Song of Songs Rabba[47], contain the primary rabbinic traditions which encompass the aesthetics of beauty.

The Mekilta text is Shirata, the commentary on the Song of the Sea, specifically on Exodus 15:2: "This is my God and I will glorify Him."

> "This is my God and I will beautify (read midrashically from beauty, nun-vav-yod) Him." Rabbi Ishmael says, "Is it possible for a man a flesh and blood to beautify his Creator? It means I shall be beautiful before God in observing the commandments. I will prepare before God a beautiful lulav, a beautiful Sukkah, beautiful

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[45] Tannaitic text from the third century of the common era.

[46] Amoraic from 200 to 500 CE

[47] Byzantine, from between the fifth to seventh centuries of the common era.

tzizith, and beautiful tefillin."[48]

This tradtion is found again in a slightly different form in the Talmud[49]:

> "This is my God and I will beautify Him (Exodus 15:2)" means beautify yourself before God in observing commandments: Make a beautiful Sukkah before God, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, beautiful tzizith.
>
> A beautiful Sefer Torah, and written with fine ink, with a fine reed pen, by a skilled scribe, and bound in fine silks."

And Midrash Shira ha-Shirim Rabba, 1:15:

> "You are beautiful my love" (Shir Ha-Shirim 1:15), 'You are beautiful through mitzvot, both positive and negative, beautiful through loving deeds, beautiful in your house with the heave-offerings and the tithes, beautiful in the field through the commandments about gleaning, the Forgotten Sheaf and Second Tithe;
>
> Beautiful in the law about mixed seeds and tzizith, and about first fruits, and the fourth year planting;
>
> Beautiful in the law of brit milah, beautiful in tefillah, and in the reading of the Sh'ma, in the law of mezuzoth and the tefillin, in the law of the lulav and the ethrog;
>
> Beautiful too, in repentance and in good works. Beautiful in this world and beautiful in the world to come."

Now, let us back up a bit and look at our texts again, the Mekilta, Babylonian Talmud Shabbat, and Songs of Songs

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[48] Mechilta D' Rabbi Ishmael. Edited by H.S. Horowitz and I.A. Rabin, (Breslau, 1930); (reprint Jerusalem, 1960), p. 127.

[49] TB Shabbat 133b

Rabba, but now in transliterated Hebrew:

> Mekilta: "Zeh Eli v'anvey-hu," Rabbi Ishmael: "I will prepare before God a lulav na'ah, a Sukkah na'ah, tzizith na'ah, and tefillin na'ah."
>
> Shabbat 133b: "Zeh Eli v'anveyhu," beautify yourself (hitna'ah)" before God in mitzvot. Make a sukkah na'ah before God, a lulav na'ah, a shofar na'ah, tzizith na'ah.
>
> A Sefer Torah na'ah, and write with ink na'ah, a fine reed pen, and a skilled penman, and wrap it with silks na'ah.
>
> Shir Ha-Shirim Raba 1:15: "You are yafeh my love" (Shir Ha-Shirim 1:15), 'You are yafeh' through mitzvot, both positive and negative, yafeh through loving deeds, yafeh in your house with the heave-offerings and the tithes, yafeh in the field by the commands about gleaning, the Forgotten Sheaf and Second Tithe;
>
> Yafeh in the law about mixed seeds and tzizith, and about first fruits, and the fourth year planting;
>
> Yafeh in the law of brit milah, Yafeh in tefillah, and in the reading of the Sh'ma, in the law of mezuzoth and the tefillin, in the law of the lulav and the ethrog;
>
> Yafeh too, in repentance and in good works; Yafeh in this world and beautiful in the world to come."

Israel is beautified by God and God by Israel by means of Israel performing mitzvot in beauty, hiddur mitzvah:

> Rabbi Zera said: "For an exemplary manner (hiddur mitzvah) one should go up to a third in the performance of a mitzvah."[50]

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[50] BT Baba Kamma 9b

Which word is "beauty?" Is it "na'ah" from Exodus 15:2 as used in the Mekilta and the Talmud? Or "yafeh" from Shir Ha-Shirim rabba? Or "hiddur" from the Babylonian Talmud in Baba Kamma? In other contexts each word might mean pleasant, good, or beautiful. In this usage all three mean "beauty" in a profound and unique sense of the concept, the consummate catagory of the rabbi's taxonomy. In each instance relational objects between God and Israel, such as the lulav, ethrog, sefer Torah, are being aesthetically elevated, objects which are the accoutrements for the perfomance of mitzvot. Now that we have established the the paramount catagory of beauty as found in the rabbinic literature, we proceed to investigate how that beauty is to be manifested in art.

Chapter 4

The Rabbis and Art

Eugene Veron[1] defines two types of beauty perceived in objects: the decorative and the expressive. Decorative art is devoted to the gratification of the eye and ear, affording no measure of its success beyond the pleasure it gives. . Its chief means to perfection of form and harmony are the grace of contour, diction or sound. Such art rests upon the desire for beauty and has nothing in view beyond the peculiar delight caused by the sight of beautiful objects.

Expressive art, on the other hand, evokes feelings and ideas, and, through them, is able to reveal the power of conception and expansion possessed in these feelings and ideas by the artisan. Veron defines expressive art as a manifestation of the "beautiful," that which is a symbolic depiction of the moral life and endeavors that occupy humanity, body and soul. The morals and values found in the ideas and sentiments of the artisan may be revealed by such expressive art.

Long before Veron, rabbinic literature made the distinction between static and expressive art. We have clear

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[1] Eugene Veron, L'Esthetique, translated by W.H. Armstrong (London: Chapman Hall, 1879), p. 50ff

examples of static and expressive art which clarify the Rabbis' aesthetic. Static art is exemplified in the following tradition in the Babylonian Talmud[e]. Rabban Gamaliel II is taking a bath right in front of a statue of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. The narrative begins with a question put by Proclos, a gentile, to Rabban Gamaliel:

> "It is written in your Torah, 'And there will not cleave to your hand the devoted thing.'[3] Why are you in the bath of Aphrodite?"
>
> Gamaliel [with some irony] replied to him, "We may not answer in a bath." When he came out he said to him, "I did not come into her domain; she came into mine. Nobody says, 'The bath was made as an adornment for Aphrodite; rather Aphrodite was put here as an adornment for the bath."

For the worldly and erudite[4] Gamaliel, the statue was merely a static example of decorative art: pleasant to look at, but non-motivating and unevocative. It was unable to act as a symbol, as defined by Eric Newton[5], for an ideal. Nor could it stimulate an experience of transcendence, as described above by Lawrence Hoffman[6]. According to Kant's

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[e] b. Avodah Zarah 44b

[3] Deuteronomy 13:8

[4] In TB Sotah 49b and Mishna Sotah 15:8 we find that Gamaliel gave his permission for the study of Greek and that in his home Greek wisdom was discussed and wax seals in full figure were used. He was also an observer of the skies and used astronomical drawings to determine the New Moon.

[5] See above, page 1

[6] See page 24

criteria, it would have been perceived by Gamaliel as visually pleasurable, and nothing more. The statue was not a ritual symbol that directed him to an awareness of an experience or value, nor did he give it reverence of any kind. It was just a decoration.

Here is another example from within the talmudic tradition[7] which differentiates between possessions and values, objects and objectives, static idols and expressive bridges to the sublime. We first cite the relevant passage from the Mishna:

> If an idol has a garden or bath house, we may use either so long as it is not to the benefit of the idol. However, we may not use either if it is to its advantage. If the garden or bath house belonged jointly to the idol and to other things, then we may use them whether it be to the benefit of the idol or not.
>
> The idol of an idolater is immediately prohibited. However, if it belonged to an Israelite then it is not prohibited until it is worshipped.

The Gemara, in discussing this passage, assigns the final ruling, "the idol of an idolater is immediately prohibited," to Rabbi Akiba. But an alternative position is attributed in a baraita to Rabbi Ishmael, who held that "the idol of an idolater is not prohibited until it is worshipped; but if it indeed belonged to an Israelite, then it is

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[7] TB Avodah Zarah 51b

immediately prohibited." The Gemara gives the last word to Rabbi Akiba:

> "The idol of an idolater is immediately prohibited, but if it belonged to an Israelite it is not prohibited until it is worshipped."

Ultimately for the rabbis, the function of an object is more determinative than its form. According to Akiba, an idol is dysfunctional for an Israelite only if the Israelite intends to use it as an object of reverence. The idol has no inherent functional abilities of its own, it is simply a form. Aesthetically speaking, the rabbis did not find any beauty in forms that were not symbolic references to mitzvot, nor any function in idols.

The debate between Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Ishmael was by no means academic for the Jews of late antiquity. We have evidence in the rabbinic literature that Jews at the end of the second century, experiencing a forced urbanization by the Romans following the Bar Kokhba revolt, increasingly lived side by side with Gentiles. E.E. Urbach writes:

> Jewish artisans and craftsmen, who lived by making clay and glass vessels, furniture and household utensils, gold and silver trinkets, not only learnt new technical processes from their gentile fellow-craftsmen: they also had to compete with them, which meant at least employing the same methods, i.e. ornamenting and decorating their products with conventional motifs. It was hard for these Jewish craftsmen not to make their vessels and trinkets for use in the pagan ritual for their gentile

purchasers, or even to avoid making idols.[8]

The difference between a beautiful sukkah and a pretty trinket could not be greater. The trinket is a commodity of value only in the marketplace. It has the comparable symbolic significance spiritually for the Jew as a sheaf of wheat. It has form but no function, but if that same sheaf of wheat would be employed in the construction of a beautiful sukkah it then becomes part of Hiddur Mitzvah. Urbach further cites a Mishnaic tradition in the name of Rabbi Eliezer, a Tanna living in Lod, which underscores this point:

> None may make ornaments for an idol: necklaces or earrings or finger rings. Rabbi Eliezer says: "If for payment it is permitted."[9]

By reviewing the negative we discover the positive: it is the intent that is central to meaning. Rabban Gamaliel could bathe with Aphrodite because he did not understand her to be symbolically transcendent. A lovely ethrog, on the other hand, would catch his eye by its natural beauty. It might trigger his thoughts towards the Creator who made it and commanded him to hold the ethrog. A Jewish artisan may even manufacture and sell a finger ring for an idol! As we have seen in statements attributed to Gamaliel and Akiba,

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[8] E.E. Urbach "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts," Israel Exploration Journal IX, (1959), p. 158.

[9] Mishna Avodah Zarah 1:8

throughout the rabbinic literature there is a distinction between the form of an object and its function, and between physical acts and mental intention. We can find this principle discussed in the Talmud[10]:

> Now, how is an unwitting and unintentional transgression of idolatry possible? Shall we say that one thought (a shrine) to be a synagogue and bowed to it, well then his heart was in Heaven!
>
> But if one saw a royal statue and bowed to it, what are the circumstances? If he accepted it as a god then he is a willful sinner; but if he did not accept it as a god he has not committed idolatry at all.

If a Jew mistook the shrine of Aphrodite for a synagogue and offered a prayer, all is well! Even if the object was wrong the intent was correct. For the Rabbis, objects are not the target of our desires but simply the vehicles for inspiration and expression.

