Review Essay

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Art and the Jew


“Say It Ain’t So, Joe!” —A young boy to Shoeless Joe Jackson, after the thrown 1919 World Series. (Apocryphal)

Kalman Bland’s thesis, in a stimulating and wide-ranging book devoted to a topic which has long deserved discussion, is that the presumed Jewish aversion to art and the visual experience in general is a modern doctrine, unknown to ancient and medieval Jewries. This modern doctrine, he further asserts, is the creature of the ideological needs of the modern Jews who invented it. Fundamentally, then, *The Artless Jew* is an investigation of ideas and their history; though some empirical data is necessary, the book has no pictures (as the author points out).

The book is well worth reading; it is informative, provocative, and at times convincing. Bland forces us to pay attention to aspects of texts that have not yet been given their due and teases content out of previ-

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ously unyielding materials. But I believe that his argument is flawed at crucial points.

I

The introduction honestly sets out the working methodological assumption: “objective” writing of history (or history of ideas) does not exist; time, place, and training are crucial components in what the historian will or will not see. It also sets out the (mistaken) assumption which will serve as the substantive punching-bag of the book, namely, that the presumed Jewish aversion to art derives from a presumed antagonism between Judaism (and even Jews) and visual experience as a whole. In the body of his work, the author will deny that classical Judaism discouraged art or was antagonistic to visual experience (“archaeologists and art historians . . . were affirming Jewish art . . . the national or religious spirit of Judaism shows deep, native affinities with the visual arts” [6]); and he will assert that the strange modern denial of these facts is explicable only on the assumption that certain modern Jews—by and large of West European education or lineage—had an ideological stake in an aniconic Judaism.

The Artless Jew excavates the late 18th century origins of an aniconic Judaism, which are to be found primarily in the Kantian preference for the abstract and disembodied over the sensate, a preference which found much to praise in the aniconic Second Commandment. Western Jews were too eager to concur. They also adopted the Hegelian preference for spirituality, ethics, and the universal. Thus, Solomon Formstecher, Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Steinheim, Hermann Cohen, and Franz Rosenzweig all insisted that Jewish monotheism was inimical to the visual arts. Steinhein also proposed that Judaism preferred the auditory over the visual, a thesis which received powerful expression in an early essay of Heinrich Graetz, who identified the bodied God who can be seen with sensual paganism, as over against the Jewish God, whose commandment can only be heard, while He cannot be seen at all. (A. J. Heschel still echoes this pronouncement by asserting that Judaism prefers “holiness in time” over “holiness in space.”) A second, related thesis had it that even when Jews produced art, it was not authentically, indigenously, Jewish, but merely a copy of the art produced by the peoples around them. This, Bland argues, mirrored the Jewish need to deny late 19th century theses which posited a unique—and inferior—Jewish racial physicality, while adopting a fundamentally assimilationist posture. These tendencies, varied and refined, marked Anglo-Jewish culture as
well; here Bland cites noted art historians such as Bernard Berenson and Harold Rosenberg, and literati such as Geoffrey Hartman and Cynthia Ozick; even Salo Baron, who ought to have known better, “was unable to resist aniconism’s allure” (49). The Anglo-American thrust was, in the main, a continuation of what preceded it. But, Bland argues, it also conformed to the dominant Protestant reading of the Second Commandment, rejecting the more accurate but less sociologically acceptable Catholic perspective. True, there were figures who, attentive to the actual state of affairs as revealed by an ever-growing mass of Jewish artistic artifacts, dissented from this consensus, but these voices were simply drowned out.

The “pre-modern consensus” was completely different. It simply did not know of a Jewish aniconism or discomfort with the visual arts or the visual. Its Judaism severely banned plastic portrayals of the divine, but that was all; everything else could be pictured. This is what emerges from the Greek and Latin literature, both Jewish and gentile; rabbinic literature slightly extended the ban, but not significantly, as it read the second Commandment as banning idolatry or portrayals of the divine alone. Thus, Maimonides, cited as a typical halakhist, outlawed portrayals of the divine; of the human figure in relief for whatever purpose; and of the sun, moon, stars, and constellations even on a flat surface—nothing more. Portrayals of animals and trees, brooks and buildings, are completely permitted. There was nothing in Jewish law—perhaps the most formative component of Jewish culture—to encourage either the ideology or practice of Jewish aniconism which, indeed, did not exist.

