

Art & Aesthetics

In memory of Rae Raff

Source Sheet by Elliot Raff

I. Against Idolatry

1. Exodus 20:1-6

(1) God spoke all these words, saying: (2) I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: (3) You shall have no other gods besides Me. (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. (5) You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, (6) but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

2. Deuteronomy 4:15-19

(15) For your own sake, therefore, be most careful—since you saw no shape when the LORD your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire— (16) not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever . . . you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them.

3. The JPS Torah Commentary, Exodus 20:4

In the Israelite view any symbolic representation of God must necessarily be both inadequate and a distortion . . . In the end the image itself will become the locus of reverence and an object of worship, all of which constitutes the complete nullification of the singular essence of Israelite monotheism.

II. But Hiddur Mitzvah

4. Exodus 15:2

(2) The LORD is my strength and might; He is become my deliverance. This is my God and I will enshrine Him; The God of my father, and I will exalt Him.

5. Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 15:2

Yishmael says: Is it possible to “host” one’s Master? Rather, (read “ve’anvehu” as) “I shall beautify myself (from the root “na’eh”) before Him with mitzvot — with a beautiful lulav, beautiful tzitzith, a beautiful shofar, beautiful prayer.

6. Bava Kamma 9b

Rabbi Zeira said is that for the embellishment of the performance of a mitzva, e.g., to purchase a more beautiful item used in the performance of a mitzva, one should spend up to one-third more than the cost of the standard item used to perform the mitzva

7. Exodus 26:7-13

(12) As for the overlapping excess of the cloths of the tent, the extra half-cloth shall overlap the back of the Tabernacle, (13) while the extra cubit at either end of each length of tent cloth shall hang down to the bottom of the two sides of the Tabernacle and cover it.

8. Rashi on Exodus 26:13:3

(3) יהיה מרוח על צדי המשכן SHALL HANG OVER THE SIDES OF THE TABERNACLE — on the north and on the south as I have explained above. The Torah here teaches you a rule of life — that a man should take care of his artistic objects (this the Torah does by commanding that the beautiful lower curtains should be protected by coarse upper ones) (Yalkut Shimoni on Torah 422).

9. Exodus 28:2

(2) Make sacral vestments for your brother Aaron, for dignity and adornment.

10. Ramban on Exodus 28:2:1

(1) **For honor and for splendor:** That he should be honored and glorious with honorable and glorious clothing, as the verse states (Isaiah 61:10), “as a groom who ministers in glory” - as these clothes were the clothes of royalty.

III. Relationship Issues

11. Numbers 21:8

(8) Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a seraph figure and mount it on a standard. And if anyone who is bitten looks at it, he shall recover.”

12. I Kings 7:25, 28-29

(25) It stood upon twelve oxen: three facing north, three facing west, three facing south, and three facing east, with the tank resting upon them; their haunches were all turned inward. . . . (28) The structure of the laver stands was as follows: They had insets, and there were insets within the frames; (29) and on the insets within the frames were lions, oxen, and cherubim. Above the frames was a stand; and both above and below the lions and the oxen were spirals of hammered metal.

13. II Kings 18:4

(4) He [Hezekiah] abolished the shrines and smashed the pillars and cut down the sacred post. He also broke into pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for

until that time the Israelites had been offering sacrifices to it; it was called Nehushtan.

IV. The Mishnah – Purpose and Relationship Matter

14. Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:1

(1) All images are prohibited, because each one is worshiped once a year, according to Rabbi Meir. But the Sages say: Only that which has in its hand a stick, or a bird, or an orb is prohibited. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: Any that has anything in its hand [is prohibited].

15. Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4

(4) Proklos son of Plosfos asked Rabban Gamliel [a question] in Akko, while he was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite. He said to him: “It is written in your Torah (Deuteronomy 13:18): ‘And let none of the condemned cling to your hand;’ why then are you bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite? He said to him: one does not respond [to halakhic questions] in the bathhouse. When he left, he said to him: “I did not come into her territory; she came into my territory. They did not say [when they built this bathhouse]: ‘Let us make a beautiful bathhouse for Aphrodite.’ Rather, they said: ‘Let us make Aphrodite for the beauty of the bathhouse.’ Another reason: [even] if they gave you a lot of money, you would not enter before your idolatry naked and defiled and urinating in front of it. Yet she stands on the sewer pipe and the entire nation urinates in front of her. The verse (Deuteronomy 12:3) only applies to “their gods;” that which he treats like a god is prohibited, and that which he does not treat like a god is permitted.”

16. Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 2:8

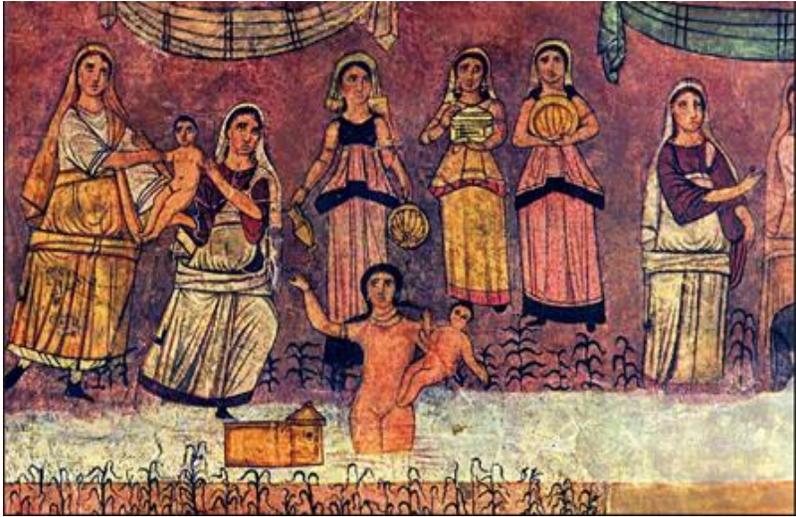
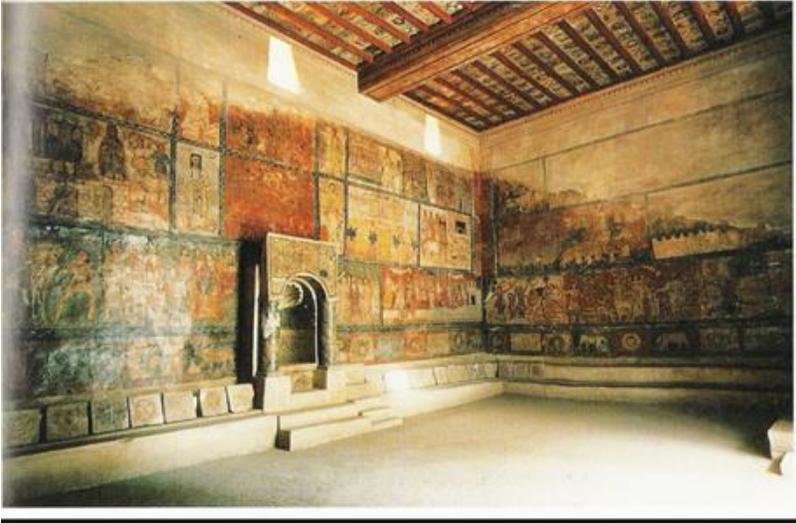
(8) Rabban Gamliel had, on a tablet, and on the walls of his loft, various drawings of the moon, which he showed to simple witnesses, and said, “Was it like this [drawing] that you saw, or like [the other one]?”

V. Mishnaic Period: Among the People . . .

17. Beit Alpha Synagogue



18. *Frescoes of the Dura-Europos Synagogue*



VI. **Rambam’s Balancing Act**

19. **Guide for the Perplexed, Part 3 45:3, 9, 11**

(3) A candlestick was then put in front of the curtain, as a sign of honour and

distinction for the Temple. For a chamber in which a continual light burns, hidden behind a curtain, makes a great impression on man . . . The duty of the Levites was the performance of vocal music . . . The object of the singing is to produce certain emotions; this object can only be attained by pleasing sounds and melodies accompanied by music, as was always the case in the Temple. Since many beasts were daily slaughtered in the holy place They were therefore commanded to burn incense there twice every day, in the morning and in the evening (Exod. 30:7, 8), in order to give the place and the garments of those who officiated there a pleasant odour.

20. Eight Chapters 5:2

Similarly, one who suffers from melancholia may rid himself of it by listening to singing and all kinds of instrumental music, by strolling through beautiful gardens and splendid buildings, by gazing upon beautiful pictures

21. Sefer Ha'Mitzvot, Negative Commandment 4

The 4th prohibition is that we are forbidden from making an image of a human being from metal, stone, wood or anything similar, even though it was not made in order to be worshipped. The reason for this is to keep us from making any images whatsoever, so that we should not entertain the false belief held by the masses — i.e. the idol worshippers — that these images have supernatural powers.

