

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## ART AND ORTHODOXY Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

The term “*avodah zarah*” has two distinct referents: worship of a false god, and false worship of G-d. The temptation is strong to collapse the two meanings and argue that worshipping G-d falsely betrays a theological error and misidentifies something else as G-d. This is along the lines of the version of the ontological argument which proves that G-d exists by defining Him as the being Who cannot be conceived of as nonexistent; any god one does not believe in is therefore not the true G-d. Here similarly, any god one worships falsely is not the true G-d.

This is a purely rationalist worldview, in which the only goal is comprehension and in which the risks and rewards of religion have reality only within the human consciousness. The extreme opposite is a magical worldview, in which the powers of idolatry and evil are real and to some extent capable of opposing and frustrating the intent of G-d.

A middle ground, which I will call the artistic worldview, concedes that the risks and rewards of religion are psychological, but holds that the attractions of *avodah zarah* are not all smoke and mirrors. There are routes to transcendence other than the legitimately halakhic, and genuine experiences of divinity that are halakhically forbidden.

Here we run squarely into a variant of the question that catalyzes Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*, and which we can call the Asher Lev problem: Why would G-d deny us any powerful experience? This question is at the root of the not-merely-perceived tension between art and Orthodoxy.

One daring answer is that no such experiences are ever completely forbidden. Even (black) magic, the Talmud teaches, is permitted לַהֲתַלְמֵד, as a teaching tool in a course on

defense against the dark arts. Any regime of censorship requires the censor to see all. As a parallel, it’s no secret that pop Orthodox culture is rarely more than a sharply attenuated version of past pop American culture. But someone had to see and filter the originals to produce this skim milk.

When it comes to sculpture and representational art, it is clear that the *Mishkan* and its accessories served as outlets for the aesthetic impulse. Rabbinic literature flaunts the perilously fine distinction between the *keruvim* (cherubs) over the Ark and gods and goddesses of eros. My question is whether they were merely an outlet, or rather an acknowledgment that the visual and plastic are religiously necessary in all contexts.

As a parallel, consider Maimonides’ treatment of the sacrificial ritual within the *Mishkan*’s precincts. Many argue that Maimonides’ believed that the sacrificial ritual was a concession to a particular cultural context which we have overcome, while I have argued that it is a concession to an intrinsic human drive which we pay a price for extirpating, and should rather channel. Perhaps this analysis of the *Mishkan* itself strengthens my argument, at least for those who do not see aesthetics as something ideally dispensed with.

Here is a sharp test case: Should synagogues, which we can conceptualize as denatured Temples, display representational art? This question is presented by *Beit Yosef* YD 141, following Mordekhai AZ 440, as if the subject of a dispute between Rabbeinu Elyakim and Rabbeinu Efraim, and reports of that dispute shape halakhic discussions of art to this day. I want to reframe the issue from technical matters of law to more abstract questions of the power and purpose of art and the ideal human relationship to the aesthetic impulse.

*The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, [www.torahleadership.org](http://www.torahleadership.org), which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.*

On *Avodah Zarah* 42b, Rav Sheshet assembles a halakhic triptych:

כל המזלות מותרין - חוץ ממזל חמה ולבנה

וכל הפרצופין מותרין - חוץ מפרצוף אדם

וכל הצורות מותרות - חוץ מצורת דרקון

*All astronomical representations are permitted – except for those of the sun and moon;*

*All faces are permitted – except for the human face;*

*All pictures are permitted – except for the picture of a dragon.*

In its initial analysis of Rav Sheshet the Talmud draws a distinction between the creation and the maintaining-in-existence (=appreciation?) of such works. This distinction, however, proves inadequate. Other halakhic statements apparently demonstrate that the production of any astronomical symbol is forbidden, and that the appreciation of even human faces is permitted. On the other hand, Rabban Gamliel possessed and used models of the moon!

The Talmud then tries to distinguish between those works with idolatrous intent and those without. This too, fails; surely any and all pictures with idolatrous intent may not even be maintained! At this point the answers come fast and furious:

- a) We distinguish between perfect and damaged representations.
- b) We distinguish between cultural contexts in which the worship of images is likely, and those in which it is unlikely
- c) We distinguish between images intended to be permanent, and those which can be disassembled and reassembled
- d) We distinguish between images with positive educational purposes and those without.

The last of these answers is the most astonishing and creative. The permission להתלמד, or alternatively ולהוררות, is in other contexts about the necessity to learn things in order to defend against them, whether through defensive charms or simply by having the capacity to judge those accused of exercising dark powers. Here, by contrast, Rabban Gamliel uses lunar models in order to become expert in, and properly set, the Jewish lunar calendar! A grudging concession to necessity is transformed into a pedagogic Torah tour-de-force.

It is in this light that I think we should see the medieval controversy. The question is not merely technical, whether flat images are within the scope of formal Biblical prohibitions or whether the local populace was likely to worship such image. Rather, the first question was whether such images could contribute to proper worship as more than mere decoration. The second question was whether creating

such an atmosphere was worth it if at the same time the atmosphere became more susceptible to idolatry.

All this requires much more analysis. For this week, I want simply to have introduced a brief excerpt of Rabbeinu Elyakim, as per Raavyah 1049, for your evaluation:

*Regarding the structure that they built as a synagogue in Cologne, in the north wall, and they formed on the windows forms of lions and snakes*

*I was greatly astonished that they had done this, coming to change the ancient practice in a manner never practice by their ancestors in all their places of exile,*

*when it was clear to my teachers that the practices of our ancestors is complete Torah and an embedded peg to hang on and lean against*

*Even though their intent was for Heaven, to create beauty before their Creator in the context of mitzvot,*

*we are commanded in the Second Statement not to do this, as Scripture writes “Do not make any sculpture” . . .*

*Let no one consider saying “But we find in the Temple that there were cherubs and other forms – since they were permitted there, they should also be permitted in synagogues”,*

*as there is a Biblical verse explicitly banning this (extension from Temple to synagogue)*

*If their proof is from “All faces are permitted, except for the human face”, “All” does not mean to permit every face other than the human face . . . and we have found in many places that even when the text says “all” and “except for”, it is not comprehensive and other cases may not be derived from it . . .*

*In the Temple as well, in a matter regarding which they were commanded, such as two golden cherubs, if he added onto the two and made four they are considered as if golden gods (i.e. avodah zarah)*

*and from Rabban Gamliel as well one cannot derive permission for this matter*

*as the Talmud concludes that he acted להתלמד, but making such images not להתלמד would have been forbidden,*

*as it is not only for a minor prohibition that להתלמד is a sufficient ground for permission, rather it is sufficient even for severe prohibitions such as capital crimes, and even for crimes that carry within them a loss of the World that is*

*All Good (i.e. the World to Come) . . .*

Rabbeinu Elyakim is opposed to the windows. But what interests me is his acknowledgement that they might be permitted if להתלמד. His assumption is that visual art, and stained or etched glass windows in particular, serve only להתנאות, to provide a beautiful context for independently meaningful actions. Would he have thought it better if his questioners had argued that the figures served להתלמד, that they directly related to the prayer experience? Or worse? *Shabbat Shalom!*

***The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, [www.torahleadership.org](http://www.torahleadership.org), which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.***