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The creation of beauty by its destruction

The idoloclastic aesthetic in modern and contemporary Jewish art

Contemporary commentators are well aware that the Jewish tradition is not an aniconic one. Far from suppressing art, the Second Commandment produces it. And not just abstract art; it also uses halakhically mandated idoloclastic techniques to produce figurative images that at once cancel and restore the glory (*kavod*) of the human. This article suggests that Jewish art's observance of the Second Commandment's proscription of idolatrous images (a commandment that belongs indivisibly with the First) is ever more relevant to a contemporary image-saturated mass culture whose consumption induces feelings of both hubris and self-disgust or shame. The article revisits Steven Schwarzschild's interpretation of the halakhic requirement that artists should deliberately mis-draw or distort the human form and Anthony Julius's account of Jewish art as one that mobilizes idol breaking. As an aesthetic consequence of the rabbinic permission to mock idols - and thereby render the ideological cults for which they are visual propaganda merely laughable or absurd - distortive, auto-destructive and other related forms of Jewish art are not intended to alienate the sanctity of the human. On the contrary, by honouring the transcendence of the human, especially the face, idoloclastic art knows the human figure as sublime, always exceeding any representation of its form. Idoloclastic anti-images thereby belong to a messianic aesthetic of incompleteness that knows the world as it ought to be but is not yet; that remains open to its own futurity: the restoration of dignity, in love.

IT IS WELL KNOWN that Kant thought that one of Judaism's few redeeming features was the Second Commandment's proscription of images (1987: 135). After their emancipation, Jews were happy to agree

with him, not least because characterising their tradition aniconically as the prototypical Word smoothed the passage of their integration into Protestant culture (Petersen 2015: 181–98). But by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the promises of the German Enlightenment were looking hollow and modern Jewish thinkers such as Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin began to take aesthetic inspiration from other sources, including the art of the Italian Renaissance (Biemann 2012). By the second half of the twentieth century, the Holocaust had broken the spell of German philosophy and culture over modern Jewish thought, and the significant contribution of Jews to modern art in Europe and the United States had become ever less deniable. It was further becoming apparent to several Jewish commentators that, far from suppressing Jewish art, the Second Commandment's proscription of idolatrous images (not all and any images other than images of God) could actually produce it.

In this article I want to present an account of the sorts of images that are produced *because* of the Second Commandment, not in spite of it. Defining modern Jewish art as an engagement, whether secular or spiritual, with Jewish experience and tradition, and distinguishing between idoloclasm and iconoclasm, which latter is a violent means to gain unmediated access to truth, or the vandalization of everyone else's objects of veneration but your own, I will argue that intentionally Jewish art is idoloclastic. By this I mean that it is an approach that takes active measures to prevent captivity by false ideas, or idols. One way that it does that is by refusing to render beauty as a perfection of the human. An artist must not depict the beauty of human beings in ways that compromise their humanity. Jewish art, instead, bears witness

to human finitude; its images have pathos. Jewish images of the human locate beauty in the endurance of history, not its brute conquest; they limit power not by violence but by aesthetic subversion and irony, and they assume the natural transience of beauty and the beauty of transience, so preventing the alienation of beauty from the human by its commodification.

Steven Schwarzschild, in 1975, was one of the first of several commentators who have characterised Jewish art as actively counter-idolatrous, an approach which he traced back to early medieval rabbinic rulings, especially those of Maimonides, restated in the sixteenth century by Rabbi Joseph Caro in his codification of Jewish law, the *Shulchan Aruch*.¹ Because any image of a human being created in the image of God is thereby a second-order image of God, here, two-dimensional paintings of human figures are judged to be permissible as long as the artist takes pains to visually prevent their being mistaken for God or gods.² In particular, the face, where the (surely unpaintable)³ image of God is made manifest,

