

*Here is the last installment of a review of the challenges that the Summer Beit Midrash Fellows have faced in their exploration of this year's topic, Halakhah and Art.*

## **SBM Weekly Synopsis**

### **Week of August 8-12**

**This week, some of the fellows review their own treatment of the Summer Beit Midrash shaylah of 2011.**

#### **Shaylah:**

Betzalel Ben-Uri is a Bnei Akiva Shaliach at Yaavetz High School in Cologne, Massachusetts. Last year, visiting family members in Philadelphia, he was enormously impressed by the Pennsylvania Railroad War Memorial, and immediately thought of using it as background for his interdisciplinary Jewish Studies class on war at Yaavetz, which covers among other things the halakhot of milchemet mitzvah and reshut and the kinah of David for Shaul and Yehonatan.

Betzalel thought first of bringing his class to see the scale model of the monument on display in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He went there himself to see the model, however, and felt that the visual environment was inappropriate for his students. He decided instead to bring in a large poster of the monument, and furthermore, to give students the option to create a visual or plastic artwork as their final project for the course rather than the usual essay.

Yaavetz as a school generally gives its teachers much discretion in their individual classrooms. However, in this case the principal, Rabbi Elyakim Efraim, saw the poster in the faculty room and asked Betzalel what he was planning. Rabbi Efraim said that he recognized the power of the monument, and that indeed, in his pre-baal teshuvah undergraduate days at Penn, he had often walked to 30th Street Station just to spend time contemplating it. Now, however, he wondered whether it was really a good educational idea, or even permitted, to encourage students to spend time studying a statue, let alone an image of both an angel and a human being. Furthermore, he felt that students needed halakhic guidance as to what sorts of images, in what sort of media, they could and could not legitimately produce – he did not want Yaavetz School, in his words, to be plausibly accused of encouraging avodah zarah in its Jewish Studies classes. Finally, he felt that students would spend more time working on the aesthetics of the project, and less thinking about its Torah content, than they would in producing an essay, and he wondered if this would be unjustified bittul Torah.

Betzalel and Rabbi Efraim had a somewhat heated discussion about artistic freedom and Rav Kook's conception of art as an essential element of national expression. In the end, they agreed to ask for psak and guidance from a mutually acceptable halakhic authority, namely you.

### **Jared Anstandig**

In my response, I concluded that the teacher is permitted to bring in this picture based on 4 reasons: The image was flat, there is no real idolatry today, there are numerous students present (to prevent one from thinking that they are engaged in idolatrous practices), and the context of bringing in the picture was for education (specifically using Tzitz Eliezer's definition that "to educate" means *יתן אל לבו*, to internalize meaning). Regarding the potential issue of wasting time used for Torah study, I determined that this poster was going to help the students direct their attention to Torah values, and therefore there is no concern of wasting time. This was based on a reading of a Midrash that prohibits gazing at objects that distract one from God. My feeling was that since this poster directed one to God, this poster did not pose an issue. During my presentation, however, I was challenged to explain if looking at an idolatrous statue that directed me to think of God would also be permitted. This has caused me to reevaluate my explanation and fashion a more accurate definition, which I am working on at present.

### **Adena Morgan**

I started the teshuvah with the assumption that a Modern Orthodox school like Yaavetz that has as its *weltanschauung* Torah v'Chochmah would value art and see it as a positive just as much as it values literature and the natural sciences. Therefore, I looked through the poskim for those who were mattir the different elements of Rabbi Efraim's and Mr. Ben Uri's question to allow the poster of the stature to be used in the lesson and the creative assignment. In the discussion that followed my presentation it quickly became apparent that my initial assumption about the status of art in the Modern Orthodox community was not shared by everyone. Many of the other fellows felt that art has no place in the world of the Beit Midrash as it has no inherent value, unlike literature, which does. We discussed back and forth the culture of the Modern Orthodox Beit Midrash community on one side and the culture of the Modern Orthodox liberal intellectual community on the other side of a vast chasm and the lack of communication and understanding between the two. We resolved to think about ways to bridge the gap between these two camps within our community.