From this point on, Bland broadens his perspective; he is no longer concerned with Jewish art alone, but rather with the attitude to the sensate, the embodied, the spatial. The Maimonidean “aesthetic” is examined at length; by and large, Maimonides—whose aesthetic (if it can be called that) is relative and for whom art and the sensate are relaxation for the weary, but no more—provides a foil for the views the author finds more to his liking. Much is made of Profiat Duran’s view of the Bible as artifact, his recommendation that one study from beautiful manuscripts and in comfortable quarters, that the text itself be written, for example, in bold square letters rather than in delicate ones, his comparison of the tripartite Tanakh to the tripartite Temple, his assertion that the Bible “works” as does medicine, in many ways, “by being gazed upon and pronounced” as well as by being understood (a reminder of a similar metaphor in Halevi’s Kuzari, similarly a work dissatisfied with
mere intellectualizing). “Sacred books became densely packed artifactual symbols,” Bland sums up, “... illuminated manuscripts became sacramental instruments” (90). A delightful chapter (ch. 6) describes the visual acuteness of Jewish travellers, exemplified in Benjamin of Tudela and Petahiah of Regensburg. The author provides lengthy surveys of early and late medieval commentary on the golden calf (117-37), the copper serpent made by Moses (118-19, 138-39) and the speckled rods placed by Jacob before ewes in heat (149-51): all visual artifacts. Images are acknowledged loci of power, they are sometimes problematic or even illegitimate and treacherous, but they need not be idolatrous; indeed Bland hammers home the point that much Jewish commentary did not consider the golden calf idolatrous.

The major theses of *The Artless Jew* are, I think, clear. These place the book in the mainstream of much late 20th-century Jewish scholarship and thought, especially (but not exclusively) that done in America. The author is very much part of the contemporary thrust to “embody” Judaism (and even, at times, the God of the Jews), urging us to celebrate the fact that Jews possessed all human bodily organs and enthusiastically made use of them. The question of art is discussed in this book as an aspect of Jewish embodiment. The denial of Jewish art is virtually a willful denial, flying in the face of empirical evidence, of the Jewish body. Indeed, given the author’s frequent assertions that the evidence for Jewish art is empirically and objectively in place, he really doesn’t qualify as a cognitive relativist.

Well argued as *The Artless Jew* is, it did leave this reader dissatisfied, on two grounds. There is the question of the evidence: too much is either omitted or distorted. And there are too many basic issues that go, surprisingly, untreated.

II

Given my own particular interests, fortified by the author’s assessment that “to neglect the law is to distort Judaism by erasing one of its axiological foundations... no chapter of *The Artless Jew*... unfolds without substantial references to the halakhah,” (9), and convinced that the halakhic regimen probably molded concrete Jewish behavior, I decided to pursue the treatment of Halakhah in the book. This, I discovered, is skimpy; and that, I think, leads to a distorted view of the whole.

The talmudic state of affairs is presented, unsurprisingly, in the chapter entitled “The Premodern Consensus” (ch. 3), which also describes the evidence of Greco-Roman sources, gentile and Jewish.
This “overview” consists of three sources (62-63). The first, a “midrash aggadah” cited from Torah Shelemah 34 (no further reference given!), allows that, despite the ban on the making of graven images, God could command the construction of two cherubs; the second deals with R. Gamliel bathing in pools “dedicated to and adorned by a statue of the goddess Aphrodite”; and the third, the midrashic story which has God personally showing Moses how to construct the menorah. Two of these three sources are irrelevant to the topic being discussed. Bathing in the presence of a statue is not a recommendation to construct one, nor does it even indicate appreciation of its presence; and the existence of the menorah was never an issue.

