

## Some Notes on Religion and the Arts

THE PROJECT OF BRINGING Judaism into discussion with the arts is part of the larger project of bringing Judaism (“Torah”) and the wisdom of the world (“*hokhmah*”) into mutual discussion.<sup>1</sup> Judaism must engage with the arts, and the arts must engage with Judaism: both need each other.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has consistently shown how the arts can illuminate Judaism, and how Jewish thought can illuminate the arts. Lord Sacks begins his 2013 Yom Kippur message not with a quote from the Talmud or midrash, but with this sentence: “I vividly remember the surprise and delight I had when I first read Jane Austen’s *Emma*.” To begin a discourse upon *teshuvah* [repentance] with such a literary reference implies that it is through the arts—through literature, poetry, art, film, dance, and theater—that we may come to truly appreciate Judaism. Reading *Emma*, writes Rabbi Sacks, enabled him to understand what it means to change through *teshuvah* in the context of Yom Kippur: “It was the first time I have read a novel in which you see a character changing over time.”<sup>2</sup> Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Lord Sacks demonstrates, can broaden our understanding of *teshuvah*; without the *hokhmah* of literary fiction, our understanding of key concepts of Torah may not be complete.

In his Yom Kippur mahzor, Lord Sacks shows how the progression of movements in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony can clarify the progression of movements in a *piyut* (a liturgical poem),<sup>3</sup> and utilizes examples from the lives of composer Arnold Schoenberg and painter Marc Chagall in order to explicate the Kol Nidrei service.<sup>4</sup> And in discussing the value of persistence (what we in Yeshiva may call “*hasmadah*”), Rabbi Sacks presents examples from the lives of Stravinsky, Van Gogh, and the Impressionists.<sup>5</sup>

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Rabbi Dr. J. J. Schachter likewise shows how the arts can enrich Judaism in his essay “Halakhic Authority in a World of Personal Autonomy.” Schachter writes that a quotation from Henri Matisse that he glimpsed in a Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit helped him elucidate the experiential dimension of halakhah.<sup>6</sup>

God, the Creator, is creative, and human beings are created in the image of God, which means that we are also endowed with some of the capacities of God.<sup>7</sup> One of these capacities is the creative capacity: just as God is the Creator, so too, human beings are the creative species. In *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (“the Rav”) famously emphasized the importance of creativity as a human trait that, when exercised in the realm of Torah, is a fulfillment of our need to partner with God in creating the world, for when human beings create, they imitate God, the Creator par excellence:

Halakhic Man received the Torah from Sinai not as a simple recipient but as a creator of worlds, as a partner with the Almighty in the act of creation. The power of creative interpretation (*hiddush*) is the very foundation of the received tradition. . . . The essence of Torah is intellectual creativity.<sup>8</sup>

If creativity is an essential trait—the “essence of Torah”—[and, as Rabbi Yisrael Salanter said, we need to know how to exercise each character trait] the creative disciplines—the arts—can, and perhaps should be drawn upon, in order to understand the creative process, in order to learn how creativity can be applied to Talmud Torah (Torah study), and in order to see models of how creativity may be introduced into the process of interpreting our tradition.

For those of us who are engaged in the arts, or who appreciate the arts in various ways, our artistic appreciation can be greatly enhanced by infusing our artistic encounters with a Jewish theological perspective. Knowing that God can be found in more places today—in locales that had never been previously considered as conducive for encounters with divinity—helps us bring an element of holiness to the arts. And indeed, for many, God is in the arts; to read a beautifully crafted sentence, to gaze at an extraordinarily colored painting, to hear a transcendent musical composition, and to view a revelatory film, is to receive a glimpse of God in this world.

The nineteenth century German Romanticist E. T. A. Hoffmann, a polymathic writer and critic, wrote of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, “Every passion—love—hate—anger—despair etc., such as we encounter in opera, is clothed by music in the purple shimmer of romanticism, and even that which we experience in life leads us out beyond life into kingdom of the infinite.”<sup>9</sup>

In his Yale Open Course series, “Listening to Music,” Professor Craig Wright dubbed Mozart “Mozart the divine”: we may have experiences of the divine in our lives that occur “in association with art, and it may come with the music of Mozart.” According to Professor Wright, it is possible to “take art and turn it into religion,” and it is also possible to see “visions of the divine working with art.” And “isn’t this what art is all about? It gives us something better than this stupid, mundane ‘crap’ we have to deal with on a quotidian basis. There *could* be something better, bigger and better” than what we normally experience. Professor Wright states that he experienced such a sublime moment of transcendence when standing at the Chartres Cathedral, and discusses how he receives intimations of this sublimity when listening to Mozart on account of the music’s “crystalline clarity, balance, and proportion.” At the same time, though, he believes that there are even occasional intimations of “hell” in Mozart’s music.<sup>10</sup>

Just as the arts can be enriched by introducing religious perspectives into the varied artistic disciplines, our Jewish praxis can be tremendously enriched by integrating artistic sentiments and sensibilities into our Jewish studies.

At Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, rabbinical students work on developing a halakhic sensibility, a pastoral sensibility, a theological sensibility, and an ethical sensibility. I would venture that an artistic sensibility—and a literary sensibility in particular—must be added to the range of sensibilities we must cultivate in order to become multi-dimensional, well-rounded, complete Jews.

A literary sensibility supplements—and perhaps is essential to—the ethical sensibility, because literature helps us understand other people in ways that have yet to be duplicated by any other discipline or manner of discourse. According to recent scientific studies, readers of literary fiction tend to be more empathetic than those who do not read literary fiction.<sup>11</sup>

Last year, we at YCT had the privilege of participating in a Beginning of Life Issues Medical Ethics Conference (March 31-April 3). Infertility was one of the major topics addressed, and we explored the subject from halakhic, bioethical, and pastoral angles. But it would not be too far-fetched to suggest that the halakhic, bioethical, and pastoral counseling of an infertile couple would be far different—and more empathetic—if we could inhabit the mental space of a person suffering from infertility. A literary sensibility, perhaps bolstered by reading literary novels such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*<sup>12</sup> that address infertility, can help us become more conscious of and more sensitive to those for whom biological generativity has not yet been (or may never be) a feasible option.

And regarding the issue of generativity itself, the arts can help us understand that having children isn't the only way of being fruitful and multiplying. The infertile are no less in the image of God than the fertile; merely because God removed the biological capacity of generativity from certain individuals does not mean that that such individuals possess any less infinite value, equality, or uniqueness than biologically generative individuals. Non-biologically generative individuals may avail themselves of other means of generativity. Creating lasting objects of art that beautify the world and enrich the lives of others is a magnificent method of exercising the human creative capacity.<sup>13</sup>

The thrust of the normative Jewish tradition teaches that a human being can only be completely whole when married.<sup>14</sup> However, we are not yet living in the World State of *Brave New World*—we are not yet living in a world in which “people never are alone now.” We are not yet living in a world in which “we arrange [people’s] lives so that it’s almost impossible for them ever to have [solitude].”<sup>15</sup> We are living in a world in which, for a variety of reasons, many individuals live alone. In such a world, we would do well to resuscitate the minority tradition which teaches that each human being—regardless of whether he or she is blessed to be married and living with another person—is a whole, complete being who is just as much of an individual created *b'tselem Elokim* [in the image of God] as a married individual. In their empathy-raising capacities, the arts can help us see all individuals—even the unmarried—as individuals who are *b'tselem Elokim*. The arts teach us that being married isn't the only way of being whole. And the arts teach us that physical gatherings are not the only way of experiencing community. As Fernando Pessoa stated,

With such a deficiency of literature as there is today, what can a man of genius do but convert himself, on his own, into a literature? With such a deficiency of coexistent people as there is today, what can a man of sensibility do but invent his own friends, or at least his intellectual companions?<sup>16</sup>

Community can be found in literature, and company can be sought amongst the great books. This does not mean to suggest that books can replace people; it is to suggest that the arts—and great literature in particular—offer other avenues for communal support that may not be found solely within one's contemporary community.

Literature expands our empathic powers in ways that halakha and theology—and even ethical analysis—cannot. Practicing the *middah* [value, character trait] of *noseh b'ol im haveiro* [sharing another's burden] and the mitzvah of *v'ahavta l'rey'akha kamokha* [love your fellow as yourself] necessi-

tates an awareness of the varieties of human experience, and this awareness can be gained perhaps only in literature. Literary fiction allows us to encounter individuals from societies not our own who possess temperaments and perspectives that are not are own; and great writers actually let us spend some time inside these other individuals' heads. We are not living in a world in which "there's always *soma* to calm your anger, to reconcile you to your enemies, to make you patient and long-suffering,"<sup>17</sup> and to make you empathetic. But we are living in a world in which—as long as we continue to read—there will always be a realm of human endeavor in which these experiences can be had: literary fiction.

The remainder of this essay does not offer any programmatic statement about the place of the arts in Jewish learning. Rather, inspired by Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp," it presents a series of reflections concerning the value of the arts in Jewish learning.

