

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## WHAT DO ANGELS LOOK LIKE?

## AND OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT HALAKHAH'S UNDERSTANDING OF ART

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

"How many angels can dance on a needle's point?" is often cited as an example of pointless speculation. Wikipedia reports an academic consensus that the question was actually invented to needle certain schools of philosophy or theology, with Peter Harrison suggesting that "needle's point" was a pun on "needless point." But the perhaps genuinely important underlying issue was whether metaphysical beings occupy physical space at all. The only coherent answers are "none" and "infinity" (although Douglas Adams fans might argue for "42").

"What do angels look like?" may seem similarly silly. But Rosh HaShanah 24b provides two possible Biblical sources for a prohibition against producing representations of angels. Shemot 20:4 (also Devarim 5:8) bans the making of representations of things "in the heavens above," and Shemot 20:20 bans the making of gold and silver representations of things "with Me." If we don't know what angels look like, how can we know whether a particular representation is forbidden?

One possible answer is that they look like *keruvim*, the winged figures atop the Ark. But this answer seems paradoxical, as G-d commanded us to make the *keruvim*! This can be finessed by asserting that the prohibitions prohibit making **additional** images of angels. But that seems forced, and also 1 Kings 6:23 reports that King Shlomoh made two additional wooden *keruvim* for the Temple.

A second possibility is that angels look as described in the visions of Yechezkel, with multiple pairs of wings. But this also seems strange, as before Yechezkel, what did the prohibition mean? Also, do all angels look alike? Yechezkel himself seems to suggest otherwise.

The possibility that seems most compelling to me emerges from Ralbag's Commentary:

וראווי שתדע כי צורת האדם לא יעברו על עשייתה אם לא היתה בולטת,  
 כי אינה תמונת האדם לפי מה שיורגש ממנו בזולת זה האופן,  
 וזה מבואר בנפשו;  
 ואולם צורת כוכבים ומזלות –  
 הנה יעברו עליה אף על פי שהיא שטוחה,  
 כי צורתם היא שטוחה לפי מחשבת האנשים.  
 וכן צורת מלאכי השרת,  
 אשר יסכימו האנשים בהם –  
 יעברו על עשייתה אף על פי שהיא שטוחה,

לפי שאין להם צורות ותמונות על דרך האמת.

*You should know that representations of human beings –  
 one does not violate by making them unless they stick up three-dimensionally,  
 because only in that manner are they temunot of a human being as perceived  
 by human beings,  
 as is self-explanatory;  
 but representations of stars and planets/constellations –  
 one violates (by making them) even if they are flat (=two-dimensional),  
 because their actual form is flat according to the way people think;  
 so too, representations of ministering angels,  
 meaning representations that people agree regarding –  
 one violates by making them even if the representation is flat,  
 because they have no forms or images in the way of truth.*

Ralbag contends that since angels actually don't look like anything, the prohibition must refer to whatever a particular society recognizes as a visual representation of an angel.

This understanding parallels Rambam's explanation in his Commentary to the Mishnah that prohibitions against representations of the sun, moon, and stars do not relate to the astronomical bodies as they appear to the human eye, but rather to zodiac-like images, which are entirely products of the human imagination.

The question then is why such representations should be forbidden.

A reasonable first step is to note that the prohibition against representing G-d seems also to be related to His not having "any form or image in the way of truth." Devarim 4:15-16 warns:

וּנְשַׁמְרֶתֶם מְאֹד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם  
 כִּי לֹא רְאִיתֶם כָּל-תְּמוּנָה  
 בְּי'וֹם דִּבְרֵי יְקוֹק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּחַרְבַּב מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ:  
 פֶּן-תִּשְׁחַתְּוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם לָכֶם פְּסֵל תְּמוּנַת כָּל-סֶמֶל  
 תִּבְנִית זָכָר אִוּ נְקֵבָה . . .