Any summary, let alone analysis, of the rabbinic materials would have to contend with two other basic blocks of material at the least. There is, first, the Mekhilta to Ex. 20:4, which has been taken by most readers (myself excluded, incidentally) to ban all image-making, whether for cultic or decorative purposes. The second is the Talmudic sugya in Avodah Zarah 43a-b, which is the basis for most subsequent halakhic rulings on the subject. Now, this discussion does take the Second Commandment (and its midrash) restrictively, limiting its ban to cultic or heavenly objects alone, as Professor Bland correctly notes. But that sugya also relates to Ex. 20:20, understood as a ban on the making of the human figure, much as it distinguishes between flat and raised (or sculpted) figures. This—and not the Second Commandment—becomes probative in Jewish law, and is the basis for the rulings of Maimonides and Shulhan Arukh, which Bland cites elsewhere in his book. The ban on making the human figure is a major element then in rabbinic policy; it cannot simply be swept under the rug. A true discussion of the rabbinic aesthetic, moreover, would have to deal not only with the pragmatic significance of this norm, but also with its philosophic roots or implications.

What of the non-rabbinic literature of the period? Here is Philo: “Moses banished from his commonwealth painting and sculpture”; on which Bland: “It is not obvious that Philo was referring to anything more than...artifactual representations of God” (61). Josephus chastised Solomon for commissioning casts of oxen for the Temple and sculptured lions for his throne, and Bland comments that “nowhere did Josephus indicate that tradition disallowed all forms of domestic, secular, and religious visual art” (61). There is too much special pleading here, too much argument from silence, a phenomenon which repeats itself in the author’s consideration of Varro, Strabo, Tacitus, and Cassius.
Dio. It would have also been helpful had the author surveyed the art preserved from Hasmonean times, which is also non-figurative, not only non-cultic.

*The Artless Jew* also displays a marked tendency to read into texts something which is barely there, sometimes in conjunction with the argument from silence, or at best, the argument from a whisper. Thus, Halevi’s description of the pious man who “commands imagination to produce, with the assistance of memory, the most splendid pictures possible” is, we are told, “not incompatible with the habit of looking at sculptures, illuminated manuscripts, portraits, and decorated monuments” (151). Similarly, what Bland calls R. Shimon b. Zemah Duran’s consideration of the “legitimate, popular, use of visual images” sums up biblical/talmudic texts on the effects on the embryo of visual affect, with only Romans (tellingly!) described as gazing upon beautiful pictures while engaged in intercourse (150-51). (Altogether, much confusion is caused by the term “visual images,” a problem I shall address more fully in what follows.) A major problem is this vein is found in the lengthy (and interesting) discussion of the sin of the Golden Calf: the widespread Jewish insistence on the non-idolatrous character of the creature was not meant to preach the essential innocence of that image and by extension, any others; the commentators are really concerned to lighten the sin of the people, in the context of religious polemic. The discussion of Profiat Duran’s “sacramentalism” (82-91), on the other hand, is closer to the intent of the author of the Introduction to *Ma’aseh Efod.* Nonetheless, it should be stressed that the recommendation of beautiful manuscripts and pleasant study quarters is mostly found in the context of tactics which aim at improving retention of the Torah’s content, and that the analogy to the Temple need not be given a fully physical meaning; nor did I find documentation of Bland’s reference to Duran’s “followers.”

III

There are broader issues to consider, both as regards *The Artless Jew* and as regards the possibility of Jewish art. Perhaps the broadest problem provoked by the book is posed in its title, which sets the presumed “artless Jew” over against his “visual” characteristics. A visual culture is not necessarily one which produces or even appreciates art. One may see acutely, as did Benjamin of Tudela and Petahia of Regensburg, but not be artistically minded. Plato banished artists, but not because he was near-sighted. Thus, the very scope of the book, which incorporates
arguments for Jewish art and arguments for a Jewish visual inclination as though they are one and the same, or at least part of a necessary continuum, is problematic. Sensitivity to the use of space does get us closer to the aesthetic, I admit, but not close enough, and not across the board. Ironically, Bland virtually adopts the 19th century argument he so despises by yoking visuality and art. If Graetz and Cohen argued that Jews have no art because they are not visually inclined, Bland argues that they have art because they are.