— For many years, painters, novelists, filmmakers, and musicians have incorporated Jewish themes and motifs into their work. Unfortunately, Jewish learning has yet to fully integrate the arts into Jewish studies; thus, this promising opportunity for an enriching cross-disciplinary interchange has largely remained unfulfilled. Much as historians of religion once maintained "some puritanical or bourgeois prejudices against literature" until interdisciplinary scholars such as Mircea Eliade argued that "it was precisely in such efforts to analyze and elucidate the structures, modalities, and meanings of literary universes, that historians of religions could have found the help or inspiration they vainly sought in sociology, anthropology, or psychology,"<sup>18</sup> scholars of Jewish learning would do well to purge the vestigial prejudices they retain against the arts, for it is precisely in the inventive tools, innovative techniques, and creative insights the arts provide where scholars of Jewish learning can find the assistance they seek in philosophy, history, economics, or political science.

— The arts in general, and film in particular, offer excellent tools for illustrating theology.<sup>19</sup> Film, perhaps more than the other art forms, functions most similarly to religion; thus, to understand the effect that movies have upon us is to understand the effect that religion has upon us.<sup>20</sup>

— Literature supports the Jewish scholar's and Jewish learner's effort to understand the way in which Judaism sees and structures the external world, and simultaneously assists efforts to understand the inner workings of the internal Jewish world. Mircea Eliade's words about the potential of literature (and *littérature fantastique* in particular) to elucidate theological concepts and

to adumbrate religious world-views hold true for the inner religious world of Judaism:

Each tale creates its own proper universe, and the creation of such imaginary universes through literary means can be compared with mythical processes. For any myth relates a story or tale of a creation, tells how something came into being—the world, life, or animals, man, and social institutions. In this sense, one can speak of a certain continuity between myth and literary fiction, since the one as well as the other recounts the creation (or the “revelation”) of a universe parallel to the everyday world. . . . [A] literary creation can likewise reveal unexpected and forgotten meanings even to a contemporary, sophisticated reader.

[S]uch types of literary creativity may also constitute authentic instruments of knowledge. *The imaginary universes brought to light in littérature fantastique disclose some dimensions of reality that are inaccessible to other approaches.*<sup>21</sup>

— What can intensive Torah study and academic Jewish studies gain from the arts? Can we daresay that the arts, and the methodologies, techniques, and stylistic devices utilized in various artistic disciplines, are necessary for a full, deeper, and dynamic engagement with Jewish texts? According to the art historian Matthew Baigell, the answer is a resounding yes: “art can be an important educational tool” in its capacity to “help sustain Judaism as a living, evolving religion.”<sup>22</sup> If we say that a sine qua non of both Talmud Torah and Jewish studies is interpretation and *hiddush* [creative interpretation],<sup>23</sup> then the creative disciplines are crucial in allowing us to understand how we can be creative in Talmud Torah and Jewish studies. Baigell reminds us that just as *midrashim* [rabbinic exegetical homiletics] interpret, “artists interpret,” and while these interpretations “should not be considered as a pretext for” academic, scholarly interpretations—“at least not initially”—these visual interpretations do implicitly beckon us to become visually literate.<sup>24</sup> Concomitantly, gaining a familiarity with different modes of interpretation, such as visual methods of interpretation, can aid the study of midrash as well. Baigell thereby goads us to approach artists and the arts with a great level of respect, since the arts are disciplines which require just as much expertise, training, and skill as other disciplines.

— Art can form the basis of a personal—if not a communal—theology. Dante believed that the Divine was revealed in art. *The Divine Comedy* illustrates how the sacred is not only found in texts, but can be glimpsed in the beauty of the arts as well.<sup>25</sup>

— Cultivating an artistic sensibility may bolster our spiritual, ethical, and ecological sensibilities, writes Moshe Halbertal:

[T]he aesthetic qualities of the Spinozistic universe resemble the features that make a work of art beautiful and arresting. Any change in color or line in a great painting will affect its totality; every feature in it is intrinsically necessary. When the beauty of a painting dawns on us, it has a compelling power of inevitability; it arrests our will. If, as I believe, what distinguishes the religious sensibility from the strictly secular is not the concept of God but the category of the holy, such works of art are like the sacred. Their integrity and inevitability are inherent to them; they are not ours to mess with. It is for this reason that the destruction of a work of art feels sacrilegious, and that certain aspects of modern technological hubris are, for the ecological sensibility, not only wrong but sinful.<sup>26</sup>

Within the halakhic system, the rabbinic authority to regulate all matters of Jewish life—from speech etiquette to food preparation to even sexual behavior—and to rule upon not only ritual law but civil law as well, is embedded in the underlying assumption that Judaism believes the “sacred” is found “within the secular.” As Jacob Neusner has observed regarding the theology of *hazal* [the talmudic-era rabbis]:

[The Mishnah] expresses a deeply embedded ontology and methodology of the sacred, *specifically of the sacred within the secular*, and of capacity for regulation, *therefore sanctification, within the ordinary*: All things in order, all things then hallowed by God who orders all things.<sup>27</sup>

The arts, then, are secular disciplines that are ripe to be engaged in for the purpose of attaining their spiritual, religious, and holy fruits.

