

BEAUTY
AND
UGLINESS



Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum



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By Rabbi Peretz Wolf-Prusan

Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

In this session we will explore connections between Jewish visual art and perceptions of beauty. Humans in all cultures use art to capture experiences of beauty, though different cultures' aesthetics and customs may vary. Judaism is no exception. There is a rich variety of Jewish art available to us, which helps us connect to our history, culture and religion. Today we will look specifically at Jewish religious art, using Jewish texts to discover more about how the making of art connects with beauty.

► Ask:

1. What varieties of Jewish art have you encountered?
2. What Jewish art do you have in your home? How does it enhance your home? Do you consider it beautiful?
3. Have you ever been inside a beautiful synagogue? What made it beautiful?
4. Do you feel that all art is beautiful?

Part One: Beautiful Spaces (20 minutes)

There is a tradition of sacred artistic creation that goes back to the description of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) in the Book of Exodus. The *Mishkan* was God's dwelling place among the Israelites in the desert and the "place of meeting". This detailed chapter of Exodus further spells out every single measurement required to build the *Mishkan*. This text is significant because it is a blueprint for production of ritual objects and of a sacred space.

Text #1: Exodus 26:1. English translation [**bold text**] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in *The Steinsaltz Bible*, forthcoming from Korean Publishers Jerusalem.

ואת-הַמִּשְׁכָּן תַּעֲשֶׂה עֹשֶׂר יְרִיעֹת יָשָׁם מִשְׁזָר וּתְכַלֶּת וְאַרְגָּמֶן וְתִלְעֵת שְׁנֵי כִרְבָּיִם מִעֲשֵׂה חֹשֶׁב תַּעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם:

And you shall make the Tabernacle, within which you shall place the aforementioned vessels, **of ten curtains** made **of spun white linen** (see *Yevamot* 4b; Ibn Ezra on Exodus 25:4), **and** with it shall be twined woolen threads dyed **sky blue wool, and reddish-purple wool, and scarlet wool.** **With artfully worked likenesses of cherubs shall you make them**, the curtains. Craftsmanship was required to ensure that the form of cherubim appeared on every curtain. According to some opinions, there was a different picture on each side of the fabric of the curtains (see Jerusalem Talmud, *Shekalim* 8:2; *Yoma* 72b; Rashi and Ibn Ezra *ad loc*).

► Ask:

1. Why should the *Mishkan* look beautiful?
2. How might art be seen as an act of devotion in Judaism?

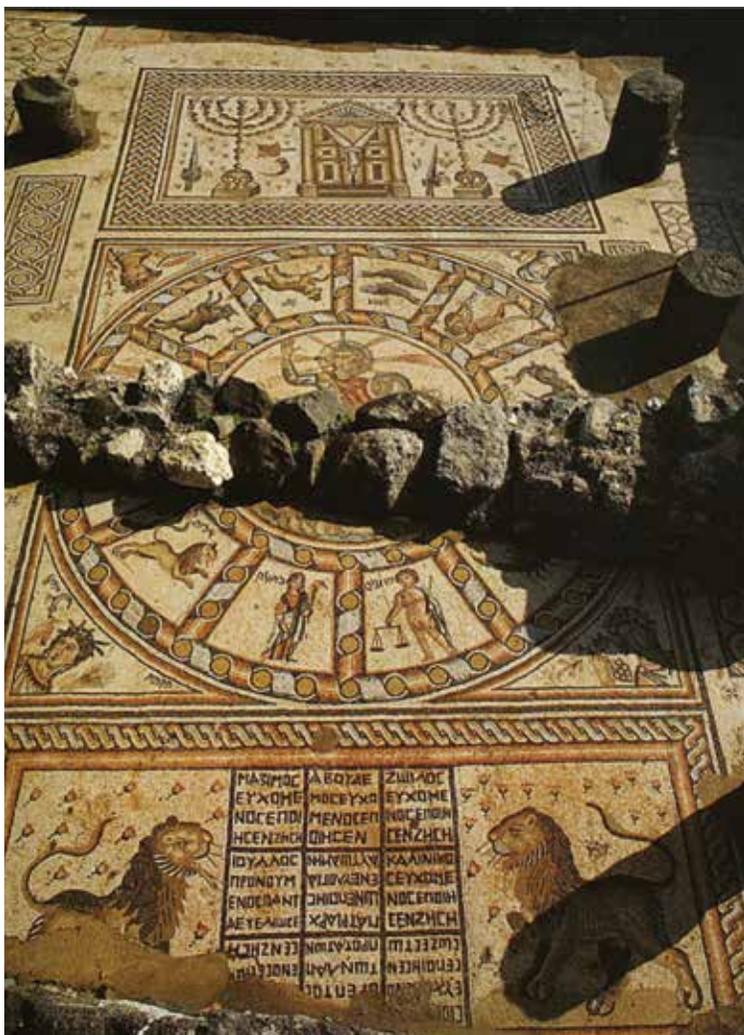
Appreciating Beauty and Art

Let's look at some examples of how Jews throughout history and in different countries have made religious art in order to carry on this tradition of beautiful spaces that began with the *Mishkan* itself.

➤ Ask participants to look at the following images together in *chavruta*.

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together. With your *chavruta* partner, look carefully at the pictures and guiding questions that follow.

Facilitator's Note: Feel free to enhance this set of images with your own examples.



Left: Hamat Tiberias (4th century CE)

Photo: Zev Radovan. *Sed-Rajna, Gabrielle*. #311, p. 414, *Jewish Art*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc, Publishers, NY (1997).

Above, and detail: Recreation of the Gwoździec synagogue in Warsaw, Poland (17th century).

Image source: bit.ly/gdjl-polin1

Image source: bit.ly/gdjl-polin2

Samples of the inscriptions in the images from the Gwoździec Synagogue:

- “Reish Lakish says one who has a synagogue in his city and does not go there to pray will be esteemed as a bad neighbor.” (Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 8a)
- “Whenever God comes to a synagogue and God does not find ten men, God immediately becomes angry.” (Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 6b)
- “Who is among you that is in awe of the LORD, that obeys the voice of His servant?” (Isaiah 50:10)
- “One who says, ‘Amen,’ in this world will merit to respond, ‘Amen’ in the world to come.” (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 7:1)

➤ Discuss these questions in *chavruta*:

1. What do you see? Are you surprised by what is depicted in any of these images?
2. What are some of the similarities and differences between the art of these two synagogues?
3. Do you think they are beautiful? Why or why not?
4. What is the most beautiful place where you have prayed? What made it beautiful?
5. How might artwork or beautiful surroundings enhance your relationship with Judaism?

➤ Bring the group back together and ask a few *chavruta* pairs to share their answers.

The mosaic floor of the synagogue in Tiberias, Israel, dates from the 4th century CE. One of the earliest excavated examples of ancient Jewish art, it survives intact to this day. The mosaic depicts a central zodiac resplendent with the four seasons, a depiction of the Ark of the Covenant with menorahs, and text in ancient Greek. The detail of the figures and text speaks to the skill of those ancient craftspeople.

The synagogue at Gwoździec was built in the 1640s in Poland (now Ukraine). It survived damage during WWI but was burned down in WWII. The recently-completed recreation is part of the permanent exhibition at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. The ceiling and *bimah* (the central raised platform where the Torah scroll is read) are richly decorated, with carved and painted animals amid detailed scroll-work. The texts painted in the borders and corners include quotes from Midrash and Talmud.