Other issues ought be raised even within the context of the materials Bland presents. It is frequently claimed that art, all art, is religious in origin, that the original function of art was to celebrate and mark the sacred. If this is true, then warning the Jew not to make images of the divine (the restrictive reading of the Second Commandment favored by Bland), would have no small effect on the development of all artistic expression and creativity. Thus, the basic halakhic sources indicate that the human form was not to be reproduced, even for decorative purposes—at all, or in relief—because it is an image of the divine (a provocative position in its own right!). So the issue of reproducing the divine has had broader implications as regards the plastic arts; it cannot be treated as a minor restriction.

The taboo on making the human form for even non-religious, decorative purposes poses no slight impediment to the development of an artistic tradition. The human form is, of course, crucial in the West, from Greece and Rome to Christian Europe. Jews couldn’t make the human form. Naturally, there were Jews who disregarded the prohibition; there were also Jews who added to it, a phenomenon possibly reflected in the “Bird’s-head Haggadah.” The central normative tradition did not allow the human form, and that may well be a formative fact. But why didn’t Jews do what many Muslims, also charged by a similar, aniconic, norm, do? And why didn’t the Jews of Muslim lands behave differently than Jews of Christian countries? It is possible to do great things with mountains and streams, as the Japanese have shown, but Jews didn’t take that route, either. One theorist—admittedly contaminated by Kant and Cohen—has raised the possibility that modern, non-representational art, is a fundamentally Jewish enterprise, or at least is acceptable to the Jewish ethos. (Ironically, this claim has also functioned in more horrific times and places, to condemn modern art as degenerate.) So Steven Schwarzschild, for example: he argued that a true “Jewish esthetic” must take the Halakhah extremely seriously, as a defining ethos and not merely as a norm. Schwarzschild may have
taken the Halakhah too seriously, or better: read it against its grain, but he was attempting to provide a “Jewish esthetic.”

For Jewish art—should we agree that it exists, that there are not only Jewish artists but a Jewish art—must answer to the question raised in the early chapters of the book but never answered: what is “Jewish” about “Jewish art”? Is it “Jewish”, and in what way, or is it simply an imitation of what is done by the surrounding society? Is there, as the blurb on the inside flap asserts, a “certain Jewish aesthetic”? A “tradition” of “Jewish art”? And need we say that a negative answer to this last question is, as Bland asserts, “assimilationist”?

The need to define the scope and content of Jewish art remains acute. Bland points to Jewish artifacts. Even if all artifacts have some non-functional characteristics, these may have hardly any artistic value, despite the honest intentions of their makers. More painfully, it would seem that an artistic tradition of high significance can’t be constituted to so large a degree of artifacts; as Harold Rosenberg put it, this is not art “in the sense in which the word is used in the 20th century” (39). And even if the 20th century grew more tolerant as it waned, more admiring of native folk art and artifacts of all cultures, it remains difficult to have these bear so heavy a burden. So the point may turn out to be that classical Jewries never get beyond the artifactual stage of art, art as the adornment of religious objects and the like, an added value but nothing more. This is certainly the impression one gets when comparing our art with that of Greco-Roman culture or that of Christianity. In Christianity—probably due to its incarnational foundations and its Greco-Roman background—even sacral art frees itself from its narrow cultic confines and becomes a central statement of independent religious significance. In due course, perhaps even early on, a purely secular art can evolve. Judaism couldn’t—or didn’t—take these routes. The Jewish imagination, for which the text is the template of the sacred, remains in the realm of the imagined. And on the level of the concrete, history and Halakhah define the agenda.

The question concerns not only “Jewish art,” but Jewish culture as a whole. How rich and varied a literature have Jews produced as Jews? What of theatre, even a religious theatre? How transporting an architecture? And, of course, how brilliant an art? Finally, what of sport?

