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TOWARDS A JEWISH THEOLOGY OF ART

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The issue of the representation of the Holocaust in art has become lately one of the most disputed and most researched topics in the field of Jewish and Holocaust studies. Melissa Raphael, a well-known professor of Jewish theology at the University of Gloucestershire and author of several influential volumes (*The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust*, New York: Routledge, 2003; *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997; *Theology and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), employs this issue as the cornerstone of the Jewish theology of art she attempts to formulate in her latest volume, *Judaism and the Visual Image*.

Starting from the premise that Jewish art “is an expression of the very soul and spirit of Judaism” (p. 2), the author argues that its theological dimension is therefore inherent, despite the fact that the Hebrew revelation, unlike the Greek one, is a verbal, not a visual one: Judaism is a culture of the ear, not the eye. A further argument is favour of this point is the biblical prohibition against making graven images expressed in the Second Commandment, which, historically speaking, would determine the Jewish aniconism. Taking these points into consideration, one might rightfully wonder what Jewish art is; Raphael provides an answer by arguing that, although one cannot speak of a “defining cultural and historical style owned by Jewish art alone” (p. 9), it is the subject matter, limited to Jewish themes and experiences, that is the true Jewish dimension of Jewish art; in other words, Jewish art can be defined as “the art of being a Jew in a historical and eschatological relationship with God”. (p. 17) However, if this should be the case, what happens to those Jewish artists like Chagall, Modigliani or Pissaro whose works include very few (if at all) Jewish themes and experiences? Are they not part of the canon of Jewish art?

The central premise of the present volume, namely that Jewish art is, in equal measure, both an “expression of Jewish meaning, memory and possibility” and a “more explicitly and intentionally confessional theology” (p. 16) is explored in the six chapters of the book, which contribute in unequal proportion to its demonstration. The first chapter provides a valuable review of the Second Commandment in Jewish art and thought, discussing both biblical and rabbinic texts, as well as Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides, Hermann Cohen, Rosenzweig, Heschel and Levinas. The author is right in observing that the Second Commandment does not forbid the making of images, but rather their worship (p. 23) – which explains, in effect, the existence of a Jewish art *within* the confines of the Second Commandment, not *outside* it.

The pillar of a Jewish theology of art is to be found in Genesis I, the story of Creation, as the author shows in the second chapter; here, she makes a very valuable point when she discusses the fact that God’s first judgement of His Creation was an aesthetic, not a moral one: He sees it as

“good” primarily in an aesthetically pleasing way. This being the case, it follows naturally that a Jewish aesthetic is necessarily determined by theological ethics (p. 54). Raphael uses the last part of the second chapter to make an informed criticism of idolatry in contemporary society from the point of view of the Second Commandment

Before discussing the central example of her Jewish theology of art, the representation of the Holocaust in visual arts, Melissa Raphael chooses to discuss, in the third chapter of her work, gendered representations in Jewish art. The connection of this chapter to the core idea of the book may be the fact that the image of the Jewish woman is conspicuously absent from the visual representations, on the grounds that it can easily become idolatrous, whereas the Jewish male figure is overwhelmingly present in Jewish visual art, because, as the authors argues, “an image of a male Jew is therefore, in fact, *not* properly an image. For the appearance of a male Jew [especially the figure of an Orthodox male Jew] points beyond itself to what cannot be imagined, namely spirit” (p. 72).