Imagine you are inside the Gwoździec synagogue. When you look up and read the inscriptions from the Bible and Talmud, imagine how you would feel about the texts while in those beautiful surroundings. Seeing the texts there, you might even read them as a narrative. You might think, “I am a good neighbor!” or “I am in a *minyán*. The heavens are happy!” You might feel that you are in awe and one with the will of God, and that you have a place in the world to come. The text inscriptions are part of the beautiful space, and the beauty of the space imbues the texts there with a more personal sense of meaning.

Echoes of the ancient synagogue are found in the 17th century synagogue in its representations of zodiacs, ritual objects and sacred texts. There is a deep connection between the presence of religious text in beautiful spaces and the sacredness of that space.

The roots of Judaism's relationship with artistic works is complicated by the Second Commandment, which prohibits idolatry (making or worshipping idols). Some interpreted this commandment as prohibiting some forms of artistic expression, especially sculpture. This makes the Jewish approach to visual art very different from the other major world cultures, especially the Western aesthetic tradition.

Part Two: Does Beauty Have Boundaries? (15 minutes)

In Text #2 we read the Second Commandment.

➤ Ask a participant to read Text #2 aloud.

Text #2: Exodus 20:3-4, 20. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in *The Steinsaltz Bible*, forthcoming from Koren Publishers Jerusalem.

לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על-פני לא תעשה-להם גִּסְלוֹ וְכָל-תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת וְאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ ... לא תעשׂוּן אֵתִי אֱלֹהֵי לִסְרָה וְאֱלֹהֵי זָהָב לֹא תעשׂוּ לָכֶם:

3 The previous declaration leads to the demand for exclusivity: **You shall have no other gods before Me**, i.e., together with Me. There is no other God but Me. **4** Furthermore, faith alone is not enough. **You shall not make for you an idol** to worship, **nor any** item that is an **image of that which is in the heavens above, or that which is on the earth below, or that which is in the water beneath the earth**, i.e., anywhere on earth. The phrase: “That which is in the water beneath the earth,” might also allude to large creatures or primeval sea monsters, which were considered powerful beings that people would worship... **20** Since you did not see any sort of image in your encounter with Me, **You shall not make with Me** or for Me **gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves**. Do not attempt to represent Me by means of an image or a bodily form. However, it is permitted to worship God through a ritual that involves physical objects, but only if these fulfill specific conditions...

In Text #3, Maimonides offers a further explanation of the prohibition from the Bible. Maimonides (also known as Rambam) lived in Spain and Egypt in the 12th century; he was a physician and philosopher whose extensive works have been an essential influence within Judaism.

➤ Ask a participant to read Text #3 aloud.

Text # 3: Maimonides. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Foreign Worship 3:10. English translation by Eliyahu Touger.

אסור לעשות צורות לנוי ואף על פי שאינה עבודת פוכבים שנגאמר (שמות כ כ) “לא תעשׂוּן אֵתִי” פְּלוֹמֵר צוֹרוֹת שֶׁל כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב שְׂאִינָם אֵלָא לְנוֹי כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יִטְעוּ בְּהֵן הַטּוֹעִים וְיִדְמוּ שֶׁהֵם לְעִבּוֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים. וְאִין אִסוּר לְצוּר לְנוֹי אֵלָא צוֹרֵת הָאֲדָם בְּלִבָּד. לְפִיכָה אִין מְצִיָּרִים לֹא בְּעֵץ וְלֹא בְּסִיד וְלֹא בְּאֶבֶן צוֹרֵת הָאֲדָם. וְהוּא שֶׁתְּהִיָּה הַצּוֹרֵה בּוֹלְטָת כְּגוֹן הַצִּיּוֹר וְהַפִּיּוֹר שֶׁבִּטְרַקְלִין וְכִיּוֹצָא בְּהֵן וְאִם צָר לּוֹקֵהָ. אֲבָל אִם הִיתָה הַצּוֹרֵה מְשֻׁקְעֵת אוֹ צוֹרֵה שֶׁל סִימְנִין כְּגוֹן הַצּוֹרוֹת שֶׁעַל גְּבֵי הַלְיוּחוֹת וְהַטְּבִלִיּוֹת אוֹ צוֹרוֹת שְׂרוֹקְמִין בְּאֶרֶץ הָרִי אֵלּוּ מְתוּרוֹת:

It is prohibited to make images for decorative purposes, even though they do not represent false deities, as [implied by Exodus 20:20]: “Do not make with Me [gods of silver and gods of gold].” This refers even to images of gold and silver which are intended only for decorative purposes, lest others err and view them as deities.

