



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

בס"ד

ויקהל תשע"ט
Vayakhel 5779

**The Beauty
of Holiness or
the Holiness
of Beauty**

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT VAYAKHEL IN A NUTSHELL

Immediately after Moses returns from the top of Mount Sinai, having convinced God to forgive the people for the sin of the Golden Calf, he gathers everyone together and commands them, first about Shabbat, and then about the making of the Tabernacle. The parsha repeats much of what was said earlier in parshat Terumah, with the main

difference being that there we read the instructions for building the Tabernacle, and here those instructions are followed and the Tabernacle is actually built. The people are generous in contributing to its construction, and Betzalel and Oholiab, the craftsmen, fashion the various parts of it.



THE CORE IDEA

Then Moses said to the Israelites, "See, the Lord has chosen Betzalel, son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and He has filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, understanding and knowledge in all kinds of crafts – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship." (Exodus 35:30-33)

In both last week's parsha, Ki Tissa and in this week's parsha, Vayakhel, we meet Betzalel, the builder of the Tabernacle. He is a rare character-type in the Hebrew Bible – the artist, the craftsman, the maker of beauty in the service of God, the man who, together with Oholiab, created the Tabernacle and the objects used in it. Judaism – in sharp contrast to ancient Greece – was always a little uncomfortable with the visual arts. The reason is clear: We have a biblical ban against sculptured images because of idolatry. Historically, images, charms, icons and statues were linked in the ancient world with pagan religious practices. The idea that one could worship "the work of men's hands" was the opposite message of biblical Judaism.

The key to understanding Betzalel and his artistic role lies in his name. It means "In the shadow of God." Betzalel's gift lay in his ability to communicate, through his work, that art is the shadow cast by God. Religious art is never "art for art's sake." Unlike secular art, it points to something beyond itself. The Tabernacle itself was a kind of microcosm of the universe, with a unique function: that in it you felt the presence of something beyond – what the Torah calls "the glory of God" which "filled the Tabernacle" (Exodus 40:35).

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

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why is Judaism uncomfortable with visual art (especially sculptures)?
2. How can art be "the shadow cast by God"?
3. Have you ever been inspired by a piece of art, or found it connected you to God?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

God the Artist

By Angela Morgan

God, when you thought of a pine tree, how did you think of a star? How did you dream of the Milky Way to guide us from afar? How did you think of a clean brown pool where flecks of shadows are?

God, when you thought of a cobweb, how did you think of dew? How did you know a spider's house had shingles bright and new? How did you know the human folk would love them like they do?

God, when you patterned a bird song, flung on a silver string, how did you know the ecstasy that crystal call would bring? How did you think of a bubbling throat and a darling speckled wing?

God, when you chiseled a raindrop, how did you think of a stem, bearing a lovely satin leaf to hold the tiny gem? How did you know a million drops would deck the morning's hem?

Why did you mate the moonlit night with the honeysuckle vines? How did you know Madeira bloom distilled ecstatic wines? How did you weave the velvet disk where tangled perfumes are?

God, when you thought of a pine tree, how did you think of a star?

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think this poem is entitled 'God the Artist'?
2. What similarities do you think art and nature have? Can you see God in both?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Judaism is a culture of the ear, not the eye. As a religion of the invisible God, it attaches sanctity to words heard, rather than objects seen. Hence there is a generally negative attitude within Judaism towards representational art.

Art is not forbidden as such; there is a difference between three-dimensional and two-dimensional representation. As Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (c. 1215-1293) made clear, "[An illustrated book] does not infringe the biblical prohibition ... [illustrations] are merely flat patches of colour lacking sufficient materiality [to constitute a graven image]." Indeed several ancient synagogues in Israel had quite elaborate mosaics. In general, however, art was less emphasised in Judaism than in Christian cultures in which the Hellenistic (ancient Greece) influence was strong.

It was Samson Raphael Hirsch who distinguished ancient Greece from ancient Israel in terms of the contrast between aesthetics (the philosophy of beauty) and ethics. In his comment on the verse "May God enlarge Japheth and let him dwell in the tents of Shem" (Genesis 9:27), he observes: "The stem of Japheth reached its fullest blossoming in the Greeks; that of Shem in the Hebrews ... Japheth has ennobled the world aesthetically. Shem has enlightened it spiritually and morally."