At first glance, sport in no way belongs in a discussion of art. If Judaism is inimical to art, it is because the poet claims that “truth is beauty and beauty truth,” with all the implications of that statement; this is not the sportsman’s claim. On the other hand, both sport and art
are fundamentally sensate activities which may not point beyond themselves, so perhaps they do belong together. The Greeks cultivated both, the Jews—neither. Perhaps we can get closer to the heart of the matter by considering a statement of Alfred North Whitehead in comparing Jews and Greeks. Whitehead, who admitted to not particularly liking Jews, once remarked (in his Diaries) that he understood the Greek idea of heaven, but not the Jewish one. The Greeks, he said, were devoted to sports; since one could play a game over and over again, for all eternity, one could construct Olympus around games (and, similarly, around art: there is no final, perfect picture). But absolute justice, the ideal of the Jews, once attained, leaves nothing further to strive for, nothing to accomplish. What then is the Jewish heaven for? What will one do there? Whitehead was not terribly well-educated about the Jews: one valid answer to his conundrum is that Jews would study Torah, which is also unending; there is also the mystical program. (Whitehead may have strongly dissociated Bible from Ḥazal and Kabbalah; though see Shabbat 151b.) But the basic point about the sports and art is well-taken: neither relates to the category of the good, neither has ethical content. And neither points beyond itself to another realm (though this last statement can be questioned as concerns art).

Interestingly, both art and sports become spectator-oriented. Art is frequently produced so as to be viewed; in some forms, that is essential. Literature is to be read by others, theatre is to be seen by others, as are paintings. It is similar with sports. True, all can participate, but somehow teams become representative and then professional—both of which mean spectators. Perhaps Judaism isn’t sympathetic to activities which develop a spectatorship. We had something like that in the Temple—but nothing since. Moreover, the viewing of the sacrificial activity was certainly tangential to the doing itself, on the one hand; and what happened in the Holy of Holies, the kodesh kodashim, was viewed by none but the High Priest himself, the kohen gadol, on the other. There is no theatre. We do have teachers and students, but that is a completely different kind of thing—not a performance but an attempt at transference and communication. The pedagogue who is pure virtuosity is a failure.

The answers to the rhetorical questions I asked earlier lead either to the demand that we close down our cultural sensitivity—aside from the artifactual, the decoration of what are primarily religious objects—to anything but Torah, since other cultural content is by definition absorbed from the non-Jewish world. Or, contrarily, the awareness that we are improved by our openness to general culture, leads to the
acknowledgment that we are to take some sustenance from non-Jewish sources. On a less dramatic level, we might say that some activities are human—no more, no less. It has been claimed that our native impoverishment has been due to our exilic existence, and that a people reconstituted on its land will also fully reconstitute its culture, across the board; thus, Rav Kook thought that the messianic period will see an efflorescence of Jewish literature and art. I wonder how much Rav Kook understood of either; literature, at least, doesn’t necessarily do well in Utopia. But then Rav Kook maintained, to the degree that I understand him, that constant development was an aspect of even the divine.

The author tells that while standing awestruck and envious before Giotto’s Arena chapel, he was consoled by a loving friend: “Why so sad? You have your frescoes of Dura Europos” (12). Prof. Bland’s companion deserves a high grade for her considerateness; but perhaps he was right after all.

Notes

2. This talmudic interpretation of the Mekhilta and the Second Commandment was not unanimously accepted. In the 12th-century debate between R. Ephraim and R. Elyakim over the permissibility of having “figures of fish and horses” in the synagogue of Cologne, R. Elyakim preferred other talmudic texts, but also adopted the plain-sense reading of the Mekhilta, and “ordered the removal of the figures of snakes and lions” (Mordekhai, Avodah Zarah, sec. 840). It should be noted that this development occurred just when the cathedral of Cologne was being built, with all that implies.
3. Harry Wolfson’s claim, cited by Bland (62), that Philo distinguishes between sculpture and painting is another instance of his tendency to construct Philo as a rabbi.