22. Mishneh Torah, Avodah Zarah v'Chukot ha'Goim, 3:10

It is forbidden to make images for beauty's sake, even it be not for idolatry; for, it is said: "Ye shall not make with Me" (Ex. 20.23), as if saying; images of either silver or gold, though they be no more than works of artistic beauty, ye shall not make, so that the erring will not err and imagine they are dedicated to idolatry. But the admonition against it is not applicable to any save to form the image of man. Therefore, the image of man should not be formed in wood, nor in lime, nor in stone, provided, however, that the image be protruding, as for instance, the figure or the laver in a palace; but if the image was homaloid, or a delineated form, such as the forms upon boards and tablets, or the forms woven in a rug, behold, such is permitted.¹⁵ *Rosh ha-Shanah, 24b; Avodah Zarah, 43b. C.*

VII. A Modern Orthodox Viewpoint

23. Rav Soleveitchik, *Confrontation*, Tradition 6 (Spring-Summer 1964), p. 7 - 8

"The hêdoné-oriented, egocentric person, the beauty-worshipper, committed to the goods of sense and craving exclusively for boundless aesthetic experience, the voluptuary, inventing needs in order to give himself the opportunity of continual gratification, the sybarite, constantly discovering new, areas where pleasure is pursued and happiness found and lost . . . The aesthete of today, like the aesthete of old, is prisoner of - no matter what her name - beauty unethicized and unreclaimed from aboriginal immediacy."



24. Rav Soleveitchik, *Halachic Man*, p. 17 (JPS)

“From the very midst of the law there arises a cosmos more splendid and beautiful than all the works of Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo. Perhaps these experiences . . . are lacking the emotional dynamic and turbulent passion of aesthetic man . . . However, they are possessed of a profound depth and a clear penetrating vision”

VIII. Rav Kook’s Radical Move.

25. Rav Kook, *HaMizrah*, pp. 352 - 354

Literature, painting, and sculpting serve to realize the potential of all the spirituality imprinted in the depths of the soul. As long as even one sketch remains hidden in the depths of the soul, missing and not yet realized, it remains the duty of art to bring it to realization.

26. Rav Kook, From letter to the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design

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

27. From “The Jewish Chronicle,” Sept. 13, 1935. <http://www.atid.org/resources/art/jc1935.pdf>

Rabbi Kook on Art
Kosher - Jewish Sculpture
REMBRANDT AND DIVINE LIGHT
by A. Melnikoff

One day I talked to the late Rabbi Kook about . . . We talked about art and he told me the following story:

“When I lived in London I used to visit the National Gallery, and my favorite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a *Tzadik*. Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt’s works, they reminded me of the legend about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light, it was so strong and pellucid, that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous when the Messiah should come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that was originally created by God Almighty.”

IX. Rembrandt’s Vision

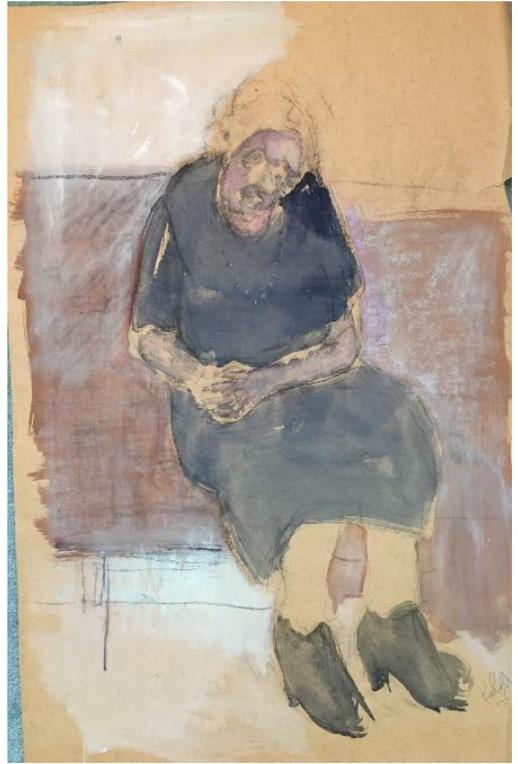
28. **Portrait of Aechje Claesdr**, 1634, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rembrandt-portrait-of-aechje-claesdr>; **Self-Portrait** 1659, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1822.html>





X. My Mother's Vision





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THE JEWISH CENTER

ROSH HASHANA II 5730
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"THE GREATEST TRIAL"

In the story of the akedah, we read that, after the angel of the Lord had stayed the hand of Abraham, and Isaac was released from his bonds on the altar, the angel declared: attah yadati ki yerei Elokim attah, "Now I know that you are a God-fearing man."