### **Emily Pisem**

In my teshuvah, I attempted to defend the position that it would be permissible for the teacher to bring in the poster and that it would be permissible for the class to create their own visual images, given certain halakhic parameters. I proved that the poster is muttar to own and to bring into class by proving that it is not halakhically problematic because it is neither bolet nor shokea, and that even if it were, it is permissible because it falls under the umbrella of *l'havin ulehorot*, which I defined as educational purposes—even though I was challenged on that definition. In terms of the second half, I attempted to give broad halakhic guidelines specifying what was and was not muttar to create, but suggested consultation with an existing compendium.

I ultimately defended the idea of a "Jewish art" that would not be afraid of halakhic limitations but would attempt to incorporate them in their artwork. Without specific definitions, I suggested an ideal view of the future of art education in Jewish schools in

which the artistically inclined students were not isolated, but felt embraced and like a part of the Jewish community.

### **Rachel Renz**

In my teshuvah, I did my best to outline what I saw as the core issue the Sheila was addressing, as well as the difficulties in connecting our sugyot and p'sakim to the matter at hand. I discussed the lack of a proper category in halakhic literature for viewing art, as the Gemara mostly deals with the making and/or benefiting from art. Additionally, I outlined what I saw as an important way to approach artistic opportunities in Jewish education; I stated that the only issue with bittul Torah would be if all students were expected to produce art, when only some of them were artistically appreciate and/or inclined. Ultimately, I promoted the appreciation of and exposure to the artistic endeavor, both the Gentile endeavors of others as well as the Jewish endeavors of our own communities.

### **Yedidya Schwartz**

My response sought to provide an intuitive and sensible halakhic ruling on the question at hand while at the same time attempting to conceptually unify various and seemingly discordant positions into one Jewish theory of art. I ultimately chose to focus on the prohibition of *al tifnu el ha'elilim*, a verse ostensibly forbidding the contemplation of idols but taken by many commentators as a much more sweeping proscription against forms of visual art generally. I contended that the prohibition was fundamentally against the adoration of images as subjects and ends-in-themselves as an (albeit far removed) form of idolatry, as it focuses our emotional and spiritual capacity for worship on a subject other than God. Subsequent diverse criteria provided by the gemara, rishonim, and acharonim for acceptable and unacceptable features of images one is permitted to make and/or keep center around this one concern.

Given this claim, I expressed my consternation over the stated purpose of the project proposed by Mr. Ben-Uri. Since it appears that gazing at the statue out of adoration—in order to experience the loss that David must have felt for Yonatan—was the express object of the exercise, it seemed to me in poor keeping with Jewish values, even if one could justify its formal halakhic permission on educational grounds (*l'havin ul'horot*). Thus, while I felt that the project was technically permitted, I recommended that an alternative means of imparting this knowledge to the students should be found if possible. Nevertheless, I expressed my enthusiasm for a Jewish education that included the study and production of a Jewish art that fought against the adoration of iconography.

### **Ora Ziring**

I built my teshuvah on the premise that there is a *chiyuv* to teach students in the manner that is most conducive to their learning skills and illustrated that with a discussion of the halakhic concept of *חגנוך הנער על פי דרכו* that must be taken into consideration when dealing with a *shaylah* that is discussing using visual aids in a classroom. In that light, I continued to explain why I thought it was *muttar* to use the poster of the statue. I explained that since there is no precedent in Torah literature for a discussion on the status of photography in order to understand the status of a picture of *avodah zarah* we need read recent contemporary teshuvot. Since the problem that

poskim have with photograph is whether taking a picture of certain things could be categorized and creating avodah zarah I felt that the connection between the original object and the picture in our case were too far apart to be considered creating avodah zarah. In response to R' Efraim's concern that this may be bittul Torah I discussed the Mishnah that looks down at people who stop learning to appreciate the beauty of the trees. I explained that a majority of the interpretations on the Mishnah explain that the reason that a person should not look at trees in the middle of learning is because it may distract them from their learning. In this case the picture is doing the opposite and helping the students focus on the subject at hand. In regards to the class project, I gave restrictions to what the students should be allowed to make based on the Shulchan Aruch explaining that if they need answers to more specific questions they should consult the halakhic guides that have recently been published. I made a point of expressing the importance of having the halakhot regarding art discussed and utilized in the school system so that students understand that there are halakhot standards regarding art just like there are halakhic standards that are relevant to every other aspect of their life.