- 1 Ch. 141, 'Laws about Images and Forms', Caro's ruling, Schwarzschild writes, leaves us 'only one legitimate way of depicting the human: to indicate in some physical way that the *physis* is only an inadequate manifestation of real nature; and since spirit cannot be pictorially added to the body image, something must be taken away from that appearance'. Paradoxically, in doing so, Jewish art effects 'not a reduction but an expansion of the human form. The negative commandment prohibiting the depiction of the complete human person is in substance a positive commandment to introduce the human spirit into the human form. In short the slashed nose is the symbol of the soul' (Schwarzschild 1990: 296; see also Schwartzschild 1998: 5 and Julius 2000). The practice of damaging images has not disappeared. In Haredi retail districts it is still sometimes possible to see mannequin heads displaying wigs for Orthodox women where the end of the nose has been chipped off.
- 2 Note that by the time the Talmud was compiled, the prohibition of service to alien gods was no longer construed as the literal worship of divinities from other religions. This, the rabbis believed, had ceased to be a threat to Jewish observance during the Second Temple period. Modern and contemporary rabbis also have no reason to suspect contemporary Jews of literal idol worship. See further, Kadden nd: 111.
- 3 Rembrandt's and Chardin's late self-portraits may, perhaps, have come as close as it is possible to come to evoking the image of God in the human face, though this is a personal, illustrative judgement that cannot pretend to objectivity and it is not to make the

must be incomplete, defaced or broken – made just a little less beautiful by being given, say, only one eye, or a chipped nose.

To claim that human creativity must not compete with God's, but express its relation to God's creativity (Soloveitchik 1965: 18–20; see further, Wurzbarger 1996: 219–28), is not to suggest that the rabbis are hostile or indifferent to art. Before the nineteenth century no observant Jew would have understood art as having its own purpose: it was an essentially decorative, occasionally pedagogical, phenomenon and served ritual and domestic purposes, often both of these at once. Of the modern rabbis, Rav Abraham Issac Kook was far better disposed to art than most rabbis of his time, but his view of art is not wholly unrepresentative. In a letter he wrote to Boris Schatz, the founder of the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem, he described the new school of art as a sign of national redemption, bringing life, hope, and comfort to the Jewish people. 'Our people', he wrote, 'look well on the sweet beauty of art'. However, he also observed that this relationship is limited: 'As we draw close with the left hand, we push away with the right (cited in Kadden nd: 97). Nonetheless, it is important for the purposes of this article to note that the rabbis have not been dismissive of human physical beauty. In fact, the first sight of a heart-stoppingly beautiful person, animal, or tree is the proper occasion of a blessing, though some rabbis are of the view that men shouldn't make this blessing on a woman because they shouldn't be looking admiringly at women other than their wives.⁴

But having said that, there is a wariness of aestheticism. Credit for physical beauty goes to its divine creator, not its bearer, and when making an image of a person, it is a category mistake to advert to their spirit by means of adverting to the beauty of their body. Therefore, when making an image of a living person (making an image of a corpse would not be

category mistake of assuming that the image of God in the face has the kind of visual phenomenality that can be mimetically represented in an image.

- 4 *Shulchan Aruch*, Orach Chaim, 225:10, based on BT *Berachot* 58b. However, on the basis of BT *Avoda Zara* 20a, where R Shimon ben Gamliel uses Psalm 104:24 to rejoice in the creation of an exceptionally beautiful woman he sees in the street, the Elya Rabba and the *Shulchan Aruch* permit this blessing to be said by a male even at the sight of an idolatrous non-Jewish woman.



Plate 1. The Birds' Head Haggadah, c. 1300. Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

permitted), at least one minor physical imperfection must be introduced. The subtraction of beauty – missing, absent, or flawed features – defuses the glory or power of a figurative image. Even a subtle flaw in an image of a person prevents the ideological abuse of beauty. Imperfection draws attention to the finitude of the human and prevents its representation from exceeding its bounds and becoming anything more than a created image-of-an-image of God.⁵ That the required distortion is, however, subtle rather than clumsy, is a consequence of the rabbinic permission to mock idols rather than take a hammer to them. Those who, like diaspora Jews, are not equipped to resist power with arms, can at least puncture the hubristic pretensions of tyrants by rendering their bid for omnipotence merely laughable or absurd.