Gertrude Stein wrote, "A rose is a rose is a rose." The Rabbis intimate that an idol is an idol is an idol. An idol can never take one beyond the most banal level of perception. It cannot be combined with any mitzvot and it fails to lead a Jew to higher levels of experience.

I have proposed that there is an acknowledgement in the rabbinic literature of at least two categories of beauty:

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[10] TB Shabbat 72b

1.) The joyous perception and appreciation of the grace and grandeur of God's creations; the pleasant of form and delightful in design.

2.) The combination of sensual pleasure with beautifying mitzvot; the fashioning of symbolic objects of expressive beauty.

This latter level is Hiddur Mitzvah, a middle level which may lead to a third level of beauty. This is the beautification of God as the created praise the Creator in a beautiful manner. A midrash presents this ideal as it expands on Psalm 119:

> Your hands made me and fashioned me;
> give me understanding that I may learn Your mitzvot.
>
> Your hands have made me and fashioned me. Job said[11]:
>
> > Your hands fashioned and made me...
> > It was You who poured me out like milk...
> > You clothed me in skin and flesh...
>
> Who did all this? David said: "You, Lord, made me and fashioned me with Your hands." When this vessel is beautiful (na'ah), who is praised? One must say that it is none other than the one who made it! That is why David said: "I am the vessel and You are the artist. Make me beautiful (na'ah) so you will be praised. That is what is meant by "Your hands made me and fashioned me."[12]

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[11] These are the first lines of verses 8, 10, and 11 of the tenth chapter of Job.

[12] Midrash Tehillim 119:24

We cannot find a single instance in the rabbinic literature of anyone asking God to make himself or herself attractive in appearance or beautiful in form without the greater values of Torah being attached. Although the referent in this passage is slightly ambiguous (beauty or deeds?), it suggests that when the Creator's creation is beautiful through beautiful acts then praise comes to the Creator. We become beautiful when we act beautifully, as Abraham Joshua Heschel writes:

> "The Bible speaks of man as having been created in the likeness of God, establishing the principle of an analogy of being. In his very being, man has something in common with God. Beyond the analogy of being, the Bible teaches the principle of an analogy in acts. Man may act in the likeness of God. It is this likeness of acts - "to walk in His ways" - that is the link by which man may come close to God. To live in such likeness is the essence of imitation of the Divine."[13]

The rabbis recognized the static nature of idolatry: human-made idols only represent their human creators. However, the beautiful performance of the mitzvot which were given by God put us in step with God. As we become beautiful in our actions, God becomes praised and beautified.

We now know what beauty is for the rabbis and by what means it can be achieved. The question remains as to why the rabbis single out specific objects for beautification. The

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[13] Heschel, p. 289

Mekilta text says: "Zeh Eli v'anveyu..., I shall be beautiful before God in observing the commandments. I will prepare before God a beautiful lulav, a beautiful Sukkah, beautiful tzizith, and beautiful tefillin." What is the significance of the lulav, ethrog, and shofar? Why single out tefillin, mezzuzah and tzitzit? Because these are the exhaustive list of objects which were used by Israelites in relationship with God. These are the enabling sacred accoutrements used in the performance of religious acts which either originally functioned in the Temple in Jerusalem or were contemporary with it.

Therefore the answer lies, at least in part, in the nature of the relationship between God and Israel before and after the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Chapter 5

The Temple In Jerusalem Then and Now

No location on earth shares with Jerusalem its place in the hearts of the Jewish people. To this very day Jews turn in prayer to Jerusalem and the place where the Temple stood. The air over Jerusalem is saturated with prayers and dreams. They gather there like planets orbiting a great sun, drawn by the pull of enormous gravitational forces. In Jerusalem stood the Temple upon which all Israelite worship was centered. The Temple was the mediator of the holy relationship between Israel and God. When it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, the rabbis rebuilt the Temple in order to preserve this relationship. But instead of using stone, they reconstructed a surrogate Temple in the performance of analogous acts. The new mediators between God and Israel would become the mitzvot, religious practices established by the rabbis, and the study of Torah. But these activities are analogues of the Temple cultus, and as such require its aesthetic qualities and basic character. Key instruments in the Temple rite during Sukkoth and Rosh HaShana were the lulav, ethrog and shofar. We first learn of the lulav, the palm branch, and the sukkah, the booth, in Leviticus 23:40:

> On the first day you will take the product of the hadar trees, branches of the palm trees, boughs of the leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you will rejoice before the Lord your God seven

> days. You will celebrate it as a festival to the Lord (hag l'adonai) for seven days in the year; you will celebrate it in the seventh month as a law for all time, through all you generations. You and all the citizens of Israel will dwell in booths for seven days, so that future generations will know that I had the people of Israel dwelling in booths as I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God.

The biblical text clearly defines the dwelling in sukkoth as a method for Jews to remember that the Lord our God brought us out of Egypt. The Jewish mind almost automatically follows with "to give us the Torah and to make us a holy people." A sign is a reminder of an event or a principle. For example, the principle of the covenant between God and Abraham is represented by the sign of circumcision[1]:

> "You will circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that will be a sign of the covenant between Me and you."

On the other hand, a symbol represents in physical form the invisible and ethereal. The abstract and intangible are alluded to by association and analogy in the symbol. The rabbis transform the sukkah, lulav, ethrog, in fact all the objects mentioned as possibilities for beauty in our midrash in the Mekilta, into symbolic analogues for the Temple cult. To understand the import of this analogue we must survey the significance of the Temple in Jerusalem in the rabbinic

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[1] Genesis 17:11

literature, indeed in the life of Israel. This will be an aesthetic examination, for we will need to discover the form and function of the Temple cult and the sacrificial rite as the rabbis considered them. Historical events play not an insignificant role in the following narrative. It is, however, the Temple which resides in the rabbinic mind, the Temple past and future, which will be central to our search. Then we might be able to understand how the sign of the lulav obtains the additonal symbolic weight of the Temple and all its grandeur.

The Temple itself was deemed an analogue for the universe. The historian Josephus[ב] records the tradition that the three parts of the Temple correspond to the three parts of the world. The court of the Temple is the sea, the Holy House is the land, and the Holy of Holies is the heavens. A midrash concurs: "The Court surrounds the Temple just as the sea surrounds the world[ג]." Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachman said: "Before the Temple was built the world stood on a throne of two legs; but when the Temple was built, the world became founded and stood solidly[ד]." The Temple was more than a place, it was a virtual analogy to creation and interactive with nature.

[ב] Wars 5, 5, 5

[ג] Numbers Rabba 13:19

[ד] Tanhuma Exodus, ed. Buber, p.47b

We find in I Kings 7:13-19, 21-22, this description of the First Temple built by Solomon:

> King Solomon sent for Hiram and brought him down from Tyre. He was the son of a widow of the tribe Naphtali, and his father had been a Tyrian, a coppersmith. He was endowed with skill, ability, and talent for executing all work in bronze. He came to King Solomon and executed his work. He cast two columns of bronze; one column was eighteen cubits high and measured twelve cubits in circumference, as was the other. He made two capitals, cast in bronze. to be set upon the columns, five cubits in height, nets of meshwork festooned with chain work. He made the columns (maybe "pomegranates") so that there were two rows encircling the top. He set up the columns at the portico of the Great Hall; he set up one column on the right and named it Jachin, and he set up the other column on the left and named it Boaz.

A midrash[5] explains the significance of Jachin and Boaz, the pillars of the Temple:

> Jachin (he will establish) corresponding to "It shall be established (yikkon in Hebrew) for ever as the moon,[6]" for it is the moon which establishes the feasts for Israel, as it is written, "He appoints the moon for seasons.[7]"
>
> And Boaz (in it strength) corresponds to the sun which comes out in power and in strength, as it is written, "It rejoices as a strong man to run the course.[8]"

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[5] Midrash Tadshe, in Adolph Jellinick, ed. Bet HaMidrash III, p. 164ff. (Vienna, 18)

[6] Psalm 89:38

[7] Psalm 104:19

[8] Psalm 19:6

It would be helpful for us to recall the role that the sun and the moon were assigned in Genesis[7]:

> God said: "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times-the days and the years; and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars."

The Temple and its constituent parts are symbolic and theurgic, that is, they work an influence on God. The Temple as portrayed in the rabbinic literature is theurgic in that its very existence, as Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachman illustrated so clearly, stabilizes the world and the cosmic order.

The priestly tradition found in the Pentateuch concentrates on the expiatory role of the sacrifices and the prominence of the Priests. Although there had been sacrifices for atonement in the First Temple, and the prophets had sought to intercede on Israel's behalf before God, the precepts of Leviticus probably represent the more fully elaborated practice and ideology of the Restoration. Ellis Rivkin writes:

> The effectiveness of the entire Pentateuchal system - laws, promises, threatening punishments -

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[7] Genesis 1:14

was retested annually when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies. If the system collapsed, Jews were taught, there would be no wheat or barley harvest, no gathering of the first fruits, no granaries stocked high with grain, no dough in the kneading trough, no security.[10]

Leviticus 21 to 25 is significant as it addresses the critical manner, the aesthetics, by which to offer sacrifices. In the biblical literature the sacrifice was the way by which an Israelite could make atonement for transgressing God's law. If the theurgic sacrifice was not conducted correctly then disaster would be the result. The description of the aesthetics of the sacrifice is found in these verses:

21:6 "The priests shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God; for they offer the Lord's offering by fire, the food of their God, and so must be holy.

21:17 "No descendent of yours who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God."

22:18 "When any man of the house of Israel or of the strangers in Israel presents a burnt offering for any of the votive or any of the freewill offering that they offer to the Lord, it must, to be acceptable in your favor, be a male without blemish, from cattle or sheep or goats."

Then details of the festival calendar follow:

23:3 "... on the seventh day there shall be a sabbath"

23:5 "In the first month, on the fourteenth day, at twilight, there shall be a passover

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[10] Ellis Rivkin, The Shaping of Jewish History, (New York, 1971), p. 39

offering and on the fifteenth a festival of matzoth."

23:9 "When you enter the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest. He shall elevate the sheaf before the Lord for acceptance in your behalf."

23:22 "And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and stranger."

23:24 "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts."

23:27 "Mark the tenth day of the seventh month is Yom Kippurim."

23:34 "On the fifteenth day of this seventh month there shall be Festival of Booths for seven days. The first day shall be a sacred occasion: you shall do no work at your occupations. Seven days you shall offerings by fire to the Lord."

The calendar concludes with verse 23:37:

"Those are the set times of the Lord which you shall celebrate as sacred occasions, bringing offerings by fire to the Lord: olah, mincha, zevach, n'sachim (burnt offerings, meal offerings, sacrifices, libations), each on its day. These are separate occasions from the sabbaths of the Lord, and distinct from your gifts and from all your votive and freewill offerings that you give to the Lord.

These freewill offerings will be offered to the Lord by way of the Priests. The book of Leviticus commences to detail the festival of Sukkoth, 23:40 to 43:

"On the first day of you shall take the product of the hadar trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days... You shall live in booths seven days."

Even the menorah is included, 24: 2-4:

> "Command the Israelite people to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, to maintain lights regularly (ner tamid). Aaron shall set them up in the Tent of Meeting outside the curtain of the Pact to burn from evening to morning before the Lord regularly; it is a law for all time throughout the ages. He shall set up the lamps on pure menorot before the Lord to burn regularly."