Yet as we see from the case of Betzalel, Judaism is not uninterested in aesthetics. The concept of *hiddur mitzva*, "beautifying the commandment," meant, for the sages, that we should strive to fulfil the commands in the most visually

pleasing way. The priestly garments were meant to be "for honour and adornment" (Exodus 28:2). The very terms applied to Betzalel – wisdom, understanding and knowledge – are applied by the book of Proverbs to God Himself as creator of the universe: "The law and the Lord founded the earth by wisdom; He established the heavens by understanding; By His knowledge the depths burst apart, And the skies distilled dew. (Proverbs: 3:19-20)

The strongest positive statement on art of which I am aware was made by Rabbi Abraham ha-Cohen Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of (pre-State) Israel, describing his time in London during the First World War:

When I lived in London, I would visit the National Gallery, and the paintings that I loved the most were those of Rembrandt. In my opinion Rembrandt was a saint. When I first saw Rembrandt's paintings, they reminded me of the rabbinic statement about the creation of light. When God created the light [on the first day], it was so strong and luminous that it was possible to see from one end of the world to the other. And God feared that the wicked would make use of it. What did He do? He secreted it for the righteous in the world to come. But from time to time there are great men whom God blesses with a vision of that hidden light. I believe that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his paintings is that light which God created on Genesis day.

Rembrandt is known to have had a special affection for Jews. He visited them in his home town of Amsterdam, and painted

them, as well as many scenes from the Hebrew Bible. I suspect that what Rabbi Kook saw in his paintings, though, was Rembrandt's ability to convey the beauty of ordinary people. He makes no attempt (most notably in his self-portraits) to beautify or idealise his subjects. The light that shines from them is, simply, their humanity.

The Greeks, and many in the Western world who inherited their tradition, believed in the holiness of beauty. Jews believed in the opposite: *hadrat kodesh*, the beauty of holiness. "Give to the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (Psalms 29:2).



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Judaism also recognises a dual epistemology. There are two ways of knowing. One is called *chochma*, 'wisdom', the other is Torah, 'teaching, instruction, law, guidance'. The difference was stated clearly by the Sages: "If you are told that there is wisdom among the nations, believe it. If you are told there is Torah among the nations, do not believe it" (Midrash Rabbah Eichah 17).

We can now state the difference between the two modes of knowledge. *Chochma* is the truth we discover; Torah is the truth we inherit. *Chochma* is the universal heritage of humankind; Torah is the specific heritage of Israel. *Chochma* is what we attain by being in the image of God; Torah is what guides Jews as the people of God. *Chochma* is acquired by seeing and reasoning; Torah is received by listening and responding. *Chochma* tells us what is; Torah tells us what ought to be. *Chochma* is about facts; Torah is about commands. *Chochma* yields descriptive, scientific laws; Torah yields prescriptive, behavioural laws. *Chochma* is

about creation; Torah is about revelation... We can now state the following. *Chochma* has an honourable place within the Jewish worldview. It has religious dignity. It is the gift of God. It is available to everyone, because everyone is in the image of God.

We can also hazard the following definition: *chochma* is what allows us to understand the world as God's work (science) and the human person as his image (the humanities).

Future Tense, pp. 219-222

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Where does art fit into Judaism's epistemology (theory of how we know things) according to Rabbi Sacks?
2. According to these ideas, what do science, art, and Torah all have in common?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why does Judaism have a complicated relationship with the visual arts?
2. What is the difference between the approaches of Maimonides and Rabbi Kook to art?
3. What message is contained in the name "Betzael"?
4. On Rabbi Kook's approach to art:
 - a. Why does Rabbi Kook describe Rembrandt as "a saint"?
 - b. According to Rabbi Sacks, what is the source of the light in Rembrandt's paintings?
 - c. What does this have to do with the message hidden in Betzael's name?
5. Do you find art is a route to spirituality and a way for you to connect to God? If not visual art, are there other forms of art (such as music or poetry) that you find moving?