It is forbidden to make decorative images of the human form alone. Therefore, it is forbidden to make human images with wood, cement, or stone. This [prohibition] applies when the image is protruding — for example, images and sculptures made in a hallway and the like. A person who makes such an image is [liable for] lashes.

In contrast, it is permitted to make human images that are engraved or painted — e.g., portraits, whether on wood or on stone — or that are part of a tapestry.

► Ask:

1. What is the fear motivating this prohibition? How might Jewish art be affected by this prohibition?
2. How does this explanation by Maimonides change your understanding of the Biblical text? What concern is Maimonides expressing?

While the Second Commandment prohibits a “sculptured image”, Maimonides clarifies the prohibition as regarding the “human form.” Maimonides’ concern is that by making such images we — the observers — might be tempted to worship them.

In the Mishnah we encounter this related story about a rabbi, Rabban Gamliel, using a bathhouse decorated with a statue of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty and love.

Text #4: Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4.

שאל פרוקלוס בן פלוספוס את רבן גמליאל בעכו, שהיה רוחץ במרחץ של אפרודיטי, אמר לו, כתוב בתורתכם, ולא ידבק בידך מאומה מן התרם. מפני מה אתה רוחץ במרחץ של אפרודיטי. אמר לו, אין משיבין במרחץ. וכשיצא אמר לו, אני לא באתי בגבולה, היא באתה בגבולי, אין אומרים, נעשה מרחץ לאפרודיטי גוי, אלא אומרים, נעשה אפרודיטי גוי למרחץ. דבר אחר, אם נותנין לה ממון הרבה, אי אתה נכנס לעבודה זרה שלך ערום ובעל קרי ומלשתינן בפניה, וזו עומדת על פי הכיב וכל העם מלשתינן לפניה. לא נאמר אלא אלהיהם. את שנוהג בו משום אלוה, אסור. ואת שאינו נוהג בו משום אלוה, מתיר.

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.”

► Ask:

1. What surprises you about this text?
2. How do you find yourself distinguishing between decoration, beautiful art, and things you should avoid?
3. Do you think Rabban Gamliel found the statue beautiful even if it didn’t hold religious significance for him?

In this colorful story, the text is making a very significant distinction between a beautiful bathhouse made *for Aphrodite* and the bathhouse that uses Aphrodite *for the beauty of the bathhouse*. The intention of the sculptor and purpose of the sculpture determine whether art is idolatrous or decorative regardless of its beauty. In contrast to many other religions that include sculptures of human forms in art and worship, cultural Judaism has traditionally produced fewer images of people in any medium. Nevertheless, Judaism has largely embraced a strong artistic culture, enhancing and beautifying many aspects of our religion.

Part Three: Appreciating the Beauty of Art (15 minutes)

Jewish philosophers and commentators had a great deal to say about appreciating beauty and art. The following texts address the boundaries of the Second Commandment.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook (1865-1935) was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, one of the founders of Religious Zionism, and a renowned scholar. In Text #5 we read an excerpt of a letter that he wrote in 1907 to the founders of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, Israel's national school of art.

➤ **Read Text #5 aloud.**

Text #5: “Letters on the Opening of Bezalel”. Rav A. Y. Kook, *Selected Letters*. Translated and annotated by Tzvi Feldman.

The very sight of our talented brothers, masters of aesthetics and art is heartwarming, as they establish their rightful position in the broad, central highway of world culture, carried by a divine spirit to Jerusalem.