The fourth and fifth chapters of the book, as I have already mentioned, exemplify the central thesis through examples provided by the representation of the Holocaust in visual arts. Raphael is not mistaken in observing the fact that images of the Holocaust are exempted from the ban imposed by the Second Commandment (p. 60), because they contribute to a preservation of memory. The fourth chapter, “Sublimity and the Representation of the Holocaust in Art”, focuses on the viewer who sees images of Jewish suffering and on the “theological possibilities of the aesthetic response to images of the Holocaust” by non-Jews (p. 98). The authors thus discusses the transformation of the Holocaust into an object of literary and filmic entertainment, an object of aesthetic consumption that transforms the viewer into a voyeur gazing at suffering from a safe distance in time and space – an idea that has often been discussed especially in relation to the cinematic representations of the Holocaust. Reprising some of the arguments of Saul Friedlander from his works, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay in Kitsch and Death* and *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Raphael shows that some films dealing with the Holocaust (either directly or indirectly), such as Visconti’s *The Damned* (1969), Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1974) or Polanski’s *The Pianist* (2002) replace realistic representation with a highly aestheticised vision that obscures the true nature of the Holocaust. However, it is somewhat surprising to note that, in the context of a discussion about the limits of Holocaust representation, the author does not mention the seminal work edited by Friedlander in 1991, *Probing the Limits of Representation*. Turning to visual arts, Melissa Raphael reprises the example of the Jewish representatives of abstract expressionism in order to argue that their art was a way of representing the anti-revelation of the Holocaust through the absence of representation (p. 106); however, this argument is weakened by the fact that artists such as Barnett Newman

explicitly rejected the label of “Jewish artist” and so the connection between his art and the Holocaust is thus hard to prove – in other words, there is no causal link between the Holocaust and these artists’ choice to use abstraction in their art rather than figuration. After briefly discussing some critical responses to the aesthetisation of the Holocaust (such as Berel Lang’s or Lawrence Langer’s), the author makes a valuable and concise observation that expresses the essence of the arguments in favour of this aesthetisation: “the aesthetic dimension should never make the Holocaust beautiful to watch. ... it is a response to the moral and spiritual obligation that their representation entails”. (p. 118)

I found the fifth chapter to be especially interesting through the variety of examples used to illustrate the point that images of the Holocaust can perform redemptive or para-redemptive functions, acting, in a sense, as a redemption of memory itself: photographs, for example, are undeniable witnesses of evil and are symbolic for all Holocaust art that is “a specially charged kind of art of witness” (p. 123), an art which is “an act of witness, not a mere representation”. (p. 134) Among the artists whose works Raphael analyses are Anselm Kiefer, Samuel Bak, Aharon Gluska, Shimon Attie, Arie Galles. Probably the strongest and most coherent part of the book is the last section of this chapter, “The Holocaust figure as a Jewish Passion”, where the author convincingly demonstrates how a significant number of Holocaust artworks borrow from the Christian iconography of Christ’s passion and crucifixion; here, she brings examples from the works of Marc Chagall, Emmanuel Levy, Barnett Newman, R. B. Kitaj. Raphael, going beyond the traditional explanations for this recurrence of Christian imagery – namely, that such images are means of protest against the Church, the Allies and God –, provides a more nuanced and, in my view, a more convincing response to this issue: she argues that such a visualisation of the suffering of Jewry is seen as similar to the vicarious suffering of God in Christian art; by depicting the plight of the Jews as a never-ending Christian passion, “the victims of the Holocaust are raised up by art to eternal presence, another kind of life”. (pp. 148-149)

The last chapter of the book, “The Dancing Figure of Jewish History”, starts out from the premise that the rich, various Jewish dance tradition is part of a single transcendent dance which in fact represents “God’s revelation in the body of Israel moving in diaspora across the earth”. (p. 152) The demonstration of this premise is done by using examples from the art of Samuel Hirszenberg, Marc Chagall, Ben Shahn, Jan Burka, Reuven Rubin and Samuel Bak. Raphael’s conclusion, that “God’s passing with Israel over the land might be imagined as a congregational work of art” (p. 171), which, in turn, would make Israel itself God’s work of art, may sound somewhat controversial and forced.

Nevertheless, Raphael’s work is extremely valuable, and, I would argue, necessary, as it presents a theology of art from a Jewish

perspective, coming after a long time when the majority of works in this field were written from a Christian perspective; her analyses concerning the representation of the Holocaust in visual arts are strong enough to be quoted by many scholars to come and they wonderfully complete the existing body of works on this subject. Last, but not least, one should remark the exceptional graphic presentation of the book, published in hardcover with many quality reproductions of the works of art analysed.