**Summer Beit Midrash Week 1: The Questions Begin**

As this week marked the opening of this year's Summer Beit Midrash, we began to look into the relationship (or rather, different possible relationships) between halakhah and art. To phrase the problem in secular terms, one might take part of a poem of Robert Frost (interestingly, the first item on our source sheet):

> My object in living is to unite
> My avocation and my vocation
> As my two eyes make one in sight.
> Only where love and need are one,
> And the work is play for mortal stakes,
> Is the deed ever really done
> For Heaven and the future's sakes.

In what relation stands our vocation—our calling as Jews to the learning of Torah and the performance of mitzvot—to our avocation—that to which we call ourselves individually, perhaps the passion for artistic production that the most driven and inspired artists espouse? How do we as Jews, to whom the observance and interpretation of halakha constitute "mortal stakes," engage with those of us whose existential lives hang just as much in the balance on their ability to create and beautify? Can these two works be merged—and should they? Can they even be reconciled? Are we to view Torah as the sole legitimate *content* of a validated life, to which all else, including art, is impressed as a means? Such an attitude might be read in powerfully religious artistic creations such as *Shir Hakavod* (read every Shabbat morning after Mussaf), which presents visual representation as a necessary, albeit dangerous, path toward the intimate knowledge of God. On the other hand, such an approach may run aground in the face of those compelled toward art for art's sake alone. Another possibility would be to view halakhah as merely the necessary *context* of the Torah-driven life, which itself can take profound meaning from any number of different sources. This possibility gives rise to works of halakhah such as *Shu"t Omanut,* a contemporary compendium of regulations as to what artists can and cannot do according to halakhah. Needless to say, the reduction of halakhah to mere censorship regarding art is hardly intuitively appealing either. With the delicate dance of "*Torah Lishmah*" and "Art for art's sake," and the tantalizing prospect of the union of "Heaven and the future's sakes," in the back of our minds, we jumped into the halakhic sources.

We begin our analysis with the *She'iltot deRav Achai*,(פרשת יתרו, שאילתא נ"ז) a collection of halakhically-centered Shabbat derashot roughly contemporary with the Gemara. Here we first encountered the prohibition on the creation of images of שמשין דקודשא בריך הוא—"those that things that serve God"—though the term is frustratingly ambiguous. The prohibition, based on the pasuk (שמות י"ט: כ) לא תעשון אתי אלהי כסף ואלהי זהב לא תעשו לכם , features the word אתי which, pronounced *itti,* appears to denote things that are somehow close to God. Various midrashim ( מכילתא דרבי ישמאעל פ' יתרו, מסכתא דבחדש, פרשיות ו, י; מכילתא דרשב"י כ: ג-ה) interpret the word in diverse ways, as possibly referring to angels, celestial beings, or even as a prohibition on replicating the sacred vessels of the beit hamikdash. One midrash, reading the word as *otti*-"Me", forbids the creation of human visages

(a troubling thought for the rationalist theologians among us). How these midrashim can be reconciled with each other (or whether they should) remains an open question.

The pressing issue that presents itself through all these sources is: what is the motivating force behind this prohibition? Even a cursory glance at the biblical verses under discussion in the midrashim immediately gives the impression that the issue is one of idolatry—the creation of graven images is seen as the product of an idolatrous impulse. But this in turn begs the question (one that will follow us throughout the summer) what of those images created with no idolatrous intent? Is there a suspicion that one might use utterly innocent-seeming images for purposes of worship? Furthermore, could one plausibly view the replication of temple vessels (for which prohibitive midrashim exist) under this rubric of potentially idolatrous acts? And if the suspicion is indeed one of worship, then why would we be told (as the She'iltot tells us in no uncertain terms) that the prohibition is one on *production* rather than on purchase or use? Clearly a good deal rides on this question, as the restriction of the prohibition to idolatrous or potentially idolatrous contexts would result in significantly more lenient positions across the board in relation to contemporary artwork.

The question follows us into the first two sugyot of the gemara studied (ע"ז מ:-מא.; מב:). Here, the contexts are very clearly idolatry. But the assumption is also made clear that those objects and images that are inherently idolatrous are *assur behana'a*. That leaves the more innocent-seeming remainder, which it appears to be merely forbidden to *make*. And the question returns: is this prohibition on production in force *per se*, or context-dependent? Both answers remain plausible.

As we begin to wend our way through conflicting delineations throughout the gemara in Avoda Zara of which images (Sun? Moon? Stars? People? Animals? Symbols?) which types of images (Embossed? Engraved? Sculpted? Drawn? Respectfully presented?) are prohibited (To use? To create?) under which conditions (When some people worship them? When some people might conceivably worship them? When someone already has worshipped them? When a lot of people worship them? When…), we find confronted with a wide vista which may narrow into any number of different halakhic paths. Some of these possibilities may be actualized next week; but if SBM lives up the hype, we'll only see the questions multiply.

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