With the levitical code as its guide, religious life in Jerusalem and its environs centered around the Second Temple. The temporal governor of flesh and blood was secondary to the God whom the Israelites served and commnicated with in the Temple. Persian, Greek, or Roman, it made no major difference in the lives of the religious Jew, as long as the Temple was allowed to continue its function as the mediator between God and Israel.

The rabbis also maintained, as we will see in this midrash[11], a profound appreciation of the theurgic role of the Temple and sacrifice:

> It came to pass that Rabbi Jonathan ben Eliezer once sat under a fig tree, and the fig tree was full of beautiful figs. Dew fell and the figs exuded honey, and the wind kneaded them in dust. There came a she-goat and from her dripped milk into the honey. And Rabbi Jonathan called his pupils and said to them: Come and see an example of the World to Come! And what was the reason for this? That the sacrifices were being offered.

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[11] Tanhuma Exodus, ed. Buber, p. 51b

The splendor of the Temple built by Herod is preserved in a tradition recorded in the Talmud:

> Herod's Temple was built of blue and white marble and alabaster. When he wished to coat the walls with gold, the sages dissuaded him, saying, "Let it be, it is so lovely, for it looks like the waves of the sea."[12]

In the same passage the rabbis say that Jerusalem is so lovely that: "He who never saw the Temple never saw anything beautiful.[13]" Josephus wrote: "Jerusalem is venerable among all men, both Greeks and barbarians"[14] and "This place is adored by the inhabited world, and honored by such as only know it by report as far as the end of the earth."[15] Even the Talmud records divine signs of favor in Herod's project:

> In the days of Herod when the people were occupied with the rebuilding of the Temple, rain fell during the night but in the morning the wind blew and the clouds dispersed and the sun shone, so that the people were able to go out to their work, and then they knew they were engaged in sacred work.[16]

The very location of the Temple in Jerusalem as described in the Talmud is unique in the world:

> As the navel is set in the middle of a person,

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[12] TB Sukkah 51b

[13] TB Sukkah 51b

[14] War 5.1.3

[15] War 4.4.3

[16] TB Ta'anit 23a

> so is Eretz Israel the navel of the world, Jerusalem is the center of Eretz Israel, the Temple is the center of Jerusalem, the heikhal in the center of the Temple, the ark in the center of the heikhal, and in the front of the heikhal is the even-shetiyah, the foundation stone from which the world was started.[17]

What was the sensual experience of an Israelite on pilgrimage to Jerusalem bearing an offering for the festival of Sukkoth in the rabbinic period? We know already that the Temple was the focus of the great religious events in the life of the nation, such as the major pilgrimage festivals, especially Passover and Sukkoth. Indeed, the journey to Jerusalem and to the Temple was essential to the proper observances of the holy days. For the Israelite these pilgrimages were the high point of religious life; they were the strongest expression of membership in the community of Israel, and contributed in no small measure to the sense of national solidarity. Even fellow Jews of the Diaspora made it their goal to perform the festival pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime, thereby binding themselves more closely to the ancestral homeland. Over and above its specifically religious function the Temple is enormously significant as a cementing factor for the nation and its culture.[18]

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[17] TB Sanhedrin 37a

[18] Gedaliah Alon, The Jews In Their Land. (Cambridge: 1989), p. 50

The Israelite is by no means alone in the pilgrimage. We have a statement from Josephus that "when the Roman Cestius marched to Lydda [66 BCE.], he found the city empty of its men, "for they had all gone up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles."[19] Philo also comments that "at each Festival thousands of Jews from thousands of cities gather at the Temple, going by water and land, from east and west, from north and south."[20] Why did the Israelite and thousands of others make an often difficult pilgrimage to the Temple? Because the Temple was indispensable for the religious life of the individual Jew, because only there could the Israelite offer up the sacrificial offerings that atoned for sins, that freed one from ritual impurity, and that enabled the Israelite to fulfill other personal religious obligations.[21]

The Israelite may have brought a free will offering, the minimum that could be brought to the Temple as a festival offering[22]. On days other than the festivals or the Sabbath the daily offerings of individual sacrifice were completed by half past the eighth hour of daylight, between the Tamid offerings[23], and then oil was added to the

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[19] Wars 2:19:1

[20] De Spec.Leg. 1.69.

[21] Alon, p. 47

[22] See Second Chronicles 35:8, Ezra 3:5, Leviticus 7:16, 22:18, 21, 23; Numbers 15:3, 29:39; Deuteronomy 12:6, and 17

[23] M Pesachim 5:1

menorah, all the lamps being lit[24]. But the festivals demanded additional sacrifices[25] and the Israelites came in mass. The gates of the Temple were opened at midnight and by dawn the courtyard was filled with Israelites[26], many of whom had immersed themselves before entering the Temple court[27]. Even if the Israelite had committed a grievous sin, entrance was still possible because "sacrifices are accepted from the hands of transgressors so that they may repent[28]." If an Israelite forgot to bring enough money to buy wood for the offering, this presented no obstacle, as wood was free[29].

On each morning of the seven days of the festival of Sukkot, a libation of water was made with a libation of wine[30]. There was a libation of wine normally at the conclusion of every Tamid sacrifice, but the libation of water was unique to Sukkoth. Israelites participated in the parade carrying water taken from the pool of Siloam in golden vessels and carried to the gate of the Temple. They heard a shofar blast of teki'ah, teru'ah and teki'ah. They saw the

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[24] Zevachim 9:6

[25] Numbers 29:12-35

[26] Yoma 1:8; Josephus, Antiquities 18:29

[27] Yoma 40b

[28] Hullin 5a

[29] Menachot 21b

[30] Sukkoth 4:1

officiating Priest carry the water to the altar, turn left, and pour both libations into separate silver bowls at the same time[31]. They might look up into the sky and pray, as this was part of the meaning of the water libation, that the new rainy season would be blessed[32].

Israelites would bring their lulavim with them wherever they went, as we know from Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Zadok who said[33]:

> Thus were the men of Jerusalem accustomed: When he entered the synagogue, he held his palm-branch in his hand; when he stood to translate (the Torah reading) or act as precentor, he held his palm-branch in his hand; when he stood to read from the Torah or (if a priest) to lift his hands he would lay it on the ground; when he left the synagogue, he held his palm-branch in his hand; when he visited the sick or comforted mourners, he held his palm branch in his hand.

During the days of the Temple period the Four Species which were waved during the Sukkoth festival were taken in hand for all seven days of the festival in the Temple but outside the Temple they were only taken on the first day of the festival. The ceremony of the Four Species was mainly concentrated in the Temple at the offering of the sacrifices and in the circumambulation of the altar.[34]

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[31] Zevachim 110b, Shabbat 103b

[32] Shabbat 16a

[33] Tosefta Sukkah 2:10 and TB Sukkah 41a

[34] Sukkah 3:12-13; TJ Sukkah 3:13, 54a; TB Sukkah 43b

The Israelite who had made this pilgrimage and experienced the water-drawing ceremony of the libations, fire-juggling in the Temple Court, seven days of ritual and pageant, and expiation by means of offerings with thousands of fellow Jews, would know that all was right with the world.

But the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Its destruction rendered impossible the whole of the Israelite's religion, especially in the field of communal ritual. "With the altars gone, the nation was confronted by a gaping vacuum, one which the generation of survivors had to fill, and fill quickly, if the people as a people was to live on."[35]

How does the rabbinic literature describe the destruction? As propitious things happen when the sacrifices of the Temple are performed, deleterious things occur without them, as Rabban Simeon son of Gamaliel says in the name of Rabbi Joshua[36]:

> Since the day when the Temple was destroyed, there is no day that does not have a curse and the dew has not fallen in blessing and the fruits have lost their savor." Rabbi Jose added, "The fruits have lost their fatness."

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[35] Alon, p. 50

[36] M Sotah 9:12

Nature is disrupted, "When the Temple is not maintained, the world is not a blessing to its inhabitants, and the rains do not come down in season.[37]" Why? Because "since the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer have been closed; God does not smile.[38]" Human communication with God is wreaked as theurgic lines are cut, as detailed in this midrash[39]:

> Simeon the Just used to say: Upon three things the world rests: upon Torah, upon Avodah, upon gimilut hasidim.[40]
>
> Avodah. This is the service of the Temple. And so you find that all the time that the service in the Temple was performed, there was blessing in the world, and the prices were low, and the crop was plentiful, and the wine was plentiful, and man ate and was satisfied, and the beast ate and was satisfied, as it was written, "And I will send grass in your fields for your cattle that you may eat and be full."[41]
>
> When the Temple was ruined the blessing departed from the world, as it is written, "Take heed to yourselves that your heart be not deceived and you turn aside... And the Lord's anger be set against you... and the land not yield her fruit."[42]
>
> And even so it is written, "And I called for a drought upon the land and upon the mountains,"[43] and so it is written, "...when one came to a heap of twenty there were but

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[37] Avot de Rabbi Natan, recension A, Ch. 4 (ed. Schecter, p. 10b)

[38] TB Berakot 32b

[39] Avot de Rabbi Natan, recension B, Ch. 5 (ed. Schecter, p. 9b)

[40] Mishna Avot 1:2

[41] Deuteronomy 11:15

[42] Deuteronomy 11: 16-17

[43] Haggai 1:11

ten,"[44] and so it is written,

"You have sown much and bring in little,"[45] since the Omer[46] ceased.

"You eat but you do not have enough,"[47] since the shewbread ceased.

"You drink but you are not filled with drink" since the libations ceased.

"You cloth yourselves but you are not warm" since the garments of the priesthood ceased.

"And he that earns wages will put them in a bag with holes,"[48] since the sheqelim[49] ceased.

And so it is written, "the fig tree does not blossom"[50] since the first fruits offering ceased.

"There is no fruit on the vines" since the libations of wine ceased.

"The labor of the olives fails" since the oil for the light and the anointing oil[51] ceased.

"And the fields yield no meat"[52] since the wave offering[53] ceased.

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[44] Haggai 2:16

[45] Haggai 1:6

[46] The offering of a sheaf of the first fruits, Leviticus 23:10

[47] Haggai 1:6b

[48] Haggai 1:6

[49] The annual payment of one-third or one-half of a sheqel to the Temple, Exodus 30:13 and Nehemiah 10:33

[50] Habbakuk 3:17a

[51] Exodus 25:6

[52] Habbakuk 3:17

[53] Exodus 29:27

"The flock is cut off from the fold"[54] since the continual burnt offerings[55] and additional offerings ceased.

"And no herd is in the stall"[56] since the peace offerings[57] ceased.

