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Women's Whispers: The artful Jew

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A bibliophile was guiding me through a collection of antique Haggadot, when he paused to lament the primitiveness of the artwork. “Jews are people of the word, not the image,” I reminded him.

It was not always so. The Pentateuch lavishes long passages among its spare and precious prose on the making of the Tabernacle, detailing precisely dimensions, materials, processing of the materials, colors and how to source the dyes for those colors. The project was implemented not by scholars but by craftsmen Bezalel and Oholiab.

The Tabernacle and the Temple that followed were corporeal forums to embody worship of God. In full motion, both provided stimulus to all the senses: a magnificent structure in which animal sacrifices were touched and eaten, incense was burned, and music was performed. It was a whole body experience of the spiritual.

But we were led astray. The late prophets were ruthless in damning Temple worship as perverting holy values. They tell us that when religion is bound into structures and performance,

pomp and lineage, relations between people are perverted. Widows, orphans and the poor had no currency to bargain with in a material religion.

So God destroyed the source of every sensual religious experience that He had commanded us to engage in. Even the tunes sung in the Temple have been lost, and the smells, colors and tastes are certainly gone. We sat on the banks of the Babylonian rivers and in utter bewilderment forged a new worship, founded on a question: “How shall we sing the song of the Lord on a foreign soil?”

By using our words.

We live today in an era of manufactured images; words are only props. The ascendance of the image has been phenomenal: from movies to TV to videos, the personal camera and computer, the Internet of YouTube and Facebook, video games, iPods. Every taxi has a screen inside with talking heads; advertisements on billboards gyrate before us.

Human beings are irresistibly drawn to the synthetic image, to the perfected embodiment of their imagination and dreams. This penchant that the media exploits ever more aggressively is not a new thing. We have been down that path before.

After the destruction of Temple religion, the rabbis and the people had to find a way to break up the old experience so as to preserve and convey it. Pieces of the Temple or replicas, recipes for incense, a modified sacrifice ritual or Levite music were some options. But none was as flexible, as transportable and conveyable as the word. Words require no technology except the human mind and voice; they are free to cross borders, and no license is needed to employ them.

The breathtaking artwork we find in the Christian churches in Europe require wealth and stability for their conception and completion. They are not liquid wealth: If the Sistine Chapel were threatened by war or flood, it could not be turned quickly into something transportable.

Listen, in contrast, to the drama of the establishment of the Jewish calendar described in Mishna Rosh Hashana. Drawing the reader into a misty past, it is full of conflict and intrigue, visual cues and rhythmic patterns. When I read it for the first time, I felt I was there in Jerusalem, holding my breath waiting for the witnesses to come to declare the new moon. There are no gimmicks, no ads, no flashing paparazzi. Words are wealth more liquid even than gold: You do not need to swallow them to hide them from the enemy.

And so in this era doused with fleshy image, we need not be ashamed of our wordy heritage devoid of sensual media. Despite the destruction of synagogues and communities, confiscation from us (many times over) of vast gilded wealth and bonfires of book burnings, we have held on to our words.

One of the loveliest wedding gifts we received was a handmade Haggada, calligraphed and illustrated.

My groom, from a family of obsessive book collectors, was mystified. “What are the decorations for?” he wanted to know. I couldn’t explain; for him, there is only the word.

Our temples require only a teacher and a pupil, a parent and a child, a mouth that can speak and an ear that listens.

I visited the Library of Congress to check that this thesis of mine was well grounded. And I discovered that I had artfully articulated the myth of the artless Jew. After the Enlightenment, the Jew was packed up into a few simple headlines. The anti-visual Jew was a headline agreed to by philo and anti-Semite alike. Kant praised the Jews for their artlessness; Hegel condemned them for the same thing. Heine, Marx, Wagner, Graetz and Buber joined the chorus of the artless Jew.

But the myth is bunk. Kalman Bland lays out centuries of evidence of the aesthetic Jew. Archeological evidence proves that Jews did not cease and desist from beauty after the Temple was destroyed: Israel is covered with synagogue mosaics. The medieval era has left us a mass of material crafted by the artful Jew: decorated synagogues, sculptures, amulets and talismans, tapestries and illustrated manuscripts. And the artsy attitude is corroborated by contemporary writings.

The most delicious irony is divulged by scholars Marvin Heller and Dan Rabinowitz. They discuss how those very works that carry our written tradition, the Responsa literature, often include illustrations “embellished with numerous figures of unclothed women, satyrs and mythological figures.”

Wordy Jew? Certainly. Artless Jew? No indeed!

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