They beautify our holy city, a capital that is as a seal upon the national heart, with aesthetics, design, dignity and splendor which will also be a source of blessing and benefit...

The whole area of ornamentation, beautification and painting is permitted to Jews. There is only one limit, one line...long in its quality and not its quantity. This limit conveys much spiritually 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.”

➤ **Ask:**

1. What do you notice about Rav Kook's enthusiasm for art and beautification? What concerns him?
2. Why is it significant that Rav Kook had to offer this kind of encouragement to an art school at the time of its founding?

In Text #6, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz offers this comment on beautiful Jewish and other symbols and art in one's home. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

➤ **Read Text #6 aloud.**

Text #6: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “The Home”. *Teshuvah*.

...While the great Rabbis of every generation have cautioned our people against excessive self-adornment, they have encouraged the decoration and beautification of ritual objects. The prayer book, the *Kiddush* cup, the *etrog* box, the vessels of *Havdalah* — all have inspired artists and artisans. No set form is imposed, nor is there any need to adhere to the aesthetics of earlier generations. One can, of course, retain the traditional forms if so inclined. But throughout Jewish history, our people have usually adhered to certain motifs while modifying the technique and application according to the period and locale. In any case, beautiful ritual objects are part of the making of a Jewish home.

Appreciating Beauty and Art

The issue of decoration also has a negative aspect: Just as there are objects and symbols that breathe a Jewish spirit — for example, the ancient symbol of the *mizrah*, a paper or cloth hanging indicating the direction of Jerusalem — there are also objects that negate a Jewish spirit. Symbols or artistic motifs associated with other religions and cultures are probably not permissible in a Jewish home. The owner may not be interested in the meaning of such objects but only in their beauty; nevertheless, when they are prominently displayed they are bound to have an effect, however subtle, on those who see them. There is a place for such things in albums, perhaps, but not on walls or otherwise in permanent view.

➤ Ask:

1. From your experience, what does Rabbi Steinsaltz mean when he writes that, “Beautiful ritual objects are part of the making of a Jewish home”?
2. How might the beautiful objects we see or surround ourselves with affect us or our behaviors?
3. Can we appreciate the beauty of the sacred object without considering its sacred character?

According to both of these texts, there is a spiritual value, beyond the aesthetic, to having beautiful objects. Although there have been historical concerns about the boundaries of idolatry, Jewish tradition also encourages the creation of art, because of its great potential for spiritual value.

➤ Ask:

1. Is beauty in art always linked to the sacred? How?
2. What do we gain from possessing beautiful objects?
3. What are some examples of beautiful objects or art in your life that are not used in rituals?

Beauty arouses in us emotions that cause us to treasure the source of those feelings. This makes us more invested in an object and enhances the other feelings we have towards an object (or a person or a place).

Conclusion (5 minutes)

In our final text, Rabbi Steinsaltz encourages us to consider that there are different ways of seeing an object and experiencing its beauty.

➤ **Read Text #7 aloud.**

Text #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. *In the Beginning.*

To penetrate further into the nature of the two kinds of knowing, let us recognize that an emotional grasp is also a way of wholeness, a way of seeing an object in a certain entirety for oneself, while the objective or scientific comprehension is being certain about the details, knowing what it is made of. The difference between the poet who gazes at a flower, admiring its beauty, and the botanist who counts the petals is a difference in what one is looking at as well as in the emotional diversity.

➤ **Ask:**

1. According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, what are some ways in which we can “gaze” at a thing?
2. Does turning one’s gaze onto a thing make it beautiful? How might this influence those standing in a synagogue or in the *Mishkan*?

Recognizing that things can be beautiful — that beauty does exist — is part of how we attribute value to objects we encounter. The physical beauty of objects made or designed artistically serves to capture the emotional and symbolic significance of experiences in our lives. We create art and consume art as part of a very deep human impulse to express ourselves and share our experiences with others. Whether in the *Mishkan*, in ancient synagogues or in our homes today, Jewish art can connect us with beauty and perhaps even with awe.