This midrash is a virtual catalogue of the levitical routes to God, each eradicated by the destruction of the Temple. Where would the Israelite go now? Loss of the Jerusalem Temple however, could not be easily eradicated from Jewish memory. After all, it had been God's house. Why had it been destroyed? Why had God abandoned it? The rabbis stepped forward and tried to demonstrate that God had no other alternative, but still had not abandoned Israel. His wrath was kindled against Israel's shortcomings and against the untrustworthy guardians (the priests) of His Temple, against those who had violated God's trust by making His place unworthy for worship. God had, therefore, decided to destroy His Temple. The rabbis tried to show that God would build a more splendid Temple in the messianic future and that the destroyed Second Temple had never measured up to the sanctity of the First and was not worthy of being rebuilt.[58]

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[54] Habbakuk 3:17

[55] Exodus 29:42

[56] Habbakuk 3:17

[57] Exodus 24:5

[58] Joseph Gutmann, The Jewish Sanctuary, (Leiden: Brill, 1983), p. 2

While Yochanan ben Zakkai and the rabbinical leaders after him could have restored the sacrificial cult, at least to a limited extent, had they wanted to do so, the complete restoration of the sacrificial cult as prescribed in the Pentateuch was not within their power. Such a restoration could only have been accomplished with the cooperation of the Romans who arrogated to themselves, or to their puppets, the privilege of appointing the High Priests, of which they had no use after the 66-73 rebellion[59], and who controlled the Temple site.

Instead Yochanan ben Zakkai is credited with taking steps to fill the vacuum which the destruction of the Temple had created in the religious life of the Jewish people. For example, as it became likely that by limiting the ceremony of the four species to one day only (as had been the practice while the Temple stood) the other days of the festival would lose one of their main festive features and thus a good deal of their popularity[60], his taqanah requiring that the lulav ceremony be observed in "the provinces" throughout the seven days of Sukkoth as a "reminder of the Temple" is a prime example of the concern for keeping certain of the Temple

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[59] Alexander Guttmann, "The End of the Jewish Sacrificial Cult," Hebrew Union College Annual, 38, (1967), p. 146

[60] Urbach, p. 273

rituals alive (and even elaborating them), even though the Temple itself was gone.[61]

This transfer to the home and synagogue of what had been an exclusively Temple ritual served to maintain a basic characteristic of the Feast of Tabernacles. It was the first step in a whole series of ordinances introduced later (in the days of Rabban Gamaliel) with the intention of preserving as many as possible of the major elements of the Temple service.[62] It was also the beginning of the rabbi's loading of older signs and rites with symbolic importance. The lulav became addionally a visual symbol of the Temple past, and of greater significance, the Temple future.

The literature records[63] that Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai ordained these things when the Temple was destroyed and believed that, when it would be speedily rebuilt, they would return to their former status.[64] Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai's greatest achievement was the creation of a legal-religious institution in Yavneh and the solution of the problems which arose because of the destruction of the

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[61] Mishna Rosh HaShana 4:3 "Aforetime the lulav was carried seven days in the Temple, but in the provinces one day only..."

[62] Alon, p. 114

[63] Tosephta Rosh HaShana 2:9

[64] Tosephta Rosh HaShana 2:9

Temple. His main aim was to re-establish religious life on the assumption that the Temple might not be speedily rebuilt but in the firm belief that ultimately it would.[65]

Raphael Patai claims that the early Palestinian teachers whose work is recorded in the Mishna, the two Talmuds and the rest of the rabbinic literature, prepared the way for the Jewish people to live without its Temple and even without its country, by gradually shifting the emphasis from the role of the Temple and its ritual to that of man and morality. He is half right, for the "morality" to which the rabbis aspire is a level of behavior enhanced and reinforced by the performance of mitzvot. These mitzvot, many of which originated in the Temple, allow each individual Jew to function as an embodiment of the Temple. The aesthetic experience of the Temple is preserved in the sensual nature of the ritual objects associated with the mitzvot.

A Jew holding a lulav and ethrog becomes the worshipper, offering, priest, and Temple all in one. Patai writes:

> This shift from Temple to man was correlated with that type of midrashic thought that elaborates on the idea that there is a structural as well as functional similarity between the world, the Temple and man. The Temple is simply the world on an even smaller scale, a microcosm. But if this is so, it becomes immediately clear that the function formerly filled by the Temple could be taken over

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[65] Ephraim E. Urbach, The Halakhah, (Tel Aviv: Masadah, 1986), p. 272

> by man: there was no reason to suppose that the sympathy between the world and man was smaller than that between the world and Temple.[66]

The rabbis reached into the rubble of the Temple and rebuilt a new structure in symbolic language. How could any new tyrant burn ethereal images, abstract and intangible, which are alluded to by association and analogy through the symbol? This great transformation is for the rabbis the work of God:

> God foresaw that the Temple would be destroyed, and He said, 'While the Temple exists and you bring sacrifices, the Temple atones for you; when the Temple is not there, what shall atone for you? Busy yourselves with words of Torah, for they are equivalent to sacrifices, and they will atone for you.[67]

When the Romans untied the theurgic lines between God and humanity with the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis reattached these lines between God and humanity through prayer, study and mitzvot. Rabbi Jochanan[68] says, "So long as the Temple existed the altar would atone for Israel; now a man's table atones for him." Instead of bringing food to the altar, provide food for the poor or receive them as guests at your table. Rab Sheshet says, [69]" Fat and blood which he

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[66] Raphael Patai, Man and Temple, (New York: Ktav, 1967), p.224

[67] Midrash Tanhuma, ed. Buber, Achre Moth, p. 35a

[68] Berakot 55a

[69] TB Berakot 17a

had lost though fasting should be as if he had offered a sacrifice upon the altar." Mitzvot, prayers and devotion become surrogates for sacrifice.

The following discussion in the Talmud[70] between two Amoraim illustrates the comprehensive replacement of sacrifice by the surrogate activity of the study of Torah:

> Resh Lachish said, "What is the significance of the verse: 'This is the law, (literally 'torah') for the burnt offering (l'olah), for the meal offering (l'mincha), for the sin offering (l'chatat), and the guilt offering (l'asham)? .[71]'
>
> He who occupies himself with the study of Torah, it is as though he were actually offering sacrifice.[72]" (In other words, Torah instead of the burnt, meal, sin, and guilt offerings!)
>
> But Rabba asks, "Why then does it say 'for the burnt offering (l'olah), for the meal offering (l'mincha), for the sin offering (l'chatat), and the guilt offering (l'asham)?' It should have said 'a burnt offering (olah), a meal offering!' Rather, it means whoever occupies himself with the study of Torah does not need, (lo olah) sacrifices.[73]"

"He who occupies himself with the study of Torah, it is as though he were actually offering sacrifice" introduces the concept of the "as if." The Temple was no longer in

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[70] TB Menachoth 110a

[71] Leviticus 7:37

[72] Resh Lakish reaches this conclusion by interpreting the Hebrew preposition 'lamed', for, to meaning 'in lieu of.'

[73] Raba separates the word "l'olah" into two words, "lo olah," no sacrifice.

existence, but the rabbis proceeded as if it was, with other acts replacing the actual sacrifices themselves - acts of loving-kindness, as ben Zakkai indicated; the reading and study of the scriptural passages on sacrifice and the rabbinic traditions; prayer, fasting, almsgiving; these and others are usually called surrogates for sacrifice. These things are not so much substitutes for sacrifice as attempts to preserve its inner meaning.[74] By preserving the inner meaning of the sacrifices they become their functional equivalents.

Prayer serves to maintain the inner meaning of the sacrifice, and just as the worship of the altar was called 'avodah,' so prayer is called 'avodah.'[75] Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba says in the name of Rabbi Jochanan[76],

> "If a man consults nature, and washes his hands and puts on tefillin and recites the Sh'ma and says the Tefilah, Scripture accounts it to him as if he had built an altar and offered a sacrifice upon it."

The communal ritual of prayer and the study of Torah become surrogate rites of sacrifice, and the ritual performances with the lulav and ethrog are analogous acts to

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[74] J. R. Brown, Temple And Sacrifice In Rabbinic Judaism, (Evanston: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1963), p. 26

[75] Moore, Judaism II, p. 217

[76] Berakot 15a

the Temple service. Key elements of the aesthetics of the Temple are preserved in surrogate activities as the mitzvot become analogues for the Temple service. The lulav, ethrog, and shofar, biblically mandated, were used in the Temple, and after its destruction, are invested with additional symbolic weight of all that the Temple experience meant in function and form. The Temple function was to be the mediating channel between God and Israel and its form and precise ritual function was sensually exciting and an exhilarating experience. The significance of the lulav, ethrog, and shofar, and indeed the basic symbolic language of Jewish art, is that they are the stone and mortar of the Temple which Jews rebuild in the performance of mitzvot. Now we must investigate how the rabbis treat each of these symbolic building blocks as they rebuild the Temple in the hearts of the Jewish people.

Chapter 6

How An Ethrog Rebuilds The Temple

"The history of art is the history of the spirit
as it reveals itself in forms"

Henri Focillon

We have established that the basic forms chosen to express the spirit of the Jewish faith as set forth in rabbinic literature were forms used in the performance of biblically mandated mitzvot which now come to seen by the rabbis additionally as analogues in forms to the Temple service. The Temple had been the locus for the Jewish faith. We read in Leviticus Rabba:

> "On the first day you will take the fruit of hadar trees." It relates to "You make me to know the paths of life; in Your presence is the satisfaction of joys (pleasures of victory).[1]"
>
> Do not read "so'va" but "sheva." These are the seven joys of Sukkoth. The four species of the lulav, the sukkah, the festival offering, and the duty of rejoicing.[2]

The festival offerings were eliminated after the destruction of the Temple, leaving the "duty of rejoicing," the four species, and the sukkah. However, the impulses and

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[1] Psalms 16:11

[2] Leviticus Rabba 30:2

aesthetics of the Temple came to be transferred to these and a limited number of other surviving ritual objects of which some were themselves accoutrements of the Temple service. These items remain to this very day the exhaustive catalogue of ritual objects: lulav, ethrog, sukkah, shofar, sefer torah, mezzuzah, tefillin, and tzitzit. This chapter will survey the relationship between the rabbinic concept of beauty and its application to these forms.

Let us begin with the lulav. We first establish what the palm may have meant to a resident of Palestine in the days of the rabbis. We read Pliny the Elder and discover that:

> Judea is even more famous for its palm-trees, the nature of which will now be described. It is true that there are also palms in Europe, and they are common in Italy, but these are barren. In the coastal regions of Spain they do bear fruit, but it does not ripen, and in Africa the fruit is sweet but will not keep for any time. On the other hand, in the east the palm supplies the native races with wine, and some of them with bread, while a very large number rely on it for cattle fodder.[3]

Pliny's description of the relationship between the palm and the residents of ancient Palestine is comparable to that between the Native Americans and the American bison; no part was without use. In a midrash we find that

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[3] From the Naturalis Historia of Pliny the Elder (23/24-79 CE), in Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism, edited by Menachem Stern (Jerusalem, 1974), p. 492.

