

Behar- Behukotai
May 16, 2015
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Here was the headline in the New York Times yesterday: “Ancient Ruins at Palmyra are Endangered by ISIS Advance in Syria” – and here is how the article began – an article that physically caused me to cringe as I read it: “Islamic militants advanced to the outskirts of the Syrian town of Palmyra on Thursday, putting the extremist group within striking distance of some of the world’s most magnificent antiquities. It raised fears that the ancient city of Palmyra, with its complex of columns, tombs and ancient temples dating to the first century A.D., could be looted or destroyed. Militants from ISIS have already destroyed large parts of ancient sites at Nimrud, Hatra and Nineveh in Iraq. Islamic State leaders denounce pre-Islamic art and architecture as idolatrous and deserving of destruction.”

And as I thought of those magnificent archeological sites being destroyed forever – well I cringed and literally felt pain – of course this was as the article mentioned not the first time these fanatics have destroyed such precious artifacts in the name of religion, but it hurts each time I read about it – on top of the loss of life, and the beheadings and the other trappings of this pre-modern movement that threatens so much our modern world – I don’t know there was something about this destruction that really angered me.

But rabbi – aren’t you being a bit hypocritical? After all, look what it says in a very strong statement in today’s torah portion: *Lo Taasu ey-li-lim u’fesel u’matzeyvah; lo takimu lachem, v’even maskit lo titnu b’artzechem l’hishtachavot aleha* “You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land and bow down to them - I am the Lord!”

Yes, I admit, this dilemma is not new. We Jews too have had an ambivalent relationship with art. In every generation we have appreciated art and even have produced objects that are aesthetically pleasing. And yet, there has also been an antagonism that has tended to mute that enthusiasm. While it is true that this Biblical injunction that I just quoted, has usually been understood as only prohibiting the making of objects for worship and adoration. At times, the prohibition was interpreted much more severely. According to art historians who specialize in Jewish themes, there has been a constant pendulum swing between art being patronized and being banned.

So before I express my outrage, aren’t these Islamic Fundamentalists merely an extreme version of a problem that was set in motion by the Bible itself??

A friend and colleague of mine, Rabbi Jim Michaels, shared an experience he had in Italy some 20 years ago. He was moved to tears when viewing a Pieta scene carved by the great Michelangelo, of the Virgin Mary lovingly cradling the body of Jesus, but as he stood there visibly moved, he was chastised by another person wearing a kippah.

I believe this simple moment points out the heart of this dilemma. My friend, standing there in his kippah was moved to tears by the beauty of the Pieta – a scene that focused on the Virgin

Mary cradling the body of Jesus. The other man in the kippah could only see a goyish work of art – worse yet an idolatrous work of art. One viewed the statue through the eyes of a sensitive, caring human being, the other viewed it through the eyes of a committed religious Jew who had severe and significant theological problems with what he was seeing. So here then is the crux of our dilemma: How can a human being not be moved by the magnificence of a Michelangelo creation? How can a Jew allow himself to be moved by images and themes that are so foreign, even antithetical to what he or she believes? And is this not the dilemma confronted by those ISIS fanatics camped outside Palmyra?

This dilemma is not new, certainly not for us. We Jews have always had an ambivalent relationship with art. In every generation there have been Jews who appreciated art and even have produced objects that are aesthetically pleasing. And yet, there has also been an antagonism that has tended to mute that enthusiasm. And all of it goes back to that verse from today's Parasha: *Lo Taasu ey-li-lim u'fesel u'matzeyvah* "You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land and bow down to them - I am the Lord!"

In Biblical times, Solomon commissioned skilled artists to make the Temple beautiful. And yet, later generations periodically allowed the Temple to fall into disrepair and neglect. In the Roman period, Herod sponsored artists throughout Judea, and had statues and frescos placed in his many palaces. And yet, 100 after Herod, those who rebelled against Rome purposefully destroyed these treasures. If you have ever visited Masada, the beautiful Mosaic floors there were deliberately ruined by the Jewish Zealots who found them objectionable.

It seems that throughout history, the attitude of Jews toward art and artists has reflected their level of cultural assimilation and comfort in their surrounding society. Where we have been open to the world and the world has been open to us, we have developed and expressed an appreciation for all forms of artistic expression. When we were isolated from the world we tended to view its art with suspicion and disdain. In other words, our relationship with non-Jewish art can be seen as a barometer of our relationship with the non-Jewish world in general. When my friend and colleague was moved by the Pieta scene he was not revealing the quality of Michelangelo's talent - that had been well established long before *he* ever saw the sculpture - but in his ability and willingness to be moved by the Pieta he was revealing much about his own relationship with the world. Similarly the Jew who chastised him for being so moved was revealing much about *his* relationship to the world in his inability, or at the very least, his unwillingness to seriously consider the magnificent work that Michelangelo had created.

And so as I read the headlines of the New York Times I realized the same holds true for these Islamic Fundamentalists who are on the verge of destroying yet another historic site. Their opinion tells me nothing about the site but everything about them and their view of the world and how they choose to relate to modernity.