May the discussion continue, and may we go *me'hay'il le'hay'il* [from strength to strength] in our engagement with the wisdom of Torah and the *hokhmah* of the arts.

## NOTES

1. See Jonathan Sacks, *A Judaism Engaged with the World* (United Kingdom: Exco DPS Ltd., 2013), esp. 28 and 18 (“In place of assimilation and segregation we need to argue the case for a Judaism that engages with the world”).
2. Sacks, “The Courage to Grow—A message for Yom Kippur,” Sept. 11, 2013; accessed Sept. 13, 2013, [http://www.rabbisacks.org/?utm\\_source=Office+of+Rabbi](http://www.rabbisacks.org/?utm_source=Office+of+Rabbi)

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3. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Yom Kippur Mahzor* (trans. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks; Jerusalem: Koren, 2012), 804.
  4. *Ibid.*, at 68. I am grateful to my father, Alan Goodman, for bringing these passages to my attention.
  5. Sacks, "Overcoming Setbacks," *Covenant & Conversation* 5774 (Vaera, Dec. 28, 2013).
  6. *Radical Responsibility: Celebrating the Thought of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks* (ed.s Michael J. Harris, Daniel Ryhnhold, & Tamra Wright; New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2012), 155-176, at 170.
  7. See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (trans. Lawrence Kaplan; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 99. Cf. *idem*, "Agency [Sh'lihut]," in *Yemei Zikaron* (Aliner Library; WZO, Dept. of Torah Education & Culture; Jerusalem: Orot, 1986), 9-28, and Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1934; repr. Philadelphia: JPS, 2010), 316 (citations from the 2010 edition).
  8. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, at 82; cf. *ibid.* at 164; *idem*, "Redemption, Prayer, Talmud Torah," *Tradition* 17:2 (1978) 55-72, at 64; Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Carl Stern's Interview with Dr. Heschel," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays* (ed. Susannah Heschel; New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), 412; and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 2011), 216: "[T]he Creator made creation creative.... The God who chose to create our universe is one who delights in creativity." (emphasis in original)
  9. In *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, quoted in Matthew Guerrieri, *The First Four Notes: Beethoven's Fifth and the Human Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 99.
  10. Craig Wright, *Yale Open Courses*, MUSI 112: Listening to Music, Lecture 15; accessed Oct 2013.
  11. "For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov," Pam Belluck, *New York Times* (Oct. 4, 2013), A1, discussing "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, *Science* 342:6156 (October 2013): 377-380.
  12. See, e.g., "Trudier Harris on Lorain, Ohio: A Wasteland," 67-71, at 68, in Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (ed. Harold Bloom; New York: Infobase, 2010).
  13. Cf. Menachem Kellner's essay in this volume, entitled "Judaism and Artistic Creativity: Despite Maimonides and Thanks to Him"; and Daniel Ross Goodman, "'Be Fruitful and Multiply': The Imperative of Creativity in Art and Religion," *Public Discourse* (Apr. 17, 2014), <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2014/04/12950/>
  14. See *b. Yevamot* 63a, 62b, *Yoma* 12a.
  15. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932; New York: Harper, 2006), 235.
  16. Fernandoa Pessoa, quoted in Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 600.
  17. Huxley, *Brave New World*, 239.
  18. Mircea Eliade, *Two Strange Tales* (introduction to English trans.; Boston: Shambhala, 1986), xiii.
  19. See Jonathan Brant, *Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. 36, 38; cf. Daniel Ross Goodman, "The



- Great Gatsby: A Biblical Theology Illuminated,” *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* 42:1-2 (2014): 79-84.
20. See John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals* (London: New York University Press, 2003).
  21. Eliade, *Two Strange Tales*, xii-xiii (emphasis added).
  22. Matthew Baigell, “Art and Religion” (unpublished paper: 2013).
  23. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 82.
  24. Baigell, “Art and Religion.”
  25. See Giuseppe Mazzota, *Yale Open Courses*, ITAL 310: Dante in Translation, Lecture 24: <http://oyc.yale.edu/italian-language-and-literature/ital-310/lecture-24> accessed Jan. 1, 2014.
  26. Moshe Halbertal, “Beyond Naturalism: A Higher Authority for Secularists,” in *The New Republic* (Oct. 12, 2013), 60-63, at 62, review essay of Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God* (Harvard: 2013).
  27. Jacob Neusner, “The Mishnah Viewed Whole,” in *The Mishnah in Contemporary Perspective* (ed. Alan J. Avery-Peck and Jacob Neusner; Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2002), 10 (emphasis added); quoted in Moshe Simon-Shoshan, *Stories of the Law: Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Authority in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford, 2012), 61.