Grisha Bruskin's *Alephbet* tapestry (2006) plays with this rabbinic aesthetic; so does Art Spiegelman's cartoon *Maus* (1980–92). But let's start with the most familiar example of Jewish art's subjection of the human head to this apparent indignity: the *Birds' Head Haggadah*, the earliest surviving Ashkenazi Haggadah, illuminated in Germany in about 1300 (plate 1), which uses birds' heads, blank faces, veils,

5 Just as Caro breaks the human image he beautifies inanimate ritual objects. The principle of *hiddur mitzvah* enhances the performance of the mitzvot by making a gift to God of our most precious materials and skills.

helmets, crowns, or rear views, to portray the human face.⁶ In 2013 Marc Epstein published a theory that seemed to overturn previous readings of the manuscript as exemplifying the counter-idolatrour aesthetic of distortion I've just described. He claimed, rightly I think, that the birds' heads are not in fact birds' heads. With their neat little mammalian ears, they are those of griffins: a composite of a lion and an eagle, which was then emblematic of social power, distinction, and statesmanship. Far from subjecting Jews to counter-idolatrour ridicule, this visual text, suggests Epstein, asserts the social nobility of chosenness (Epstein 2013: 45–63). The Jews are, after all, very 'old family'. While Epstein would be the first to acknowledge that it is impossible to know what, 700 years ago, its creators intended, I think that the manuscript is still, nonetheless, using a halakhic device to stabilise the anthropology of the text and its readership. The griffin heads play on the ironic doubleness of Jewish standing, being at once socially ignominious and theologically elevated – both outcast and elect.

A helpful exposition of disfigurement in art as signalling several things at once is offered by Mark Taylor in his 1992 study *Disfiguring Art*. Taylor's elucidation of three ways in which some of the most creative painters and architects of the late twentieth century practised disfigurement helps us to understand how it is practised in the Jewish context, where it is halakhically mandated. Taylor notes that to disfigure is first 'to de-sign by removing figures, symbols, designs, and ornaments'. It is also, second, to 'mar, deform, or deface and thus to destroy the beauty of a person or object'. Lastly, it is 'an unfiguring that (impossibly) "figures" the unfigurable'. This interstitial figure is 'neither erased nor absolutized but is used with and against itself to figure that which eludes figuring. Torn figures mark the trace of something else, something other that almost emerges in the cracks of faulty images' (Taylor 1992: 8–9).

I think that the Jewish art of incompleteness and distortion achieves the third of these by means of the second. Just as the Lurianic kabbalah imagines the creation of the cosmos as a breakage in the heart of God, Jewish art's creations emerge 'in the cracks of faulty images'; in the space between figuration and abstraction. In particular, the subtraction of formal beauty from the human figure ensures that an image

6 See further Narkiss 1983.



Plate 2. Maurycy Minkowski, *Poultry Market*, before 1930.

of a human being remains ontologically interstitial. That is, the image remains within the space or crack between angel and beast. Being both and neither of these – a finite, morally imperfect being who bears the signature or hallmark of her creator, God – she cannot be mistaken for an image of a god, or a self-created entity, or the creation of another god: ‘Man’.

Clement Greenberg was perhaps the best known of the mid-twentieth-century Jewish art critics who regarded Jewish art as inevitably tending to aniconic abstraction. In fact, most modern central and eastern European Jewish art (Maurycy Minkowski, Marc Chagall, Lucien Freud, Philip Pearlstein, Jack Levine, R. B. Kitaj and many others) is not abstract at all; much of it is documentary and bears witness to the plight of the Jew as *Luftmensch*: the stranger, the refugee, the peddler: the poor and the persecuted (see Strosberg; see, e.g. Maurycy Minkowski, *After the Pogrom*, c. 1910 or *Poultry Market*, plate 2, below). Such paintings also, I think, come under the halakhic rubric of distortion, though here the figures have been damaged not by the artist but by a history which, by the mid-twentieth century had turned the *Luftmenschen* to *Luft* (air). These images cannot be mistaken for idols because they have pathos which false gods – and eerily perfect faces – do not. Only a finite face faces loss. A Jewish image of a Jewish face cannot be beautiful in the classic sense of its enjoy-

ing a perfect economy of symmetries. The face of classical beauty is an imperviously serene face to which nothing has happened and nothing is demanded. But, theologically, a suffering face is expressive of just that: a passion. It suffers or undergoes the unlovely afflictions of history as the servant of its redemption.