Part One: Beautiful Spaces

Text #1: Exodus 26:1. English translation [**bold text**] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in *The Steinsaltz Bible*, forthcoming from Korean Publishers Jerusalem.

וְאֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן תַּעֲשֶׂה עֵשׂוּר יָרִיעֹת יָשָׁן מִשְׁזָר וְתַבְלַת אֶרְגָּמון וְתַלְעֵת שְׁנֵי כַרְבִּים מִעֲשֵׂה חֹשֶׁב תַּעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם:

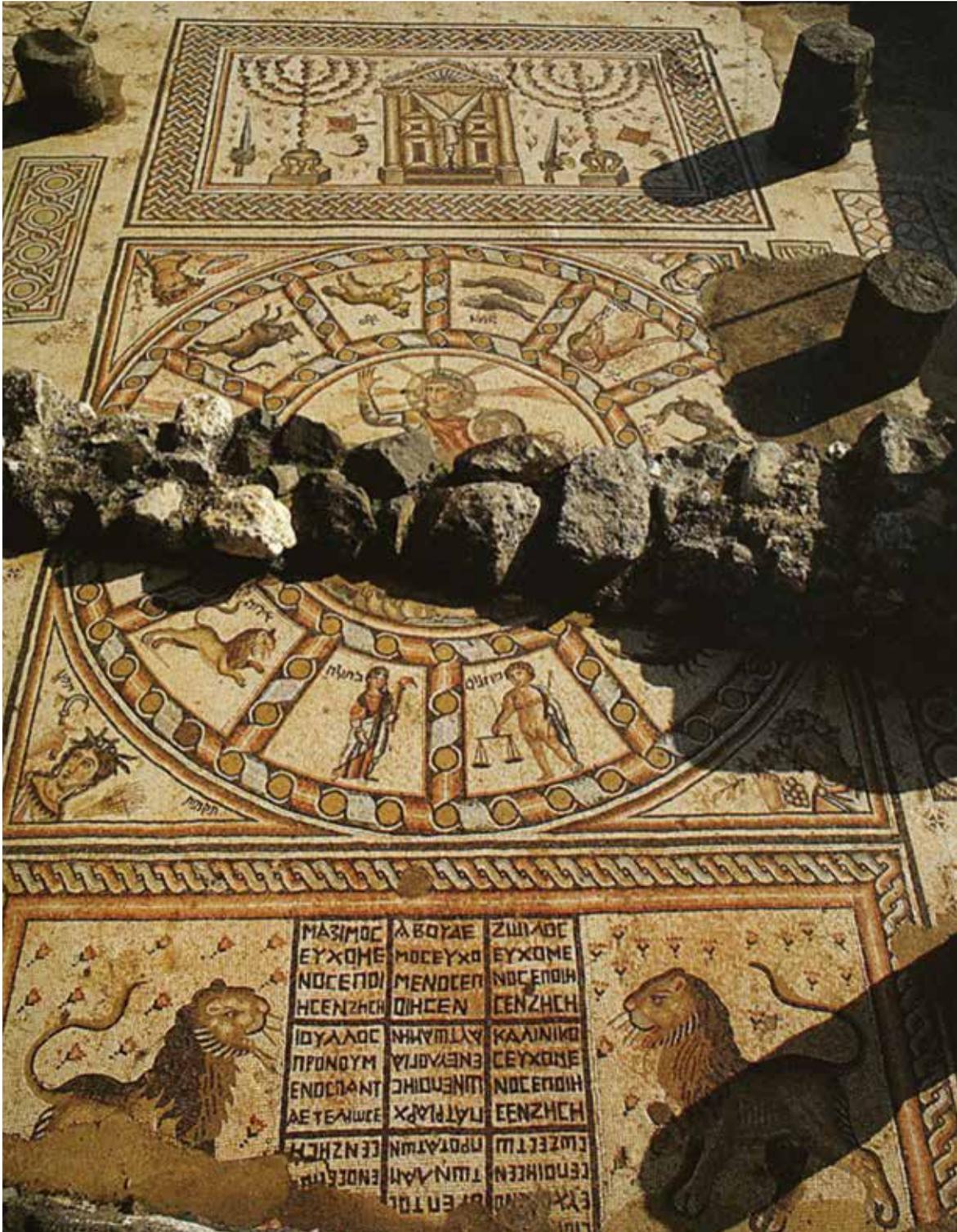
And you shall make the Tabernacle, within which you shall place the aforementioned vessels, **of ten curtains** made of **spun white linen** (see *Yevamot* 4b; *Ibn Ezra* on *Exodus* 25:4), **and** with it shall be twined woolen threads dyed **sky blue wool, and reddish-purple wool, and scarlet wool.** **With artfully worked** likenesses of **cherubs shall you make them**, the curtains. Craftsmanship was required to ensure that the form of cherubim appeared on every curtain. According to some opinions, there was a different picture on each side of the fabric of the curtains (see *Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim* 8:2; *Yoma* 72b; *Rashi* and *Ibn Ezra ad loc*).

