

Bezalel & Aesthetics

The construction of the Tabernacle and all its artifacts was handed over to Bezalel and his assistant Oholiab. They are mentioned throughout the process, not just as great craftsmen but also as righteous people. Filled with the spirit of God.

One of the criticisms leveled at Judaism by its ideological opponents is that we have no sense of aesthetics, of physical beauty. This is nonsense on many counts. Physical beauty is repeated many times in relation to individuals, both male and female are beautiful. The Torah would not have mentioned it if it were insignificant. Beauty is feature of creation. Something we recite a blessing over when we see it.

The details of the Tabernacle and its vessels is also proof of the importance of aesthetics. Form, shape, proportion all played a part. It is true we can see similarity to other artistic patterns and forms from Egypt and Mesopotamia. But that does not invalidate the aim and desire of the craftsmen to create something aesthetically attractive.

All sacrifices had to be of animals whose form was physically and visually perfect. Even priests performing their various ceremonies had to be physically perfect human forms. And it is from this that we derive the religious imperative that what we offer to God or whatever objects we use in religious ceremony should be as beautiful as we can afford. The Torah says in Exodus "This is my God and I will beautify Him." From here the rabbis said whatever you make for God should be beautiful (Shabbat 133b).

It is true that for hundreds of years Jews were denied access to crafts under Christianity. And the Church could contrast the magnificence of its buildings and art to contrast with the poverty of Jewish art. And as art became an expression of Christianity with its iconography and physical forms that were worshiped, Judaism recoiled from portraying human forms. But as soon as opportunity presented itself and wealth enabled it we always gave art and beauty great significance.

The first school of Art in the Jewish state was called Bezalel. And creativity flourishes in Israel, including religious objects, as never before.

But there is one important lesson to be learned from Bezalel. In the West there is no necessary connection between aesthetics and morality. It is true the ancient Greeks, Aristotle in particular, tried to make the two interdependent. But slowly artists have come to associated with corruption, pornography and indeed Antisemitism. That is something that Judaism strives to avoid.