The messianic face cannot be closed or finished by its own beauty. It must be something of a black square – like the one I saw painted in the hall of a building that I looked into one morning walking near Mahane Yehuda Market, Jerusalem (plate 3). This painted black square recalls the unimaginable losses of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE and, messianically speaking, observes that Jerusalem is not yet rebuilt. But as the visual keystone of the arch, that ‘lack’ keeps the house of Israel standing. Of course, the black square is variously used by a number of modern artists including

Kazimir Malevich, Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko. It is a form that is both absolutely expressive and entirely non-expressive of the absence of presence; of presence in absence; it is at once abyssal and flat, empty and full. But the holocaustal Jewish face is also something of a modern black square – compare Aharon Gluska’s 1991 *Man and Name* (*Jacob Dykerman*) – in which erasure is witnessed; judgement pronounced and resurrection just glimpsed.

If there is great beauty in the Jewish face, and of course I think there is, it does not signal immortality, nor is it the mark of divine favour, but of endurance. Leviticus 23:40 issues a requirement: ‘And you shall take unto yourselves on the first day [of Sukkot] a fruit of a beautiful (*hadar*) tree.’ The rabbis (Sukkot 35a) ask what tree might this be, and what makes it beautiful, *hadar*? They conclude that this beautiful tree is the etrog tree, because its fruit is not seasonal but ‘dwells continuously all year on the tree’ (*ha-dar*, literally, ‘that which dwells’). Beauty is that which remains standing. Through blistering heat and cold rain the etrog tree persists and yields fruit. Similarly, as Joshua Shmidman notes, when Leviticus 19: 32 commands us to stand up in honour of the face or presence of the elderly the word used for honour is *hadar*, which is the word for beauty. We are being encouraged to find beauty in an old face; the beauty of that which has endured. Rabbi Yochanan used to

stand up and look into the faces of the old, Jew and pagan alike, and say 'how many troubles have passed over these' (Kiddushin 33a). Time has created beauty by destroying it.

So when Jewish art troubles the still waters of human beauty this is not to be confused with any uglification of the world, or reductive violation of human sanctity. On the contrary, where history and time erase beauty from the face, the rabbinic aesthetic of distortion and incompleteness makes a bid for the conservation and restoration of spirit from the very ruins of beauty. Just as Auschwitz was not the terminus of our history, which is unfinished, the disfigurement of perfection knows our brokenness but belongs to a messianic aesthetic of *incompletion* that knows its God to be the unbounded God of our futurity, always both with us and going on before: the One called 'I will be who I will be' (Exodus 3:12). The cancellation of beauty as a perfection – even to the point of its contraction into a black square – is not its abolition but its memory and its deferral. The black square that faces you as you open the door and ascend the stairs is at once the catastrophic black hole of absolute loss and an aperture or gate onto the future. It is perhaps as close as any Jew might get to seeing the face of God.

Of course, theology doesn't always qualify or supersede history in modern Jewish art. For the Polish Jewish artist Maryan S. Maryan (Pinchas Burstein), the trauma of surviving Auschwitz (he did and he didn't), the random chance of being the only one of his family left alive, produced a huge body of work, including, for example, his diptych, oil on canvas, *Untitled* (1975), and *Personage with Donkeys Ears* (1962). The artist Irving Petlin, a close friend of Maryan's, once remarked, 'He made pictures like other people throw-up—they were literally spewed out, one after another.' Paintings of what Maryan called his 'personages' were often completed – sicked up – in a single day.⁷ These 'truth paintings', as he referred to them, were an unrelenting assault on human beauty. They so truthfully represented Auschwitz's dehumanization of both victim and perpetrator that it became impossible for Maryan, and for us looking at his paintings, to tell the tormentor and the tormented apart. He committed suicide in 1977, in the Chelsea Hotel, New York.⁸

7 Spertus Institute Collection Highlights website.

8 See further, Bojarska nd.



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Plate 3. Hallway, Jerusalem.

