

We began Friday's shiur ([available online](#)) with a discussion of Rav Yaakov Ariel's *haskomoh* to Rav Dovid Avraham Spector's *Shut Omanut*. The *haskomoh*, as is often the case, makes no content-specific reference to the book, but instead offers an explanation for why something like the book would be useful, and how it ought to have been written, with the implicit expectation that the book in some way resembles its ideal.

Rav Ariel's thesis, as I understand it, is that a healthy Jewish society, which he believes cannot exist in exile, naturally produces artistic expression. He presents this healthy society as providing the visual arts with a middle-ground between Christian semi-pagan corporealization of the Divine and Muslim rejection of all representational art, which denies the religious significance of human physicality and reduces the richness of human experience to "monotonic monotheism". Western artistic culture responds to these two failures by rejecting the notion that art should be bounded at all. However, in a healthy Jewish culture, expression is in no way constrained by Halakhah, as it expresses the same culture that produces the Halakhah.

But what if the artists don't end up feeling that way, or alternatively, what is the role of art, and the place of artists, in a not-yet-fully-healthy society? *Shut Omanut* itself is a litany of *dos* and *don't's* for representational painters – what happens when such a painter feels that a particular representation is necessary, and the *posek* forbids it? The fellows divided as to whether *Shut Omanut* was exactly what Rav Ariel thought necessary or desirable, or rather antithetical to it, a clear imposition of authority on artists who can only respond by rebelling or wilting.

I suggested that this issue very much reflected the conversation in Plato's *Ion*, a dialogue between Socrates and the eponymous rhapsode. *Ion* claims that his performances of Homer are meaningful and deserve the applause of virtuous men, but Socrates finds this questionable; the performance itself is mere entertainment, and what does *Ion* know of the substance of the matters He discusses? Is he a general, or even a bridle maker? Is he a philosopher, so that he knows what constitutes a good life or how to achieve it? The parallel for all arts, I contend, is whether they claim authority exclusively over form, or whether they claim authority over content as well.

More specifically – guest artist Chava Evans-Dredze, asked us Thursday whether Halakhah has anything to say about the experience of the redness of meat. Some fellows easily conceded that it does not, but concluded from there that the experience of the redness of meat is not a valuable subject. One way of eliminating conflict between artistic and religious authority is to give art autonomy in areas one considers trivial, as per Socrates if *Ion's* performances to be ends in and of themselves. But this does not seem to be Rav Ariel's position, nor is it true to many artists' self-conception. One might set up a dialectic in which *poskim* consider the arena trivial, but artists themselves consider it supremely meaningful, and Torah overall acknowledges the validity of both positions. This position has some appeal within the tradition of the Rav.

Alternatively, one can take the position of Socrates in the Republic, which requires art to submit to philosophic censors, on pain of exile. This seems to be the position of Shut Omanut itself, but not Rav Ariel's ideal.

Socrates offers Ion a different way of preserving his significance, namely a claim of Divine inspiration. The Jewish parallel would be some form of ruach hakodesh, which gives artists epistemologically direct access to Torah. This seems to be an option within the tradition of Rav A. Y. Kuk, but does not provide any guidance as to how one might deal with conflicts between conflicting Jewish epistemologies, the halakhah and aesthetic. I noted that Mitnagdish culture seems to be heavily invested in claiming that the halakhic epistemology wins outright, as the Torah is "not in Heaven". Furthermore, I do not really see myself as part of the R. Kuk tradition.

I look forward to our continued wrestling with these issues, and to the creative responses our fellows will provide as to how art and halakhah might coexist, cooperate, and/or flourish together.

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