

“IDOLATRY INTO ARTISTRY”

After leaving the opulence of Egypt, the Israelites, still addicted to imagery, build a golden calf. But right after the calf is destroyed, after we have learned the dangers of human creation, the Torah tells of Bezalel, the artist, who is “filled with the spirit of God” and ready to create. Indeed Bezalel builds the tabernacle with the same gold that built the calf.

After idolatry, artistry. As the midrash puts it, Bezalel came to heal the wound. Bezalel came to teach us that beauty is not bad. Artistry is a way of celebrating God’s gifts to the world. If we worship the products of our own hands, we are idolators. If we create in gratitude and appreciate with reverence, we are artists. Plato banned the poets from his ideal Republic, but in our tradition Moses was poet, David was a poet, and we have embraced artists from Bezalel to Chagall.

As Chagall once wrote: “Jews, if they have a feeling for it (I happen to) may weep at the passing of the decorators of the wooden shtetl synagogues...But what really is the difference between my crippled great-grandfather Segal, who decorated the Mogilev synagogue, and me, who painted murals in the Jewish theater?”

“Besides, I am sure if I let my beard grow, you would see his exact likeness...Were I not a Jew I would not be an artist at all...”