> as no part of the palm has any waste, the dates being eaten, the branches used for Hallel, the twigs for covering the Sukkah, the inner bark for rope, the leaves for sweeping, and lumber for roofing, so are there no worthless people in Israel.[4]

The symbol of the palm is widespread It was used to signify both the Maccabean victory[5] from tyranny and the Roman victory and return of tyranny as Roman coins depicted "Judea capta" mourning beneath the palm. The following midrash reveals the multivalence of the palm:

> Rabbi Abba ben Kahana said: From the reward of one act of "taking" you may infer the reward for another act of "taking." In Egypt it was prescribed, "You will take a bunch of hyssop[6]" (to paint the sign of paschal blood upon the doorpost).
>
> How much was its value, four maneh? Yet it was this that enabled Israel to inherit the spoil at the Red Sea, the spoil of Sihon and Og, and the spoil of the thirty-one kings. How much more in the case of the palm-branch, which costs one more and which so many more mitzvot are included.[7]

In the Exodus narrative the Israelites took the hyssop and painted their doorposts with the blood of the paschal offering to protect themselves from the Destroyer. The blood was the sign the Destroyer needed in order to pass over the

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[4] Genesis Rabba 41:1

[5] I Maccabees 13:37 and II Maccabees 14:4

[6] Exodus 12.22

[7] Leviticus Rabba 30:1

Israelites. When the hyssop is joined with the palm to form the lulav, it becomes in the rabbinic literature more than a sign. While the Maccabees employed the palm as a sign of their military victory, the rabbinic literature employs the palm as a symbol of a spiritual victory which is waged each year by every Jew:

> On Rosh HaShanah all the people of the world come forth like contestants in a parade and pass before God. Then the guardian angels of the nations declare: "We were victorious and will be judged righteous." But really no one knows who the winner is. After Rosh HaShanah is past, the children of Israel come forth on Yom Kippur fasting, clothed in white and fine garments. Still no one knows who the winner is. But when Sukkoth comes all the children of Israel, adult and child alike, bring their lulavim in their right hands and their ethrogim in their left, and now all the peoples of the earth know that the children of Israel have been judged victorious.[8]

More than the "High Holidays" of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, the performance of the mitzvot of Sukkoth is efficacious in reaching heaven, even in our dreams: "dreaming of a palm tree is a sign that one's sins have come to an end."[9] The value of right intent is evident in this passage from the Talmud: "dreaming of a lulav indicates that one is serving God wholeheartedly."[10] Further, the very

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[8] Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 17

[9] Leviticus Rabba 30:2

[10] TB Berakot 57a

heart of the palm and the heart of Israel are linked in the literature:

> "On the first day you will take the product of the hadar trees, branches of the palm trees, boughs of the leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you will rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.[11]"
>
> Like the palm tree which has a single heart that keeps reaching upwards, so Israel has a single heart reaching upwards - to their parent in Heaven.[12]

The Israelite reaches to heaven with a lulav in one hand and an ethrog in the other, with sincere intent, thereby sending an offering to heaven as potent as an offering in the Temple, as this midrash explains:

> From Yom Kippur to Sukkoth, Israel is busy with mitzvot. One with the sukkah, one with the lulav. On the first feast-day of the festival all Israel stands before the Holy One with their lulav and ethrog in honor of the name of the Holy One and He says to them: "Let bygones be bygones. From here on we will begin a new account." Therefore Moses says to Israel: "On the first day you take the fruit of the hadar tree"[13]

This and the following midrashim show that the expiation of sin and the balancing of the relationship between God and Israel continues through the performance of mitzvot which

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[11] Leviticus 23:40

[12] Pesikta Rabbati 51:2

[13] Leviticus Rabba 30:7

are, at least in part, symbolic. The following tradition in Leviticus Rabba projects the lulav and ethrog, and the Jewish people, into a better future:

> "Let this be written for the generation to come" applies to the present generation which are in imminent danger of death; "And a people that will be created will praise the Lord" applies to them because the Holy One will at some future time create them afresh. What will be done then? Take the lulav and the ethrog and praise the Holy One. So Moses calls on the first day to Israel and says: "And you will take the fruit of hadar trees"[14]

The lulav and ethrog are simultaneously messianic symbols and metaphors for the Jewish people, as found in this midrash on the biblical verse: "Boughs of hadar trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees and willows of the brook[15]:"

> "Boughs of hadar trees": these are the Israelites. As the ethrog has taste and smell, so among the Israelites some have both Torah and good works.
>
> "Branches of palm trees": These are the Israelites. As the date has taste but no smell, so there are Israelites who have Torah, but no good works.
>
> "Boughs of thick trees": these are the Israelites. As the myrtle has smell, but no taste, so there are Israelites who have good works and no Torah.
>
> "Willows of the brook": these are the Israelites. As the willow has neither taste or

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[14] Leviticus Rabba 30:3

[15] Leviticus 23:40

> smell, so there are Israelites who have neither Torah or good works. What is God to do with them? It is not possible to destroy them. God says, "Bind them together into one bundle, and the one will atone with the other."[16]

The elements of the lulav, when bound together, are a metaphor for the Jewish community and a symbol of the Jewish messianic faith in a better day for that same community which had lost its national and religious center.

The Ethrog

From the time of the Talmud to our very day there are Jews who strive to obtain the most perfect ethrog. I vividly recall the scene in Jerusalem as men examined each citron as if the whole world depended upon the making the correct choice. The obsession with the selection of an exemplary ethrog derives from the transfer of the values attached to offerings of the Temple to the symbolic offerings of mitzvot, in this case, lulav and ethrog. We read in the Talmud:

> Rabbi said: Read not "hadar" but "ha-dir;" Just as the stable ("dir") contains large and small animals, perfect and blemished ones, so also does the tree[17] contain large and small, perfect and blemished ethrog.[18]

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[16] Leviticus Rabba 30:12

[17] The ethrog remains on the tree for several years.

[18] TB Sukkah 35a

Just as the sacrificial animal must be free of blemish, now so too must the ethrog. The Amora Rav responds as follows to a mishna which states that if an ethrog is missing any part it is invalid:

> It was stated that Rav ruled that an ethrog which has been gnawed by mice is no longer "hadar." But is it not so? Did not Rabbi Chanina in fact differ with it and fulfilled his obligation? Does then our Mishna present a contradiction to Rabbi Chanina? One might well explain that our Mishna presents no contradiction against Rabbi Chanina since the former might refer to the first day of the festival (ethrog must be whole) while the latter might refer to the second day; but is it a contradiction to Rav? Rav answers: "The situation concerning mice is different for they are repulsive."

The analogy between a blemished ethrog and a blemished sacrificial animal also figures in the following passage:

> Rava inquired: "If there developed in an ethrog signs of trefah, what is the law?"
>
> What is he inquiring about? We already know[19] that if an ethrog is peeled, split, or perforated it is trefah. Rava is concerned with the law Ulla cited in the name of Rabbi Jochanan[20]: "If the contents of the lung pour out as from a ladle it (animal) is fit to be eaten." Raba explained that this applies only to when the arteries are whole, but if rotted then it is trefah. What is the ruling here? (Seeds of ethrog are like the arteries of the lung). Is it possible that this applies to the former since the air cannot affect it, it could become healthy again, but not in the latter since the air decays it, or is it possible there is no

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[19] From the Mishna that this discussion is following.

[20] TB Hullin 47b

difference?

> Come and hear: An ethrog which is swollen, decayed, pickled, boiled, and of the Ethiopian variety[21], white or speckled, is invalid. An ethrog which is round as a ball is invalid. And some add if two are grown together. If an ethrog is half ripe Rabbi Akiba declares it invalid but the Sages valid. If it was grown in a mould, so that it has the appearance of another species, it is invalid. At any rate it teaches "swollen or decayed," which implies, does it not, swollen outside and decayed inside (like an organ)? No! Both refer to the exterior, and yet there is no discrepancy. The one refers to a case where the ethrog is swollen even although it is not decayed; the other to a case where it was decayed without being swollen.[22]

The laws concerning the ethrog are not simply rabbinic ordinances and regulations. The passionate attention placed upon this little citron is an example of the redirected passion for God that could not be expressed in the Temple and is now exemplified in the mitzvot. The intensity of the investigation is evidence of the passion to maintain the core analogue to the Temple sacrifice, in this instance in the body of the ethrog. These same values are applied to the sukkah.

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[21] TB Sukkah 12a

[22] TB Sukkah 36a

Sukkah

Just as Yochanan ben Zakkai's taqanah requiring that the lulav ceremony be observed in "the provinces" throughout the seven days of Sukkoth as a "reminder of the Temple" was a response to the concern for keeping certain of the Temple rituals alive, the rabbis intensified the attention given to the adornment of the sukkah. The sukkah originates from the same biblical source as the lulav and ethrog and can be preserved independently of the Temple. So the sukkah enjoys some of the same transference of energy from the Temple rite as do the lulav and ethrog. The sukkah is also specifically earmarked for beautification as we find in this passage in Tractate Sukkah:

> If one spread a sheet over it because of the sun or beneath it because of the falling leaves... it is invalid. Rabbi Chisda says "because of falling leaves," but if it is in order to beautify the Sukkah, then it is indeed valid.[23]

We also find in Tractate Sukkah this description of the adornments used to beautify the Sukkah, in a discussion of whether or not these adornments can be consumed:

> If one covered the top of a sukkah with a sheet according to the rule, and adorned it with embroidered hangings and sheets, and hung nuts, almonds, peaches, pomegranates, bunches of grapes, wreaths or ears of corn, wine, oil or fine flour,

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[23] TB Sukkah 10a

> it is forbidden to make use of them (eat) until the conclusion of the last day of the Festival, but if he expressed a prior condition about them all depends on the terms of his condition? No! It is possible [to use sheets] at the side.[24]

Any effort one has made to make his or her home beautiful should be transferred to the Sukkah, for as the following texts makes clear, the Sukkah is, for the duration of the festival, one's permanent home:

> How should one dwell in the Sukkah? If one has beautiful vessels, beautiful divans, they should be brought inside the Sukkah. One should eat and drink and pass leisure in the Sukkah. From where do we know this? From what our Rabbis have taught: "You will dwell"[25] means in the same manner in which you ordinarily live. So they said all the seven days of Sukkoth one should make the Sukkah a permanent home and the house temporary. How? If one has beautiful vessels and divans they should be brought inside the Sukkah and one should eat and drink and pass leisure time in the Sukkah.[26]

Shofar

The lulav and ethrog are held in hand and the Sukkah is a dwelling, but the shofar is an instrument which produces a

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[24] TB Sukkah 10a-b

[25] Leviticus 13:42

[26] TB Sukkah 28b

sound. The sound of the shofar was heard in the Temple[27] at Rosh HaShanah[28]. On the symbolic significance of the shofar blast the midrash says:

> "And the Lord God will blow the horn.[29]" Rabbi Chanina ben Rabbi Isaac said: Throughout the year the people of Israel are in sin's clutches and led astray by their troubles, but on Rosh HaShana they will take the shofar and blow it, and eventually they will be redeemed by the ram's horn, as it says, "And the Lord God will blow the horn."[30]

Thus the shofar is a symbol of the redemption of the Jewish people. The shofar is preferably a ram's horn, for the Talmud states that the ram's horn is a reminder of the "ram substituted for Isaac."[31] Just as Isaac was spared by the hand of God, the rabbis believed that Israel will be rescued.

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[27] After the destruction of the Temple Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai issue a taqqanah that the shofar may be blown on the Sabbath in a provincial town which had a bet din (M Rosh HaShana 4:1).