*You must be exceedingly guarded for your souls  
 because you saw no temunah  
 on the day that Hashem spoke to you at Chorev from the midst of the fire.  
 Lest you destroy  
 and make for yourselves a pesel, a temunah of any semel  
 a tavnit of a male or a female . . .*

The simplest reading of the argument in these verses is that representations are forbidden because they entrench false ideas of

G-d in human minds. Recall that *avodah zarah* originally meant “strange worship of G-d” rather than “worship of a strange god.”

However, Devarim 4:19 seems to convey a different rationale.

וּפְנֵי-תִשָּׂא עֵינֶיךָ הַשָּׁמַיִם יְמָה  
וְרָאִיתָ אֶת-הַשָּׁמַשׁ וְאֶת-הַיָּרֵחַ וְאֶת-הַכּוֹכָבִים כֻּלָּם כִּצְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם  
... וְנִדְחִיתָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לָהֶם וְעִבַדְתָּם  
*And lest you raise your eyes toward heaven  
and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of the heavens  
and be led astray into sin, and bow to them, and worship them*

The suggestion here seems to be that conceiving of G-d as representable will lead to the worship of astronomical bodies. However, the causal chain is not clear.

The question that seems most pressing to me, and that none of these texts address explicitly, is whether the prohibition against physical representations is intended to constrain our thoughts and imaginations. Should making mental representations of G-d also be forbidden?

(I am leaving aside the halakhic questions of whether objects that create representations via optical illusions are forbidden, or images composed of energy, such as light-sculptures.)

The obvious difficulty with any such claim is Yechezkel. The magnificent poem *An'im Zemiroth* suggests that we understand the prohibition as discouraging **unauthorized** mental representations of G-d. It therefore provides us with a handy list of Biblical, i.e. authorized descriptions. The problem is that the Torah seems to ban even, or perhaps especially, physical representations of the prophetic descriptions.

Moreover, if mental or verbal representations of G-d and angels are discouraged, we may end up with an irony according to Ralbag. If the prohibition accomplishes its purpose, and conversation and thoughts about G-d and angels become utterly aniconic, then there will be no “representations that people agree on.” With regard to G-d, it may be that we prohibit even representations that are meaningful only to the artist. But with regard to angels, Ralbag seems clear that only conventional representations are forbidden. Could each artist then freely produce their own representations?

In other words – can we argue that the ultimate purpose of the prohibition is to free us to think and create about angels subjectively without worrying that the results will be taken as objective representations?

Now imagine a society in which everyone agrees that a particular image corresponds to the word “angel,” but everyone also understands that the image is no more a representation than is the word “angel.” Are such images “agreed on” for Ralbag?

If the prohibition is against “making” rather than “having” representations, what if someone makes a representation that resonates with enough other people that it becomes conventional?

Part of what I’m wondering is whether there are images that human beings are hard-wired to recognize as angels, in a way that culture cannot extirpate. Even if the culture professes not to believe in the existence of angels, if we understand the term, we automatically associate it with certain images.

Here’s another thought experiment: What if a culture becomes convinced that angels look just like human beings (at least until they earn their wings)?

What about cultures that believe that angels are masters of disguise? So for example: According to Ralbag, “flat” paintings of human beings are permitted, but not of angels. What if I paint a scene of Avraham serving three men while they eat under a tree? What if I paint the scene but don’t title it?

Here’s the thing. Most of us live in Jewish cultures that are more-or-less post-Maimonidean in the sense that even non-philosophers instinctively agree that neither G-d nor angels “look like” anything in particular. My sense is that we also live in Jewish cultures that instinctively accept virtually every halakhic leniency regarding the production of images, as can be witnessed by the reaction to occasional efforts by halakhists to impose restrictions on kindergarten drawings of sunny days (or to my wife’s objection to a popular children’s siddur’s representation of G-d as a benevolently personified moon). It seems clear to me that these realities go hand-in-hand, and can best be justified by arguments along the lines of Ralbag above.

It also seems clear to me that such arguments often implicitly contend that all religious images are fundamentally kindergarten art. It does not take the religious representations produced by artists seriously. That does not seem to me sustainable. The unanswered halakhic questions I’ve raised throughout this essay are intended to at least raise the issue.