QUESTION TIME

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THE CORE IDEA

1. The core value of Judaism is ethical monotheism – the belief in one God who guides humanity in morality and ethical behaviour. Therefore one of the central prohibitions of Judaism is against the worship of other “gods”. Historically, idolatry (the general term for polytheism – worshipping multiple gods) often took the form of the worship of graven images that had been created by man. Because of this, Judaism has a distrust of all graven images, even those that were not created for this purpose. This discomfort was sometimes even extended to other visual arts such as paintings and mosaics.
2. The world around us is a reflection of God’s greatness. It is an expression of God’s spiritual truth and the beauty of the holiness of God, which can be accessed through exploring the natural sciences. So too with the social sciences which aim to understand humanity (which is in itself an integral part of God’s creation). The arts are similarly a cultural expression of the spiritual goodness contained in human beings. The message of Betzalel’s name, in the shadow of God, is just as the sciences are a reflection of God, so too can the arts be.
3. For some people art may be a difficult medium through which to connect to God (or in fact to others). However, if we widen the definition of art to its broadest sense, it could include contemporary popular culture (for some this could even include sports as an expression of the creativity and beauty of man and man’s endeavours!). All of these are examples of culture in its broadest sense, offering people the opportunity to find a spiritual connection to God and the world through whichever mode of art and culture that best speaks to them. So if visual art doesn’t do it for you, there could well be another mode of culture that does.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. This poem describes the beauty of nature, and reflects on God as the creator of nature. By describing God as an artist in the title of the poem, the poet is comparing an artist who uses paint on canvas to create beauty just as God created beauty when He created the world.
2. Apart from the beauty in both art and nature (see answer 1), just as nature is created by God and is a path to be inspired by and connect to God, so art is also indirectly created by God (because it is created by humans who are created themselves in the image of God) and therefore art can also be a path to become inspired by and connect to God. Nature and art are just two examples of potential paths to God.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Art fits into the area of knowledge Rabbi Sacks terms *Chochma*. *Chochma* includes the natural sciences and the social sciences, as well as cultural expressions of humanity, such as the visual arts and literature. They are all ways of exploring and understanding the world that God created, and the living creations that exist in this world, including humans.
2. Science, art and Torah are all ways to understand God and the world He created. They are each created by God Himself, whether directly or indirectly and therefore each one is a path to understand and connect to God, and the world that He created. Science helps us to understand the world God created, and art, as an expression of humanity, helps us to understand humanity, and experience the creative spark that humans were given by God. Torah is also a creation of God, and this is a direct path to understanding and connecting to God.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See answer 1 of *The Core Idea*.
2. While Maimonides admits that art could be a source of spiritual healing and calm for a soul that is “melancholy”, according to Rabbi Sacks, Maimonides sees art only as a means to an end – as a solution to a spiritual problem. Rabbi Kook on the other hand, saw the possibility that art could contain spiritual beauty in and of itself, and therefore gave it intrinsic spiritual value.
3. The name Betzalel means “in the shadow of God”. Betzalel’s gift as an artist was in his ability to reflect God in his artistic work. The message in his name is that art can be an expression of the spiritual beauty of the world and a means to connect to God.
4. On Rabbi Kook’s approach to art:
 - a) In the description of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, light is created on the first day yet the sun and the constellations were only created on the fourth. Rabbinic tradition sees this as a tension in the text and interprets the light created on the first day as a spiritual light that was from that point on hidden until the end of days (*Or Ganuz*), with only the very righteous able to perceive it until then. Rabbi Kook believed that Rembrandt could see this light and had found a way to represent it in his paintings. This must have made Rembrandt one of the very righteous (and therefore he describes him as “a saint”). Rabbi Kook enjoyed visiting the National Gallery to experience this light in Rembrandt’s paintings.
 - b) The spiritual light that Rembrandt managed to express in his paintings seems to emanate from the people themselves, who are in every other way ordinary. He suggests that the source of the light is their very humanity. It seems clear he is referring to the *Tzelem Elokim* (“Image of God”) that the Torah describes as the core of what it means to be human. Perhaps Rabbi Sacks is even suggesting that the *Or Ganuz* (hidden light) from the first day of creation was hidden in the soul of every human, and only truly righteous people can see this light in others.
 - c) This explains how art is an expression of our humanity, and can be a means for connecting to God and to the spiritual dimension of the universe. This is why Rabbi Sacks describes art as “the shadow of God” (the meaning of Betzalel’s name).
5. See *The Core Idea* answer 3.