

SBM Weekly Synopsis

Week of July 25th –29th

By Jonathan Ziring

The first few weeks of the summer were devoted to the exploring the potential *halakhic* issues that could impinge on artistic expression “accidentally.” The possibility that some works of art could be defined as *Avodah Zarah* or could be seen profaning that which should be sanctified for the *Beit HaMikdash* doesn’t touch on the central questions about art in *Halakhah*. Some foods are not kosher, but that tells us nothing about *Halakhah*’s perspective on eating. This week, however, we took on the Torah’s perspective on art head on.

We began the week with an intensive two days with R. Chaim Brovender. He argued that the creation and interpretation of art can act as a creative religious experience. He emphasized that a central part of religious life is the ability to feel that one stands before God, an idea he saw as central to prayer. He claimed that the Talmud’s requirement that one pray either physically or mentally in the direction of the *Kodesh HaKodashim*, the Holy of Holies, acts as a stand in for the notion that one must pray with the cognizance of God. However, this experience is often difficult to achieve, and therefore other more subjective modes of feeling God’s presence must be sought. Thus, on personal note, he spoke about the contemplation on the meaning of art can generate the feelings that are often lacking in classical religious activity. With that background, he interpreted Rembrandt’s *Night Watch* as well as several works by Rothko. This experience continued on Tuesday with a tour of the Museum of Fine Arts where we were also joined by Rabbi Meir Sendor and Anne Sendor who helped the fellows experience works by Rothko, Sargent, and many other artists. Whether or not we agreed with the assessment of art in general or the pieces we saw in particular, we all were offered the opportunity to see serious Talmidei Hakhamim who appreciated art, giving us the opportunity to ascribe value to art on the level of Ma’aseh Rav, for those of us who chose to take it.

R. Brovender also presented a piece by R. Kook in *Ein Ayah (Berakhot 55a)* about Mosheh and Betsalel, a piece which Mosheh represents the perspective of Halakhah and Betsalel presents the perspective of art. In this piece, Betsalel is seen as presenting a perspective of this worldliness that ends up being the position that is accepted over that of Mosheh. R. Brovender used this to show R. Kook’s appreciation of the reality of talent outside the realm of Torah, and the recognition that such skills have objective value, giving us another reason to consider artistic skill and expression valuable.

In contrast to the positive view of art presented in the first half of the week, the latter half of the week was devoted to attacking the value in the appreciation of art itself. Most of the discussions surrounded the derasha in Hazal of “al tifnu el ha-elilim’ – al tifnu el mi-da’atkhem. “ At the most extreme, we saw Rashi to Shabbat 149a who writes that it is forbidden to stare at *tsurot* of exotic animals and *diyuknaot* of people of action, such as murals depicting the battle of David and Goliath. The most radical read we suggested was that Rashi forbade the appreciation of all art, as only God’s handiwork should be appreciated, and not mankind’s. Alternatively, Rashi opposed the diminution of

real scenes by their concretization into a limiting mode. Others, such as Rambam, limit this prohibition to studying images related to idolatry, which does not directly challenge the artistic expression per se. We saw several Rishonim, such as R. Yehuda Sir Leon (cited in Tosafot) and R. Yonah (cited by the Rosh) who suggest that different type of literature are forbidden to read, such as war chronicles, romance novels, and some fables. They claim that all of these are forbidden because they are meaningless, and the reader is considered to be joining a *moshav leitsim*. This critique can be levied against the entire artistic enterprise. However, this opened the question as to what we do when we think a Rishon's principle is correct, such as meaningless things should be forbidden, but disagree as to the application. More concretely, what if we thought art was meaningful, for whatever reason, would we be bound by the Rishon's assessment of value.

Friday closed the week with seeing many modern Israeli scholars who intuitively argue that drama is valuable, though providing little to no evidence for their claims. In total, the questions of the week revolved around what to do when little Halakhic language is used to explain why art is valuable, but knowing that there are those scholars who think it is. What place in Halakhah is there for assuming value simply because we know that others have valued the subject in question? This is made more difficult when we know that many Rishonim directly question the premise of value. In the words of the *Hovot HaLevavot* quoting¹ *yatsanu min ha-milhamah ha-ketanah el ha-milhamah ha-gedolah*. Everything comes down to this.

¹, well I won't say who,