The importance of Marayan's witness is not to be underestimated, yet in truly idoloclastic Jewish art the human figure, made in the image of God, not only subscends but also transcends the representation of its form. As in David Bomberg's *Hear O Israel* (1955), the consuming glory (*kavod*) of the human figure must be honoured as well as withdrawn.⁹ The proscription of idolatry protects as well as contains glory by placing a notional fence around an image of a face: a bird's head; a cloud; a cloth. In David Bomberg's, *Hear O Israel* (1955) the *tallit* obscuring the face illustrates this interplay of the revelation and the hiding of glory in the human form and its history. Maryan's personages do not defer or conceal their glory: they have been stripped of it forever.

Naturally, I am aware that this prescriptive theological account of Jewish art would not meet with the approval of all contemporary historians of Jewish art.

9 According to the rabbis a woman, for example, is beautiful only in so far as she hides her beauty: 'the glory of the king's daughter is within [or hidden]'. This theology can and does sour into an apology for the patriarchal ownership of female sexuality and the cultural erasure of the feminine. But, properly, notions of modesty (*tsniut*) know that glory is unstable and quickly passes from respect, to honour, to glorification – in Hebrew the same word (*kavod*) is used for all three.

Generally speaking, the recent consensus is that ‘there are no unifying theories of Jewish art’ (Baigell and Heyd 2001: xiv). Aaron Rosen has argued that definitions of Jewish art are doomed to failure or over-qualification. Jewish art, he says, is a part of the general history of western art, including explicitly Christian art and iconography, with few genuinely exclusive claims to particular characteristics (Rosen 2009).

Granted, Jews are hardly the only people who testify against idols, and the introduction of flaws into illuminated manuscripts is sometimes found, for similar reasons, in the Christian and Islamic traditions. Yet if a Jew is defined, as in the rabbinic midrash, as one who testifies against idols; if (as Kenneth Seeskin puts it), ‘the litmus test for being a Jew is seeing things in the created order for what they are: natural objects of finite value and duration’ (Seeskin 1995: 20), then the Second Commandment must define what is Jewish about Jewish art: namely that its images testify against idols. If we define a Jewish artist as one who *intends* the Jewishness of her or his work – painting is not just about painting. And the job of the Jewish artist is no more that of creating an image of a beautiful face or body than the purpose of God was to create beautiful people. God has created us to flourish together; we stand under moral, not aesthetic, judgement.

So while there have been modern artists who happen to have been Jewish and, like, say, Broncia Koller-Pinell,¹⁰ have painted very beautiful nudes or very beautiful faces, a painting of a nude or face is Jewish in so far as its intentions are prophetic, namely, interruptive; awakening consciousness of an alternative dimension of meaning and value to that promoted by the dominant culture. Let’s take for example, Lucien Freud’s portrait of the British queen (*Queen Elizabeth II*, 2000–1, plate 4). Quite literally, it cuts monarchical power down to size: the canvas is exceptionally small (c. 15 x 23 cm). Far too much of its very limited space is taken up by the fabulous diamond-encrusted crown, its power corrected by the pudgy face that has assumed it. Judaism knows a king to be glorious: the blessing for seeing a king is ‘Blessed are you, God, King of the universe, who has given of his glory to *flesh and blood*’ (italics mine).

10 Koller-Pinell (1863–1934) was an Austrian Jewish female artist. See her *Sitting Marietta* (1907). See also Vito D’Ancona’s *Nude* (1873) or Lesser Ury’s *Reclining Nude* (1989).

David Dawson, 2001



Plate 4. Lucian Freud, painting a portrait of HM Queen Elizabeth II.

That is, a king remains as subject to the law as anyone else (Goldman 2012), including the laws of nature and time. The anthropology of Genesis 1 is revolutionary. Unlike other ancient near eastern anthropologies (vestiges of which can be found in other parts of the Hebrew Bible), everyone is made in the image of God, not only the king. Alexander Melamid and Vitaly Komar are contemporary Russian-born Jewish artists whose art also lets down the tyres of human power. In their lithograph *Girl and Stalin* (1992), Stalin, whose Great Terror gave him god-like power over who would live and who would die, has become such a big head that he’s turned into a giant balloon that even a child can lift with one hand and pop at will; a ghastly Halloween lantern carved from a hollow gourd.