[28] TB Rosh HaShanah 26b

[29] Zachariah 9:14

[30] Genesis Rabba 56:9

[31] TB Rosh HaShanah 16a

Sefer Torah

The Sefer Torah is held in the hand like the lulav, must be aesthetically pleasing and free of error as an ethrog, and its proper reading is as powerful as the sound of the shofar. We find the aesthetic quality of the Sefer Torah mentioned in the Talmud:

> Our Rabbis taught: "The rest of the prayer: 'Accept my song, petition, supplication before You for Your people Israel, which are in need of salvation.' He would conclude: 'Who listens to prayer.' Thereupon each would bring a sefer torah from his house and read therefrom, in order to show its beauty."[32]

There is beauty in its reading and in its writing. In fact, all holy manuscripts must be beautiful, as we find in Tractate Soferim:

> It is obligatory to make beautiful tzizith, beautiful mezuzoth, to write a beautiful sefer Torah with choice ink, with a fine reed-pen by an expert penman on well finished parchments, on dyed skins, and to wrap it in precious silks; for scripture states, "This is my God and I will beautify Him," which means, perform the mitzvot in a beautiful manner before God.[33]

The scribe, like the teacher, handles the word and the name of God. The actions of both are demand right intent like that required of the pilgrim who offers his sacrifice in

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[32] TB Yoma 70a

[33] Soferim 36b. Soferim is one of the "minor tractates" of the Talmud, Palestinian in origin and later attached (by printers) to the Babylonian Talmud.

the Temple service, and as such require the same grace, beauty, and purity found there. The Talmud distinguishes between correct result and correct intent:

> It has been taught: If a scribe (copying a sefer Torah) had to write in a certain place the Tetragrammaton (Yod-Hay-Vav-Hey) and intended to write instead the name Judah (Yod-Hey-Vav-Daled-Hey) and by mistake left out the letter daled (thereby writing the Tetragrammaton as the text required), he may go over the letters with his pen and so sanctify the Name. This is the opinion of Rabbi Judah, but the Sages say that such a Name is not of the choicest... perhaps the Rabbis ruled thus concerning the Tetragrammaton because of the maxim "This is my God and I will beautify Him."[34]

The scribe must have skill and intent, for the scribe is entrusted with the transmission of Torah, and, perhaps of more significance, the deployment of the name of God, just like the teacher, from generation to generation. The midrash places the scribe in a tradition which began with God and then passed to Moses:

> "Write these words[35]." The Holy One said to Moses: "It was I who wrote the first tablets, as it says 'written with the finger of God[36]', but you will write the second tablets, and I may assist."
>
> It can be compared to a king who married and had a ketubbah written with his own materials. In the course of time, she changed her ways, and he reacted by driving her from his house.

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[34] TB Gittin 20a

[35] Exodus 34:27

[36] Exodus 31:18

> Her best friend then came and restored her to the king's favor. Said the king to him: "I am reconciled with her, but this time, you prepare the certificate, and may you prevail upon me to lend my signature to it." This is why it says: "And I will write the tablets[37]."[38]

In Deuteronomy 10:13 Moses carves out the tablets and God, for the second time, inscribes upon them the Ten Commandments. The analogy is that the mitzvot are God's signature on the world. The scribe is the transmitter of the Torah upon which the mitzvot are inscribed. To write, the scribe must master the Hebrew alphabet, the letters of which Bezalel used in the construction of the tabernacle, for he knew how to combine the letters by which the heaven and earth were created[39]. Therefore the tradition links the letters of the Hebrew alphabet to God and the world. For the Hebrew scribe each stroke of the pen, like each movement of the High Priest in the Temple, is a movement in concert with the Creator. Each beautiful letter is a song of praise to God, an offering of black ink in place of black smoke.

Studying and Teaching Torah

A constant, firm, and vital theme in the rabbinic

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[37] Deuteronomy 10:2

[38] Exodus Rabba 47:2

[39] TB Berakot 55a

literature is that the study of Torah becomes a surrogate for the Temple service, as in the saying attributed to Rav[40] that the study of Torah "supercedes the offering of daily sacrifices" and[41] "is superior to the building of the Temple." Torah is more than law, it is the manner in which Jews conduct themselves, and a bridge to God. Attributed to the Amora Rava[42] is the teaching that "one who busies himself with the study of the Torah has no need of sacrifices," and that the student of Torah is "greater than the high priest who enters the innermost part of the sanctuary."[43]

Correct study is as important as making a sacrifice in the correct manner, as we find in Tractate Shabbat, "Raba says that for those who use the Torah correctly it is a drug for life, but for those who use it incorrectly it is a drug for death."[44] Just as the intent of the offering in the Temple had to be pure, so too with regard to study. In Tractate Yoma we find the following midrash attributed to Simeon ben Lakish: "'The word of the Lord is pure,'[45] if his intent is pure, the Torah purifies him to life, but if impure

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[40] TB Erubin 63b

[41] TB Megiloth 16b

[42] TB Shabbat 10a

[43] TB Sotah 4b

[44] TB Shabbat 88b

[45] Psalm 19:9

it purifies him to death."[46]

Study was constitutive of the world of the academy, but what of the householders who gathered in the synagogue to hear the reading of the Torah? The need to explicate the Torah so that the people might understand it after it has been read aloud is mentioned in the Mishna[47]. For the rabbis there is an aesthetic dimension to the exposition of Torah:

> One who speaks words of Torah in public with words that are not as pleasant to the ears as honey from the comb should not speak at all. The Rabbis say that one who speaks words of Torah in public, if his words are not as pleasant to his hearers as honey and milk together, had better not speak at all. Rabbi Jochanan said that one who speaks words of Torah in public, if the words are not as pleasant as a bride under the huppah is pleasant to the sons of men, had better not speak at all. Resh Lakish said that one who speaks words of Torah, if his words are not as pleasant to his hearers as a bride in the bridal chamber to her husband, had better not speak at all.[48]

This is unquestionably a sensual approach (although male-centered) which leaves no room for doubt as to whether or not the rabbis are concerned with the aesthetics of oral performance. "Words of Torah" refers to the Torah and the explication of Torah. Even the oral reading of the sacred text could be emended for aesthetic reasons, as we find in

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[46] TB Yoma 72b

[47] M Megillah 4:4

[48] Shir ha-Shirim Rabba 4:2

this passage from the Talmud:

> Our Rabbis taught: Wherever the text is written indelicately, we read it delicately:
>
> "Ravish[49]" is read "Shall lie with her"
> "Posteriors[50]" is read "emerods"
> "Dove Dungs[51]" is read "decayed leaves"
> "Excrement..urine[52]" is read "deposit...of his feet"
> "Privies[53]" is read "retreats."[54]

Even the study of Torah has its aesthetics, an aesthetics which is itself an offering to God in repayment for the gift of the Torah:

> Rabbi Jochanan: "He who reads and studies the Law without sweetness and song, of him the Scriptures said: 'Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good, and ordinances whereby they should not live[55].'"[56]

and

> Rabbi Shefatiah further said in the name of Rabbi Jochanan: If one reads the Scripture without a melody or repeats the Mishna without a tune, of him the Scripture says, "Wherefore I gave them also statues that we not good, and ordinances whereby they should not live."

If, as we have previously seen, the study of Torah

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[49] Deuteronomy 38.30

[50] I Samuel 5:5

[51] II Kings 6:25

[52] II Kings 28:27

[53] II Kings 10:27

[54] TB Megillah 25b

[55] Ezekiel 20:28

[56] TB Megillah 32a

replaces the function of the Temple ("superior to the building of the Temple") then there is also the possibility for danger. For just as an offering in the Temple preserved the world, a faulty offering, in substance or intent, would endanger the world. The Temple service was as precise and delicate as surgery. An Israelite would bring a sin offering, chatat, or a guilt offering, asham, to the Temple for the expiation of a sin committed unintentionally[57]. The sin of the unintentional violation of Torah would be expiated if the procedure was executed correctly.

But teachers of Torah are not simply Israelites when it comes to teaching. Teachers serve in the manner that the Temple priests served, as conduits of God's word to Israel. The Talmud warns teachers of Torah in this exegesis:

> Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Ilai asked what is the meaning of:
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> "Cry with your throat, spare not, lift up your voice like a horn, and declare unto My people their transgression (peesham[58]), and to the house of Jacob their sins (hato-tam)[59]."
>
> "Transgressions" refers to scholars, whose unintentional errors (shiggoth) are equal to intentional errors (zdonot). "The house of Jacob

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[57] TB Yoma 36a

[58] The Hebrew word "pesha" means to cause a breach, a disruption. In biblical Hebrew it means to break a covenant between nations. But scriptures also employs it to mean a breach between God and humanity (I Kings 8:50 and Psalms 25:7 and 51:3).

[59] Isaiah 58:1

> their sins" to the unlearned, whose intentional sins equal unintentional errors.
>
> And this is identified with what we have learned in the Mishna. Rabbi Judah said, "Be careful, for an error in Talmud is equal to intentional sin (zadon).[40]

A breach between humanity and God can be created by teachers in the faulty performance of teaching and applying the Torah. Thus Torah must be written, studied, and taught in a beautiful and precise manner because to do otherwise would be an insult to the Giver of Torah. Just as an improper or degraded offering made in the Temple could wreak havoc, so too with substandard and slipshod calligraphy, careless study, and offensive teaching.

Mezzuzah, Tefillin, and Tzitzit

One of the oldest collections of Tannaitic Midrashim, the Mekilta, lists these objects as vehicles for beauty: lulav, sukkah, tzizith, and tefillin. The Amoraim in Tractate Shabbat 133b of the Babylonian Talmud add two more: shofar and a beautiful Sefer Torah, written with fine ink, with a fine reed pen, by a skilled scribe, and bound in fine silks. The midrash Songs of Songs Rabba adds the mezzuzah and a messianic twist: beautiful in this world and in the world to come.

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[40] TB Baba Metzia 33b, Avot 4:13

The status of the tefillin and mezzuzah are equal to that of a Sefer Torah, as all three bear the name and word of God. We read in the Talmud:

> Our Rabbis taught: Accoutrements of religious observances are to be thrown away; accoutrements of holiness are to be stored away. The following are accoutrements of religious observances: sukkah, lulav, shofar, tzizith. The following are accessories of holiness: large sacks for keeping scrolls of the Scripture in, tefillin, mezuzoth, mantle for a sefer torah, tefillin bag and tefillin straps.[61]

The tzitzit are partners, as found in this midrash: "'Let his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me.' This means the tzizith and the tefillin."[62] Together, the mezzuzah, tefillin, and tzitzit combine to form a lacework surrounding the body of a Jew that is a sign of the relationship between the metzaveh and the metzuvah, Israel and God. The mezzuzah on the doorpost, the tefillin on the hand and forehead, and the tzitzit about the waist interweave together to wrap around the body as a single sign for the mitzvot which must always be in mind and heart. The rabbis state this boldly in the Talmud:

> Beloved are the Israelites, for God has encompassed them with mitzvot: tefillin on the head and arm, tzizith on their garments, mezzuoth on their doors.[63]

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[61] TB Megillah 26b

[62] Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba 2:6

[63] TB Menachoth 43b

As the sukkah is independent of the Temple rite, so too are the tzizith, tefillin, and mezzuzah. As the Torah is a sacred gift from God, so are tzizith, tefillin, and mezzuzah:

> Rabbi Nechemia explained that "and the extra-profits of the land[64]" means that even things which appear to you to be "extra-profits" to the giving of Torah, tzizith, tefillin, mezzuzoth, these are part of the giving of Torah.
>
> As it is written: "And the Lord delivered to me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God and on them was written according to the words"[65]. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi explained that it says, "On them... according to all the words (k'kol ha-devarim)," and it is also written, "all the mitzvah which I command upon you (kol ha-mitzvah)[66]".[67]

We have seen details of the rabbinic program to load the accoutrements of the Temple service and other biblically mandated mitzvot which survived its destruction with the aesthetics of the Temple and analogous theurgic capabilities. Redemption, beautification, refinement, and the expiation of sin can be achieved, despite the disappearance of the Temple in the waving of the palm, possession of an ethrog, the dwelling in the sukkah, the sound of the shofar, the writing of beautiful letters in holy scrolls, reading in a fine voice, and pleasurable teaching which is sweet as honey.