In a few weeks, as part of our TBS trip to Israel we will visit the magnificent Roman ruins that have been unearthed in Jerusalem and around Israel. We will visit the archaeological remains of villas from 2000 years ago and see with our own eyes how wealthy *Kohanim* - religious leaders of the Jewish people - hired the finest Roman artisans of their day to decorate their palatial estates near the Temple - yet instructed them to leave out any pictorial representations and used only geometric designs in their mosaic floors and exquisite frescos. And these

incredible archeological remains tell us much - not only about the nature of Roman art of that period - but of the nature of that Jewish community- through its relationship to that art. Two thousand years ago, those Jewish aristocrats, like my friend viewing the Pieta, were able to appreciate the quality of the art and find a place for it in their lives, despite its foreign genesis. And I have little doubt that they were probably criticized by some other Jews, just as my friend was when he stood before Michelangelo's Pieta.

It seems to me that we have three choices regarding how we relate to non-Jewish art in general and religious art specifically - and it is the same three choices that confronted Jews throughout our long history all the way back to the prohibition from today's Torah reading: "You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land."

Some would say the only way to understand this torah prohibition is narrowly and literally – not unlike the Islamic fundamentalists in Syria are doing. Like them we can say that the art of our non-Jewish neighbors is foreign and must remain so or it will contaminate our Jewish life and thought with foreign ideas and concepts. According to this approach the Torah could not be more clear: "no idols, no carved images, no images!" This is the philosophy of the Jew who criticized my friend: the Pieta by Michelangelo is *treif* - its beauty is irrelevant - it is foreign and should not be allowed to contaminate us. If it is art you crave, then cultivate Jewish art; art that is created for and by Jews.

Of course there is Jewish art - and much of it is beautiful art. Our Beth Sholom Museum makes it a point to cultivate and showcase such art.

But others would reject this narrow and parochial approach. If the torah requires me to dismiss non-Jewish art, than I choose to reject the torah. These assimilationists believe the torah is part of a narrow and outdated world-view – it is time to open ourselves to the world, become one with the beauty of the world. In the nineteenth century, for example, two impressionists, Pissarro and Modigliani, were both Jews but they did nothing to acknowledge that Jewishness, nor did they include Jewish themes in their work.

So one rejects Jewish art as parochial and embraces non-Jewish art, wholly, completely, and uncritically, while the other rejects non-Jewish art as idolatrous and embraces Jewish art exclusively and sees it as an extension of Jewish religiosity. It would be a tough choice for many of us if those were the only two choices we had. But thankfully there is a third option.

Read the verse from the torah closely and we find it actually says something very interesting and contains a solution to our dilemma:

"You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land **and bow down to them...**" The prohibition from today's Torah reading does not prohibit art for art sake – it merely prohibits art for worship sake. This close reading would prohibit the *worship* of non-Jewish art but not the *appreciation* of it. I wouldn't purchase a replica of the Pieta and place it in my living room - but there is nothing wrong in viewing it, appreciating it and being moved by the magnificence of this creation. My friend who appreciated Michelangelo's Pieta understood this distinction - the person who criticized him could not - or at the very least did not. The fact that Israel has spent significant sums of money to unearth, preserve and present ancient Roman Temples is not because

Israelis see any religious value in them – they have no intention to bow down or worship in them – but they do understand their beauty and their historical significance – they are worthy of our admiration and study – this is a distinction that is lost on the Fundamentalists in Syria.

The goal of art is to touch our humanity and provoke our deepest human emotions. Religious art has that as its goal as well, but in addition it seeks to encourage us to connect with the religious beliefs and values it promotes. I have a beautifully crafted pair of sterling silver candlesticks created by a Jewish artisan in 19th century Poland. Its beauty not only touches me but inspires me to want to embrace the mitzvah of *hadlakat neyrot* - lighting the Shabbat candles. I too visited Michelangelo's *Pieta* and was moved and touched by its beauty and grace. Yet it's religious themes that surround the Virgin Mother and her sacrificed son of God did not resonate within me or affect me at all. I am sure it is a much more powerful work of art for a religious Christian, but I am glad I saw it and felt its beauty.

If someone were to ask me what is the goal of any kind of art, I would respond that it is to inspire and to provoke emotions. However, I would add that one of these emotions should be the desire to acknowledge and praise God as the source of all creative power. As a Jew, the image of a Virgin Mary does not resonate within me but the idea of a God who created a Michelangelo and endowed him with such talent and depth of feeling moves me to utter praise. Praise of Michelangelo and praise of God who created a world that contained a Michelangelo.

So the image of a Jew, standing before a statue of the Virgin Mary and being moved to recite a blessing to the God of Israel - is not one that cause me any difficulty at all. I much prefer it to the image of Muslim fanatics destroying ancient sites of magnificent beauty because they deem them to be idolatrous.

The Grand Canyon moves me to praise God as I see it as part of God's creation. The *Pieta* also moves me to praise God as I see it as the creation of a man who is part of God's creation. So, is there a proper blessing for a beautiful piece of art? What *bracha*, would one make for the *Pieta*? I would say the same *brachah* that is said when we see magnificent works of nature: *Baruch atah adonai eloheynu melech haolam she-kacha lo b'olamo* "Praised be God in whose world such beauty is included."

In the great tradition of our people who have found a way to be a part of this world and yet separate from it, who have found a way to embrace the beauty of other traditions and promote our own, I encourage you to cultivate the arts. And remember, the next time you see works of art, keep in mind the words that we say every morning in our *Shacharit* prayers: *Ma gadlu maasecha adonai...* "How wondrous are Your works, O Lord. With wisdom and divine skill have You made them all." It just saddens me that there are so many religious people in the world who cannot or at least will not say: Amen.