Examples of Jewish Art

Right, and detail: Recreation of the Gwoździec synagogue in Warsaw, Poland (17th century).

Image source: bit.ly/gdjl-polin1
Image source: bit.ly/gdjl-polin2





Above: Hamat Tiberias (4th century CE)

Photo: Zev Radovan. *Sed-Rajna, Gabrielle*. #311, p. 414, *Jewish Art*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc, Publishers, NY (1997).

Part Two: Does Beauty Have Boundaries?

Text #2: Exodus 20:3-4, 20. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in *The Steinsaltz Bible*, forthcoming from Koren Publishers Jerusalem.

לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על-פני. לא תעשה-לך פסל וכל-תמונה אשר בשמים ומעל ואשר בארץ מתחת ומעלה במים... לא תעשיו אתי אלהי כסף ואלהי זָהָב לא תעשיו לכם:

3 The previous declaration leads to the demand for exclusivity: **You shall have no other gods before Me**, i.e., together with Me. There is no other God but Me. 4 Furthermore, faith alone is not enough. **You shall not make for you an idol** to worship, **nor any** item that is an **image of that which is in the heavens above, or that which is on the earth below, or that which is in the water beneath the earth**, i.e., anywhere on earth. The phrase: “That which is in the water beneath the earth,” might also allude to large creatures or primeval sea monsters, which were considered powerful beings that people would worship...20 Since you did not see any sort of image in your encounter with Me, **You shall not make with Me** or for Me **gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves**. Do not attempt to represent Me by means of an image or a bodily form. However, it is permitted to worship God through a ritual that involves physical objects, but only if these fulfill specific conditions...

Text # 3: Maimonides. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Foreign Worship 3:10. English translation by Eliyahu Touger.

אסור לעשות צורות לגוי ואף על פי שאינה עבודת פוכבים שנקאמר (שמות כ כ) “לא תעשון אתי” כלומר צורות של כסף וזהב שאינם אלא לגוי כדי שלא ישעו בהן הטועים וידמו שהם לעבודת פוכבים. ואין אסור לצור לגוי אלא צורת האדם בלבד. לפיכך אין מצירים לא בעץ ולא בסיד ולא באבן צורת האדם. והוא שתהיה הצורה בולטת כגון הציור והפיור שבטראקליו וכיוצא בהן ואם צר לוקה. אבל אם היתה הצורה משקעת או צורה של סימנין כגון הצורות שעל גבי הלוחות והטבליות או צורות שרוקמין באריג הרי אלו מתרות:

It is prohibited to make images for decorative purposes, even though they do not represent false deities, as [implied by Exodus 20:20]: “Do not make with Me [gods of silver and gods of gold].” This refers even to images of gold and silver which are intended only for decorative purposes, lest others err and view them as deities.

