

SBM Weekly Write-Up, Week of July 11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup>  
By Rachel Renz

This past week at the Summer Beit Midrash Program, art and halacha became a deeply philosophical matter, spurring fascinating discussions about artistic intent, meaning, and experience. Each discussion touched on matters of theology, literary theory, authorial intent, epistemology, and methodology, and centered on the issue of abstract meeting concrete, and one creating space for the other. We began the week by discussing our sugya in Masechet Avodah Zara 42b concerning the reason behind creating or not creating certain forms of art for fear of "chashad", suspicions of avodah zara. The debate concerning chashad extended far beyond the machloket between Rabbi Meir and the Chachamim to the overarching matter of halachic concepts being applied in "frozen" ways; frozen would imply the precise ways in which they felt relevant to their original cultural milieu, or "fluid" ways, the ways in which they are made relevant to contemporary culture and understanding. A concrete example given by Rabbi Klapper concerned the halachic status of the Ipad, an electric instrument which, in spirit, violates the laws of Shabbat, but which in actuality might have some ground for being permissible (since the electric circuit is always somewhat on, never turning off entirely). This would propose a perfect debate regarding chashad and its relevance to the present: Do we apply it fluidly to the issue of the Ipad, an issue not addressed in ancient Rabbinic literature? Or, do we feel chashad is a frozen concept, only relevant to concepts and practices to which the chachamim directly linked it?

We discussed the concept of a "social contract" in halachic Judaism, in which we, through assumed and unspoken means, have agreed to submit to halacha in whatever applicative form the rabbinic tradition has decided. This tied in with our discussion about "לא תעשון איתי" and our sugya's extensive discussion about what this phrase means: are we forbidden from recreating things used *to serve God* in the Beit Hamikdash? Or maybe irreplaceable, impossible images of heavenly beings like the פנים or ד"פ or חיות הקודש? We discussed our overall acceptance of the rabbis in Late Antiquity and the extent of their issurim.

In our sugya, we were brought to a discussion concerning the methodology of a given sugya and the editorial decisions which may have been involved in the sugya's construction. We discussed literary theory's application to Gemara, and we pondered the possibility of an editor inserting a "frame" for our sugya in which a mishnah was *inserted* for the purpose of giving a rather abstract discussion of braittot a concrete context. This discussion, in its own right, is a discussion of art, of concretizing the abstract. As discussed in HaRav Yaakov Ariel's *haskama* to "שו"ת אומנות", the goal of art in the framework of religious enterprises is to express Divinity without physically concretizing it, and to express humanity without raising mankind to be metaphysically abstract. This approach to Judaism and art was conveyed in Rabbi Sendor's drashah to Fellows of SBM this past Friday night when he discussed Parshat Balak and its emphasis on speech, lending itself to a discussion of the artistic dimensions of experience and its conveyance, communication par excellence. Rabbi Sendor discussed Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and its labyrinthine mixture of reality and fiction, and the simultaneous veracity and absurdity of being alive.

On Thursday, SBM was fortunate enough to have professional artist Chava Evans present not only some of her artistry, but her philosophical approach to the intersection of art and halacha as well. Evans explained that the goal of art is often to convey inexplicable emotions and the complexities of *experience*. We discussed the concept of conveying emotions and experiences which have or have not been approved of by halacha: one must begin by acknowledging the reality of experience, both muttar or assur, then formalizing and concretizing said experience. As Evans sees it, the third step is a decision to *show* your art to others, to fulfill the ideal purpose of art, which is its being *shown*. We discussed if there is supposed to be a discussion of "ethics" in relation to being both an artist and a religious Jew. Evans states that there is, either purposefully or otherwise, a gap in Jewish literature concerning

emotions and subjective existence. She writes, "Torah does not usually answer questions like, 'what did it feel like to give birth?' (Not what should you feel like, but what did you feel like?)" Therefore, the artist is called upon to *make space* for personal experience. Just as our Gemara deals with the separation between keeping a certain object, "מוצא", and *creating* this same object, "עושה", art's experiential roots emphasize this discrepancy; that the inspiration for art may be עושה, an acceptable initiative that spurs creativity, or מוצא, a prohibited experience that has, like the former, spurred great creativity and self-discovery.

Our final discussion of the week concerned Plato's "Ion", a dialogue between the rhapsode Ion and the philosopher Socrates in which the Ion's right as a poet to express thoughts on matters outside of his experience is challenged, essentially challenging the role of both artist and audience, of experience and fantasy, of philosophy and of art.

Our sugya's structure may be a conceptual challenge to our appreciation for halacha, just as our artistic identities might pose a theological challenge to our appreciation of religion. Yet the very discussion SBM has entered in which we will search for the intersection of such contrasts and similarities gives both the halachic as well as the artistic endeavor much credit. In the words of Rav Soloveitchik zt"l, "The struggle itself sanctifies." The machloket, the dichotomy, gives life meaning.