

## ROSH HASHANAH MORNING 5769

### HIDDUR MITZVAH: SACRED BEAUTIFICATION AS AN EXPRESSION OF HOPE IN THE FUTURE

In July, while Ana and I were visiting my mother in New York, we went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the exhibit of the great English Romantic landscape artist William Turner. Walking into each gallery was like walking into a turbulent cosmos awash in the power of light and motion. Though the ostensible subject may have been ships or a landscape or a building, the real focus of Turner's palette was movement itself. For Turner, nature was not composed of objects acting upon one another in a mechanical way but of colliding fields of energy. The earth's atmosphere was not a passive or neutral backdrop. Turner's brush endowed it with swaths of energy and vibrating light. On his canvasses humans and their constructions threaded their way through halls of vapor and transparency. The sea, which for centuries had been conventionalized as a flat sheet or, when shown in a storm, had been portrayed with stylized patterns of movement, was disclosed by Turner as actually consisting of cascading structures engaging and contending within itself.

The work expressed the artist himself. In the refined and meticulous world of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century English portraiture, Turner was a scandal. Often his works were hung in galleries before they were even finished. A colleague of his described a piece that had just been delivered to a gallery as "a mere dab of several colors...void and without form, like chaos before creation." Mere hours before the gallery was to open, Turner hunched over the work as if in a trance and from the movement of his hand burst forth the brilliance of color giving shape.

On this day of Rosh HaShanah we celebrate the work of another great artist who shaped form out of chaos; whose primary subject was light; who orchestrated teeming fields of energy not so much to tame them as to sanctify them, to endow them with sacred purpose. According to tradition, this day is the birthday of creation.

It would be good to recall the work of this artist, the one whom we call God. At first all is unformed and void. Only darkness exists. Then God's breath sweeps across this vast canvass, uttering the word, "Light." This is not the

illumination of sun or moon, which have yet to be created. This is an ephemeral translucence exploding with color and wisdom. Water covers everything and is eventually separated into waters above called heaven and waters below called earth. And the waters below are further separated, creating areas called dry land. Yet these separations do not settle matters. They serve only to entice earth's inhabitants to cross the boundaries that have been created: to cross the seas that separate them from their neighbors and to bridge the chasm between heaven and earth.

Vegetation sprouts. Stars and planets erupt out of the dark expanse above. On earth, creatures emerge out of the waters. Sea monsters swim the depths. Birds soar. Beasts of great variety of design roam the earth. Then with one more great breath God creates the human being. God looks upon all of this creation, finds it very good, ceases, and sanctifies it. A work of consummate artistry is finished.

Jewish tradition teaches that we are to “walk in God’s ways” by emulating God. How do we do this? Certainly the verses from the Holiness Code that we will read on Yom Kippur guide us in how to act as ethical beings: feed the hungry; assist those who are physically challenged; pay fairly those who work for us; engage in honest business practices; treat the stranger as one of us.

Yet, how are we to emulate God as artist? The Torah seems to present some obstacles in this sense. The second of the Ten Commandments states: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or in the waters below.”

How enduring this verse has been in restraining the development of Jewish visual arts is told by a story from my own family. As a young boy my mother’s cousin Morris showed great gift as an artist. His sketches were exquisite. Yet, they disturbed some within the family. One day, still in his teens, he was at my grandfather’s home on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. He had just drawn a beautiful sketch of my grandfather. My great uncle Yitzak walked in and worried out loud to my grandfather: “I’m worried about Morris’ soul. All this drawing. It violates the commandment against graven images.” My grandfather, who was more relaxed in his approach, said, “Don’t worry, Yitzak. It’s just a picture.”

But pictures have not come easily within the Jewish tradition. I think the reason has to do with how fiercely Jewish tradition has resisted literalistic representations of the sacred.

The work of human artistry actually plays a central role in the story of the exodus from Egypt and the forty years of wanderings. Within two months after the Israelites leave Egypt, God instructs Moses on the building of the mishkan, the sanctuary, and its ritual objects. The materials to be used are sumptuous: purple linen, blue and crimson yarns, gold threads, silver furnishings, acacia wood, precious gems, ornaments in the design of pomegranates and golden bells.

The fact that this project occurs so early in the exodus indicates that the construction of a beautiful sanctuary is not a mere luxury. It is an essential part of freeing ourselves from slavery.

Jewish tradition has understood the mishkan to be a model of creation itself. Its different materials, vessels, and domains manifest through metaphor the various dimensions of creation. Within its structure we not only worship God but also renew ourselves by entering into a field of energy designed to remind us of that sanctified and sanctifying divine work of art that brought all life into being.

The chief artisan in charge of constructing the mishkan was Bezalel, whose name means “in the shadow of God.” Reflecting on why Bezalel was chosen for this most important task, the early rabbis say it was because he knew how to combine the letters with which Heaven and Earth were created. It was not primarily his skills with gold or silver or stone. It was his ability to weave divine meaning into shape through words.

To the rabbinic imagination words share with water a life-giving power. And, like water, they are fluid, capable detouring around obstacles, seeping through barriers, shifting as necessary to restore currency and to revive those who are parched in a wilderness of wandering.