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[64] Ecclesiastes 5:8

[65] Deuteronomy 9:10

[66] Deuteronomy 8:1

[67] Leviticus Rabba 22:1

Chapter 7

The Role of Jewish Art In Jewish Life

"Art is the lie that reveals the truth."

Pablo Picasso

What is beautiful in the rabbinic literature is the realization in analogical form of an ideal Temple performance where God and Israel are simultaneously bathed in the reflected beauty of each other. In the ideal Temple service, the Israelite offers with right intent the finest possible offering to the Priest who acts as a pure conduit and agent for the Israelite. The Israelite experiences the sensual delights of the Temple: hears the sound of the shofar and the singing of the Levitical priests; sees the splendor of the Temple; smells the burnt offerings and sweet wine; touches the festival offering; witnesses the libations side by side with a multitude of fellow pilgrims; and knows that heaven and earth have touched.

This peak experience is replicated in analogous forms through sacred objects as a Jew hears the shofar and sweet teachings; sees the Sefer Torah written with beautiful Hebrew calligraphy; smells the ethrog and wine; holds the lulav and dwells in the Sukkah; declares with fellow Jews the Sh'ma; and knows that with each of these mitzvot heaven and earth

are drawn closer. The symbols are lies, little acts of artifice, which reveal the truth: they are at the same time not the Temple and the true meaning of the Temple. Beauty for the rabbis is bringing heaven and earth together through the actions of each Jew in the performance of mitzvot. The Temple in Jerusalem is rebuilt by the rabbis where the Romans and their successors can never find it, in the life of each Jew though the beautiful performance of mitzvot. Thus Hiddur Mitzvah is a necessary component of Jewish life. Now the following tradition can be understood fully:

> Rabbi Zera said: For an exemplary manner [hiddur] one should go up to a third more in the performance of a mitzvah. Rabbi Ashi asked if it is a third from within or is it a third from the total amount. This stands undecided.
>
> In the West (Palestine) they said in the name of Rabbi Zera: Up to a third one performs a mitzvah out of his own wealth, but from a third onwards he performs it from that of the Holy One.[1]

If one performs a mitzvah in a exemplary manner, the first third of the additional expense is drawn from his or her own "account." But if one should strive even further, then God pays (or repays) the additional expense. It is as if going past a third more forces a response from God, a theurgic activity as dynamic as offering a sacrifice to

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[1] TB Baba Kama 9b

insure that God brings the rains in the correct season and amount. The performance of a mitzvah in an exceptionally beautiful manner then involves both God and Israel in a spiritual association just as the Temple rite engaged them when it stood. Beauty, at the highest level of our understanding of it, becomes a key ingredient in the rabbinic literature for the maintanence of the faith of Israel.

The Jewish appreciation of beauty as defined in the rabbinic literature of late antiquity has endured from the time of the rabbis to our day despite the erratic imposition by authorities, Jewish or other, of limitations and disabilities on the materials and subject matter of artistic production. The symbolic strength of the objects to be made beautifully as, mandated by the Rabbis of late antiquity, speaks in a language so powerful as to supersede boundaries and limitations. When we read in the Mekilta, "I will prepare before God a beautiful lulav, a beautiful sukkah, beautiful tzizith, and beautiful tefillin," we are speaking of objects in our hands that we use to reach for God. The idiosyncratic imposition of, or the liberation from, the "Second Commandment" has little or nothing to do with the rabbinic concept of beauty and Hiddur Mitzvah. Even when the use of the human image is banned by religious authorities (Jewish or Islamic), the imperative of Hiddur Mitzvah persists. What must be kept clear is the difference between

the aesthetic ideal of the rabbis, which involves the interweaving of mitzvot, Temple symbolism and right intent, and mere artistic production.

The ideal of Hiddur Mitzvah is the constant, ever-vital heartbeat which lies deep within the breast of an ever-changing collective Jewish body. The ostentatious or humble clothes with which this Jewish body may adorn itself are not Hiddur Mitzvah. However, it is all too easy to mistake splendor for spirit, flash for faith, and pomp for prayer.

A fascinating example of mistaking high production for "outbursts of Jewish art" is the phenomenon of the Italian illustrated ketubbah of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Our Jewish art books and museums feature these wonderfully illuminated creations. Shalom Sabar writes[2]:

> During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the period during which the custom of the ketubbah illustration flourished in Italy, a major factor undermined the life of the local Jewish communities: a compulsory segregation in specifically built and walled quarters, the ghettos. From Rome to the Alps, the confinement of the Jews in the ghettos imposed limitations on their relative prosperity and involvement in the social and cultural activities of their Catholic neighbors. This is especially evident when one compares the "ghetto age" with the preceding period, the Renaissance, in which Italian Jewry achieved its highest socio-cultural attainments,

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[2] Shalom Sabar, "The Beginnings and Flourishing of Ketubbah Illustration in Italy: A Study in Popular Imagery and Jewish Patronage During the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," doctoral dissertation, UCLA, 1987.

and enjoyed unequalled economic achievements. The persecutions of the ghetto period, however, eradicated the past attainments and drastically reduced the humanistic interactions between the Jews and Christian intellectuals. Living as a segregated religious minority, even the small, through extremely powerful, group of wealthy Jews had to adapt itself to the poor conditions in the overcrowded ghettos, unusually high taxation, and anti-Jewish outbreaks which were common in the Papal States.

The illustrated ketubbah as a social phenomenon, and its tremendous popularity among Italian Jews for almost two hundred years, must be viewed against this background. As standard status symbols, common among the upper classes of Italian society, were generally denied to Jews, those Jewish families who could afford luxury objects were in constant search for appropriate parallels or substitutes within their own Jewish environment. Every occasion to commission attractive personal objects for Jewish usage was utilized. As a result some of the most elaborate objects of Judaica known were produced in Italy during the age of the ghetto.[3]

What would appear to the art historian as a rare demonstration of "Jewish art" is actually a socio-economic reaction to external limitations. The irony is that with the emancipation of the Italian Jews and the abolition of the Italian ghettos in the early part of the nineteenth century, the socio-cultural factors which brought forth the popularity of the illustrated ketubbah ceased to exist.[4]

Since the ketubbah is a creation of the Tannaim of late

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[3] Sabar, pp. 305-306

[4] Sabar, p. 312

antiquity[5], why is it not mentioned in their lists of objects for beautification? Precisely because it is indeed a creation of their own day and not of the Temple. For the Tannaim, a ketubbah is simply a legal document (a property settlement); yet, in later periods the ketubbah may contain (and we have in our collections hundreds that do) images of the lulav, ethrog, shofar, the Temple pillars, and Torah. Thus the ketubbah becomes a secondary redactor of primary images. Parallel to the ketubbah is the Synagogue, for it is also a respository of symbolic images. While its floors and walls may display the symbolic forms of lulav and ethrog, the structure itself is a secondary assemblage.

There is another, more significant reason that the ketubbah and synagogue are not primary objects by which beauty may be achieved. I propose that there are three basic types of ritual acts: intimate, private, and public. Intimate acts are performed close to the chest and in familiar spaces with companions and friends. Private acts are exclusive of others and secluded from view, a ritual between ourselves and God witnessed by no one else. Public acts are in plain view and require mass involvement. For example, the immersion in the mikva is a private act, as are sexual relations. Joining in a minyan, the necessary quorum of ten[6] for the reading of Torah[7], is a public act.

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[5] TB Ketuboth 11a; 82b

[6] TB Berakot 21b and Megiloth 23b

However, Jewish ritual acts are, for the most part, intimate. Brit milah, B'nai Mitzvah, Huppah, even Keriah, are actions between ourselves and God performed in the companionship of our Jewish community. The sensual experience of mitzvot such as waving the lulav, holding the ethrog, smelling the spice box, hearing the megillah, are all intimate between Jews and God, even as they stand next to each other as fellow travelers reaching out to join heaven and earth.

Although the ornamentation of the ketubbah did not originate until after late antiquity, it became a record of an intimate act, a part of the intimate act of kiddushin, Jewish marriage. It thereby became an opportunity for Hiddur Mitzvah as one of the sensual elements of a Jewish wedding: the taste of the wine, the sound of the seven blessings, the touch of the ring, and the color of the ketubbah. The wealthy Italian families who needed to express themselves in resistance to oppression inflated their ketuboth with remarkable ornamentation. When the oppression lifted, the amount of ornamentation deflated. The simplest ketubbah, if drawn with beautiful letters and sincere intent so that it delights the eye, contributes to the increase of the beauty of the mitzvah of huppa. The following discussion occurs in

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[7] M Megiloth 4:3

the Mishna:

> "The lulav may be bound only with its own species" according to Rabbi Judah. Rabbi Meir says even with a cord. Rabbi Meir also observed that the nobility of Jerusalem used to bind their lulav with strands of gold. The rabbis answered him that they bound it with its own species underneath."[8]

In that passage the gold was a decoration which did not improve the beauty of the lulav. However, the rabbis were not abstemious when it came to gold: in fact they record that:

> A golden vine stood over the entrance to the sanctuary, trailing over the posts; and whoever donated a leaf or a berry or a cluster as a free-will offering brought it and the priest hung it thereon.[9]

Only if the gold obscures the intent of the object and reduces the object from symbol to sign is there a danger. For example in the Talmud there is a discussion of the writing of the name of God in a sefer Torah:

> An open section may not be written closed, nor a closed section open. If one writes it as the Song[10] or if one writes the Song as the general text, or if one writes it without ink, or if one writes the "Names" in gold, they must be hidden away.[11]

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[8] TB Sukkah 36b

[9] TP Middoth 3:8

[10] The "Song" is the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15: 1-19) or the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32: 1-43). Each is written with a nine letter separation in the middle of each sentence.

[11] TB Shabbat 103b

The names used for God in the Torah are not the name of God. There is a Zen saying that a man pointing at the moon is not the moon but a man pointing. The names used to indicate God are signs to indicate the creator of the universe, and if illuminated in gold might become important themselves. The rabbis desired the veneration of God's word and not the words used to indicate God. The ultimate example may be the mezzuzah. The scribe must write the text[12] in an exact fashion: square characters in twenty-two lines. All the skill and right intent required for a sefer Torah should be applied to the mezzuzah scroll, yet it is rolled up and placed inside a holder which is then attached to the doorway. Where is the beauty? In the act of writing it, the scribe was making an offering as if he was in the Temple. The scroll is a record, as is the ketubah, of an intimate act. The aesthetic value attached to the mezzuzah is a combination of the word of God recorded in a beautiful way with right intent. The following midrash[13] expands on this idea:

> Artaban[14] sent to Rav a priceless pearl, and said to him, "Send me a precious object of equal value." Rabbi Judah sent him a mezuzzah. He said to him, "I sent you a priceless gift, and you send me something worth a penny." Rabbi Judah replied, "Our respective gifts cannot be compared. You sent

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[12] Deuteronomy 6: 4-9 and 11: 13-21

[13] Genesis Rabba 35:3

[14] Artaban the Fifth, the last of the Parthian kings, who died in 227 CE.

me something I must guard, but I sent you something which will guard you while you sleep, as it is said, 'When you are walking it will lead you, when you lay down it will watch over you, and when you awake it will talk with you[15].' It will lead you in this world, it will watch over you in the hour of your death; it will talk with you in the world to come."