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, one of the most profound and mysterious of the Polish Hasidic leaders, asks: why the emphasis on attah, "now?" If the binding of Isaac on the akedah was the act of sacrifice that marked Abraham as a yerei Elokim, then the statement attah yadati should have come earlier in the narrative, when Abraham bound his son. Is it not out of place "now" that Isaac was saved?

The answer of the Kotzker is nothing short of amazing, even shocking. He says that for Abraham to take Isaac off the altar was many times harder than for him to offer him up in the first place! It was more painful for Abraham to release Isaac than it was to bind him -- and that is why the angel said attah yadati, first now do I know that you are really a yerei Elokim.

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Rather, the Kotzker here presents us with a new interpretation of the akedah, one which teaches an awesome psycho-spiritual insight. It is the nature of man, once he has taken a clear position in life, especially if he has suffered for it, not to retreat from it, but to mold the future along the doctrines of the past in order to vindicate his past. It is part of our normal psychology: what we have invested in time and energy, loyalty and commitment, prestige and reputation in a certain approach, we do not want to change, we cannot change, lest we thereby declare that our entire past has been invalid and inauthentic. Self-justification of our past dictates our future.

Consider what Abraham had to invest in his initial decision to offer up his son. He had to overcome such enormous inhibitions in order to bring Isaac up on the altar. The Rabbis describe the inhuman anguish that Father Abraham had to undergo between the divine commandment and the actual binding on the altar. In these three days he lived through 300 years. This was his entire posterity, his beloved Isaac -- and the Lord who had promised him that his seed would occupy his Land, now ordered him to destroy this child with his very hands! What greatness, what enormous and even inhuman

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his heart, he had to subdue the tenderest, gentlest, most powerful love -- in order to obey what seemed to be such a cruel demand of

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his Lord. In his mind's eye, Abraham saw his son dead over and over again. As he made his way up the mountain, he rehearsed the bloody scene a thousand times. His mind ached and his heart burst and his nerves threatened to snap from the death screams of his own child which he anticipated in such unspeakable agony. This was his beloved Isaac, and he was a warm and compassionate father, and now -- he had to subdue his most powerful natural instincts. Yet Abraham followed the dictates of God and sacrificed the love of a father's heart. The love of God demands that every other love be subservient to it. And so Abraham invested in his momentous decision every fibre of his humanity and his very being. And once he had decided on his path, ~~and~~ that was that. Having made his decision, Abraham was no longer the same man. He aged, and was now -- in his own image of himself -- and old and bereft father, whose light of his life had been extinguished. He cut a tragic figure in the halls of history who had to choose between family and faith,

between God and son, and, having chosen, would never sleep soundly again.

This, then, was what was involved in Abraham's submission to the divine command to sacrifice Isaac. At this time, after having made that historic, heart-rending, and soul-wrenching psychological decision; at this point when Abraham held up his hand holding the knife above Isaac, he had, in the reality of his heart and mind, already sacrificed his son on the akedah. The pain, the suffering,

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the renunciation, the conflict, all of it was over -- only the anticlimax of the actual physical act remained to be done. And now, after all this, to be told to cease, because it was only a trial, a show, would have meant invalidating all that he had done, his anguish and his fear, his commitment and his pain -- and especially his renunciation of his love for his child. When now the angel suddenly told him to stay his hand, he in effect told him: Abraham, you gave up that boy's life too quickly; morally you already spilt the child's blood -- and it was not really necessary: you marked yourself as a murderer in the name of a higher cause, and, after all that, you are not even going to receive the reward of knowing that

that, you are not even going to receive the reward of knowing that your sacrifice was a real one. Who would have blamed Abraham for turning to God and saying: "God, are You playing games with me? Once I had decided to raise my hand over the akedah, to stretch out my hand against my son, the entire story was over for me. Couldn't You tell me before it was only a game? Why, in heaven's name, did You force me into a sacrifice of heroism, and then pull back and reduce a sacred drama to a pretentious gesture?" To be told to release Isaac