The early rabbis favored verbal over material representations of the divine not only because the cultures around them worshipped statues. It was because the rabbis opposed static, doctrinaire explanations of sacred intention and favored interpretations that were more supple and open-ended. Surrounded by cultures that built monuments both in tribute to heavenly

gods and in honor of human conquests, the rabbis told the story that God cheered when Moses smashed the first set of Ten Commandment tablets, concerned that those engravings would become just another object of worship. The rabbis were suspicious of any medium which appeared to freeze meaning and favored that which encouraged inquisitive thought and evolution.

In the Bible, the word for artist, *oman*, appears only once. It is in the Song of Songs:

How graceful your steps in those sandals,  
O daughter of nobles!  
Your rounded thighs are like jewels  
The work of an artist's hand.

These words teach us that the work of the artist is in the roundness of the thighs, the place of birth and pro-creation. It is also in the beauty of the step. Art is in the walk, in the movement forward, in the path that is life. A work of art is sacred because it opens up the way, providing access to new possibilities. It is the conveyor of hope.

Hope is knowing that life remains yet open, that the future is a gift that life offers us. Sacred art expresses our confidence in a future of meaning and facilitates our way forward.

There is in Judaism a principle that expresses this notion of sacred aesthetics. It is called *hiddur mitzvah*. It means "to beautify the way we perform a mitzvah." The concept is derived from Rabbi Ishmael's comment in the Talmud on the Biblical verse in the book of Exodus: "This is my God and I will glorify Him" (Exodus 15:2). Rabbi Ishmael asks: "Is it possible for a human being to add glory to his creator? What it really means is: I shall glorify Him in the way I perform mitzvot. I shall prepare before God a beautiful lulav, a beautiful succah, beautiful tzitzit, beautiful tefillin, a beautiful shofar, a beautiful Torah scroll."

The verse that gives rise to this concept of *hiddur mitzvah* is from the Song of the Sea. The setting is this: The Israelites have just fled from Egypt. They have reached what appears to be an insurmountable barrier: the Sea of Reeds. From the distance they hear the pounding hoofs of Pharaoh's army. All seems lost. But Moses calls out, "Have no fear!" And God says to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to move forward." And with that the sea parts.

The Israelites cross over, and then the waters close over their worst fears, submerging them in the depths of the sea.

Immediately, the Israelites sing those words which Rabbi Ishmael understands to be a source for Jewish aesthetics. The Song of the Sea is a celebration of that which carries us across the threshold from slavery to freedom. The Israelites cross over from the realm of enslavement and head towards the promised land, the realm of responsibility. From this song exulting in our liberation blossoms the principle of *hiddur mitzvah*, the beautification of how we perform mitzvot. We endow our sacred tasks with grace and adornment as a celebration of hope in the future and of our freedom to shape it.

According to tradition, one of those mitzvot is to build a sanctuary. We today are the fortunate beneficiaries of a courageous generation of Temple Israel members, who amidst a time when world Jewry was threatened with extinction demonstrated their confidence in the future by buying the property at 3<sup>rd</sup> and Loma and committing to the construction of our current synagogue building. At the dedication ceremonies on September 12, 1941, the commemorative book opened with a poem by Hortense Hoffman entitled “The New Temple Israel.” Its first words were a clarion call of confidence and commitment: “Against the world of Nazi hate, This glorious fortress [we] dedicate.”

Over the succeeding years congregants continued to express their confidence in the mission of the synagogue by building a school addition, adding a second floor for more classrooms, modernizing the kitchen, and refurbishing the sanctuary.

Temple Israel continues to be a beacon of spiritual light: for young families moving to the area; retirees relocating to be closer to their children; young adults reactivating their interest in practices from their childhood; and for many, many who were not born Jewish but who feel drawn to Judaism for its wisdom and its welcoming of wayfarers in search of a spiritual home.

Our human resources, our members, are warm and welcoming, enthusiastic and, I believe, optimistic about the future. Our physical resource, our building, however, is tired and in need of attention. Over the past two years through a series of parlor meetings, annual meetings and informal discussions involving hundreds of people, our members have begun to shape

a consensus about what is needed to raise the physical appearance and function of our synagogue to a level that matches the sparkle of our spirit. Over the coming months a detailed plan for implementing a long overdue upgrade will be produced.

At that time I ask that you join in a proud chain of tradition at Temple Israel that has consistently expressed its confidence in the future of the synagogue's mission by vigorously supporting this *hiddur mitzvah*.

Returning to the sole Biblical source for the word artist, the Song of Songs, the rabbinic interpretation of the verse, "My beloved, you are beautiful, How beautiful you are!" suggests that one who engages in *hiddur mitzvah* becomes him or herself beautified as a result. That beauty is the glow of reinvigoration one experiences in proclaiming one's optimism about the future. Through your commitment to our synagogue's beautification, you will be an artist in the most profound way that our tradition understands that sacred occupation: you will be providing access to new possibilities for yourself and others. And like those before us, your brush strokes will proclaim this a New Temple Israel proud of its past and confident in its future.

May this New Year be one of joy, success, and great beauty for each and every one of us and for us together. L'shana tova!