The "it" referred to in Proverbs must be read in full to appreciate this midrash:

My son, keep the mitzvot of your father
And do not forsake the torah of your mother;
Bind them continually upon your heart,
Tie them around your neck.
When you walk it will lead you,
When you lie down it will watch over you;
When you are awake it will speak to you.
For a mitzvah is a lamp
And the Torah is a light,
Its warnings are the way of life;
To keep you from the "woman of evil"
From the smoothness of the foreign tongue.
Lust not after her attractiveness in your heart
Not let her captivate you with her eyelids.[16]

Aside from the male-centered language and the sexist use of "woman of evil," we can appreciate the midrash and the proverb upon which it stands. The mezzuzah is the symbolic referent for all of Torah, a talisman which wards off evil, and Torah is the gift of God which preserves life. Its apparent value to Artaban is only what he can see. He could not see into the scroll which is really a tiny window into the immense universe of God's creation.

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[15] Proverbs 6:22

[16] Proverbs 6: 20-25

Urbach[17] concludes his article on the rabbinical laws of idolatry in late antiquity by noting that the Christian and Islamic eras to follow would impose further restrictions on artistic expression. Sabar has detailed how the Italian community, once exposed to the light of the emancipation, left the darkness of the ghetto and left behind the drive for illuminated ketuboth. However, Jews created ritual objects of great beauty under Christianity and Islam. Illuminated ketubboth were produced the Jewish world over, and we enjoy a renaissance of this art form today. The greatest threat to Hiddur Mitzvah is the ethos of modernity and the concommitant devaluation of ritual and the abandonment of mitzvot. The average American Jew is more like Artaban than Rabbi Judah and more akin to the heirs of Berenson and Freud than the inheritors of the mitzvot of our fathers, the Torah of our mothers.

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[17] E.E. Urbach "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts," Israel Exploration Journal, 9, (1959), p. 245.

Conclusion

As previously noted, the ritual objects delineated in the rabbinic literature of late antiquity which are to be made beautiful in order to beautify God and Israel remain the sum total of Jewish religious objects in use today. These form the basic aesthetic stock of the Jewish religion, the primary colors if you will, which are used to formulate the total spectrum of ritual expression. Furthermore, the religious system developed in that same literature remains the foundation of the Jewish religion. Therefore I am able to make some considered remarks on the relationship of Jewish art and Jewish life today, especially in the liberal Jewish community.

To be honest in my critique I will state from the outset that I am a committed Reform Jew. I firmly believe, however, that the baby was thrown out with the bath water when the early reformers jettisoned ritual objects in their effort to salvage the meaning of Judaism from moribund orthodoxy. When the symbolic language of the rabbis ceased to be spoken, the following generations of Jews became illiterate in the symbolic language of Jewish forms and dysfunctional in respect to the performance of Jewish rites and rituals.

Michael A. Meyer[1] writes that in 1810 the consistory of Westphalia, the regulating body of all the Westphalian Rabbis established by Jerome, the youngest brother of Napoleon, issued regulations which became the prototype for similar documents throughout the nineteenth century. The combination of the recently announced emancipation and the perceived lugubrious nature of normative religious practice set in motion a desire to reach beyond habitual practice and find real meaning in the Jewish faith and acceptable manners in which to practice it consistent with the social, moral, and aesthetic norms of central European high culture. Meyer writes that the new regulations minimized congregational participation. For example, boys were not to read from the Torah at their Bar Mitzvah, the procession of the lulav during Sukkoth was discouraged, and all liturgical functions were performed by the cantor. The reformers sincerely tried to create a worship service in accord with the ethos of the world in which they sought to live. But, as Meyer writes, there was a price:

> In their quest for decorum members of the consistory - perhaps unintentionally - thus created a greater distinction between officiating clergy and largely passive congregants than was customary in Jewish worship. It was a gap that would become wider in the course of time.[2]

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[1] Michael A. Meyer, Response To Modernity, (New York: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 35-36.

[2] Meyer, p.36

Samuel Holdheim[3], who would become the model for radical Reform Judaism in nineteenth-century America, believed that it was the essential idea of each Jewish holiday, and not the holiday itself, that was to be celebrated. Consequently he had no use for the feel of the lulav on Sukkoth or the sound of the shofar on Rosh HaShana. As the bath water of stagnant Jewish practice was tossed out, so too went the symbols of the rabbis. As Jews became an audience instead of congregants, and rabbis and cantors became the surrogate performers, the Aaronide cult seemed to come back from the past. But its Temple sacrifices were left back in the dust of the ruined sanctuary. The modern Jew was given the same passive role of an Israelite without the theurgic promise of the sacrifice. The modern Jewish worshipper had nothing to do but attend a service which had only decorum. The symbols and ritual items were gathered up and put behind glass.

Removed from Jewish life, the visual and sensual vehicles of Jewish expression (Hebrew calligraphy in scrolls and ketuboth, decorated sukkoth, lulav and ethrog, i.e. the objects listed in the rabbinic literature), became valuable relics. Objects of potential beauty were reduced to mere subjects for pleasing display. Separated from action they became decorations. The tefillin, ketubah, megillah, lulav

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[3] Born in Prussia in 1806.

and ethrog were taken from our hands and placed, like dead butterflies, under glass. Bruce Chatwin writes:

> An object in a museum case must suffer the denatured existence of an animal in the zoo. In any museum the object dies - of suffocation and the public gaze - whereas private ownership confers on the owner the right and need to touch.[4]

Unused ritual objects rest behind glass, silently testifying to Jewish artistry while "experts" deny its existence. It is no wonder then that historians, scholars, even Rabbis, have said that there is no art in Judaism. A sensual symbol of an ethos separated from its "ethnos" becomes a shard, a fragment belonging in a museum.

Chatwin writes that "ideally, museums should be looted every fifty years, and their collections returned to circulation." For Reform Judaism the looting of the museums began in earnest with the revisions of the Union Prayer Book in the 1940's; these revisions represent clear evidence of a return to tradition. A passage in the morning service for Sukkoth makes clear reference to the presence of the symbolic ethrog and lulav; and the New Year service includes the blessings preceding the sounding of the shofar[5]. In 1944 Solomon Freehof put forward a conception of the relation between belief and observance that for Reform Judaism was

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[4] Bruce Chatwin, Utz (New York: Penguin, 1989)

[5] Meyer, p. 322

nothing less than revolutionary:

> From its earliest history in Europe, the movement had consistently declared that the ethical monotheistic faith was primary in Jewish religion, while ceremonies served only as a means to enhance and preserve it. The Reformers' image repeatedly was the kernel and the shell. Freehof now reversed the relationship. In his book **Reform. Jewish Practice and Its Rabbinic Background**, he argued that "the foundation of Jewish religious life is Jewish practice upon which are built habits of mind and attitudes toward the universe.... First we obey God's commandments and then we learn to understand God's nature. We do not begin with theology, we arrive at theology."[6]

This philosophy made it possible for the looting of the museums to proceed apace. For with the commandments come the instruments of the mitzvot, and with them come Hiddur Mitzvah, the rabbinic aesthetic imperative to make it all beautiful.

Even though Reform Judaism has opened the door for Hiddur Mitzvah there are factors which keep trying to close it. The custom remains for the officiant, the rabbi or surrogate, to hold the lulav on behalf of the congregation. The passionate and sensual experience of each individual is avoided. Even in relatively recent publications such as **A Guide for Reform Jews**[7] we find the statement that "the reading of the ketubah during the wedding no longer has meaning." And yet Sabar notes that there is an increasing

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[6] Meyer, p. 324

[7] Frederick Doppelt and David Polish, editors, (New York: UAHC, 1973), p. 73

demand for personal, handwritten and decorated ketuboth. Beginning in the late 1960's young couples sought artists or friends with artistic talent to design their ketubbah for them. Starting on the East Coast, by the seventies the custom had spread throughout the large cities of the United States.[8] The ketubbah is only an example of the dissonance between segments of the contemporary rabbinate and a Jewish population which has been starved for beauty and meaning in their religious practice.

The Jewish aesthetic as found in the rabbinic literature conceives of the beautiful as an object or performance which is intimate, sensual, and a relational bridge to the experience of God in this world and the world to come. It is understandable why modern synagogues adorned with massive modern sculptures fail as Jewish art: they are not intimate and only rarely sensually interesting. A worship service in which the cantor and choir perform the liturgy fails because it is neither public, intimate, or participatory. Works of graphic art with shoddily-drawn Hebrew letters fail by reason that they are without Hiddur Mitzvah, function, or sensual beauty. Synagogue architecture, even that which seeks to inspire the awe and grandeur of the Jerusalem Temple, which overpowers the congregant with its grandeur fails: it is self-centered and misdirects the Jew away from the goal of

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[8] Sabar, p. 75ff

prayer.

Hiddur Mitzvah lives in the artisan who approaches the workbench like the Israelite climbing the steps to the altar with an offering. There must be the finest possible material, skillful execution, an appreciation for the beauty of the physical world, the proper balance between form and function, and above all, the inner intent to make this act an offering to God.

Why do we need such artisans and artists? The klay kodesh which are implements of intimate acts are relational symbols between God and Israel. When the groom and bride approach each other under the huppah they are adorned beautifully and reflect beauty upon each other, and so it is between God and Israel. Israel's adornments are the sacred accoutrements of the acts required to perform mitzvot, as we read in the Talmud:

> "I will be beautiful" He becomes a Nazirite. Perhaps it means, "I will be beautiful before God in mitzvot, as has been taught: This is my God and I will beautify Him," which means, I will beautify Him in mitzvot; I will build an beautiful sukkah, obtain a beautiful lulav, wear beautiful tzitzit, write a beautiful Sefer Torah and provide it with wrappings of beautiful silk.[9]

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[9] TB Nazir 2b

These are not adornments only for the priests of the Temple of Herod or for the Rabbi of the modern synagogue, but for each Jew. The Talmud goes as far as to say:

> Rabbah said: Even if his parents have left him a Sefer Torah, it is proper that he should write one of his own, as it is written: "Now therefore write you this song for you[10]."[11]

In reality, skilled hands are required for the beautiful lettering of a Sefer Torah. Jewish artists serve the Jewish people in providing beautiful sacred objects which are required as Hiddur Mitzvah for the beautiful performance of mitzvot. Yet each Jew must seek out and obtain beautiful objects for his or her own beautification, either by creating them or by commission. It is incumbent upon Jewish teachers and authorities to encourage this relationship and to beware of becoming hindrances and obstacles to the effort of the rabbis of late antiquity to place beauty in Jewish life.

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[10] Deuteronomy 31:19

[11] TB Sanhedrin 21b

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