It is forbidden to make decorative images of the human form alone. Therefore, it is forbidden to make human images with wood, cement, or stone. This [prohibition] applies when the image is protruding — for example, images and sculptures made in a hallway and the like. A person who makes such an image is [liable for] lashes.

In contrast, it is permitted to make human images that are engraved or painted — e.g., portraits, whether on wood or on stone — or that are part of a tapestry.

Text #4: Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4.

שאל פרוקלוס בן פלוספוס את רבן גמליאל בעכו, שהיה רוחץ במרחץ של אפרודיטי, אמר לו, כתוב בתורתכם, ולא נדבק בנדף מאומה מן התרם. מפני מה אתה רוחץ במרחץ של אפרודיטי. אמר לו, אין משיבין במרחץ. וכשנצא אמר לו, אני לא באתי בגבולה, היא באתה בגבולי, אין אומרים, נעשה מרחץ לאפרודיטי גוי, אלא אומרים, נעשה אפרודיטי גוי למרחץ. דבר אחר, אם נותנין לה ממון הרבה, אי אתה נכנס לעבודה זרה שלך ערום ובעל קרי ומשתיין בפניה, וזו עומדת על פי הדיב וכל העם משתיינין לפניה. לא נאמר אלא אלהיהם. את שנוהג בו משום אלוה, אסור. ואת שאינו נוהג בו משום אלוה, מתר.

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.”

Part Three: Appreciating the Beauty of Art

Text #5: “Letters on the Opening of Bezalel”. Rav A. Y. Kook, *Selected Letters*. Translated and annotated by Tzvi Feldman.

The very sight of our talented brothers, masters of aesthetics and art is heartwarming, as they establish their rightful position in the broad, central highway of world culture, carried by a divine spirit to Jerusalem.

They beautify our holy city, a capital that is as a seal upon the national heart, with aesthetics, design, dignity and splendor which will also be a source of blessing and benefit...

The whole area of ornamentation, beautification and painting is permitted to Jews. There is only one limit, one line... long in its quality and not its quantity. This limit conveys much spiritually 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.”

Text #6: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “The Home”. *Teshuvah*.

...While the great Rabbis of every generation have cautioned our people against excessive self-adornment, they have encouraged the decoration and beautification of ritual objects. The prayer book, the *Kiddush* cup, the etrog box, the vessels of *Havdalah* — all have inspired artists and artisans. No set form is imposed, nor is there any need to adhere to the aesthetics of earlier generations. One can, of course, retain the traditional forms if so inclined. But throughout Jewish history, our people have usually adhered to certain motifs while modifying the technique and application according to the period and locale. In any case, beautiful ritual objects are part of the making of a Jewish home.

The issue of decoration also has a negative aspect: Just as there are objects and symbols that breathe a Jewish spirit — for example, the ancient symbol of the *mizrah*, a paper or cloth hanging indicating the direction of Jerusalem — there are also objects that negate a Jewish spirit. Symbols or artistic motifs associated with other religions and cultures are probably not permissible in a Jewish home. The owner may not be interested in the meaning of such objects but only in their beauty; nevertheless, when they are prominently displayed they are bound to have an effect, however subtle, on those who see them. There is a place for such things in albums, perhaps, but not on walls or otherwise in permanent view.

Conclusion

Text #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. *In the Beginning*.

To penetrate further into the nature of the two kinds of knowing, let us recognize that an emotional grasp is also a way of wholeness, a way of seeing an object in a certain entirety for oneself, while the objective or scientific comprehension is being certain about the details, knowing what it is made of. The difference between the poet who gazes at a flower, admiring its beauty, and the botanist who counts the petals is a difference in what one is looking at as well as in the emotional diversity.



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