This prophetic deflation of the inflated head can serve as a powerful critique of another kind of totalitarianism: that of our contemporary mass culture, which is saturated with images of women, usually models for advertisements and fashion shoots, whose super- or post-human alien beauty signifies access to spaces of power and privilege so great that they promise triumph over time; over mortality itself. And what I want to argue now is that in this cultural context, halakhically broken images countermand the surgical and technological alienation of human difference. For this too is a kind of killing. It is the denial and the destruction of an aesthetic ecology whose vitality is comprised of the diversity of its forms and judgements. And more immediately



Plate 5. Sacha Sosno, *Grande Venus*, 1984.

it is a killing that bonds a mask onto the face, suffocating the beauty of its existential freedom (what Kierkegaard would call its 'historical beauty' [1987: 133, 305]) by covering it over with the same fixed, bronzed face of a god.

Here, broken images are antidotes to images of digitally or surgically immortalised faces (usually female) whose unearthly beauty depletes our imagination of its aesthetic resources; that are so homogenised and super-improved that our collective memory of a human face in time begins to fade. Maimonides once mourned his own early medieval culture's idolatrous forgetting of God (*Code of Jewish Law*, Laws of Idolatry 1:2 reprinted in Twersky 1972: 72). After the modern death and forgetting of God, late modern culture's posting of alienated images of beauty also teach us not only to forget the human, but to despise it. Ours is a culture whose glorification of the image leads to self-disgust. We try to make the 'me' look like the 'her', but most of us will fail; as time goes on it becomes impossible for the human face and body to measure up to its idea, culturally reproduced in images.

Contemporary photographic representations of faces that have, in all senses, fixed beauty and put it

up for sale on the global markets, are literally captivating. They arrest the fleeting shadow of the divine as it passes as a cloud of glory over the face. These silent images, as the Hebrew Bible notes of idols, lack *ruach*: the reverberation of divine presence through history; the coming of God. The cultural adulation and mimetic replication of an industrialised human beauty rendered in fillers and freezers hardens the heart, as the Hebrew Bible would put it, because it occludes the speech that *is* the living face under the commandment to love. By contrast, when, say, cosmetics advertisements present mask-like images of 'amortal' beauty, these, not, of course, the actual nameless or celebrity women who were employed as their model, are the face of death. For what cannot die cannot live; has never been born.

Emmanuel Levinas helps us to think about beauty and death in art. Art, Levinas says in an article he wrote in 1948, proceeds 'as if death were never dead enough' (Levinas 1989: 141, 137–9). Levinas insists that, in contrast to an image of a face, the actual face is a revelation whose brute nudity is a moral summons commanding absolute responsibility for its care. Its infinity cannot be reified into an image to be merely enjoyed. What is required is not the disengagement of a contemplative, 'beautiful' vision of the other that freezes their being into a mere spectacle, but a *donation* of the self to the other (140, 297, 174). It is no coincidence that one of the very few artists admired by Levinas was the Jewish artist Sacha Sosno (Rosen 2011), whose 'art of obliteration' left heads unfinished, requiring others to complete the image in their imaginations, alone. Sosno's many versions of the *Tête Carrée* from the mid 1990s onwards, and other such works in which Athens and Jerusalem confront one another 'head on', Judaize the opacity of the pagan marble or bronze head. Sosno's many square heads literally block the objectifying gaze, others, like *Grande Venus* (1984, plate 5) allow us, in all senses, to see through beauty; to know it as no more and no less than the passage of spirit.¹¹

The breaking of the figure of beauty's idea is also evident in the work of Jewish feminist artists, such as Joan Semmel, which since the 1970s has insisted on women's real, living, changing, and therefore

11 The truth of the face is also insisted upon in death. With very few exceptions funerary cosmetological embalming is halakhically forbidden. A corpse must not be rendered lifelike by art.

imperfect, embodiment. Her hyper-realist self-portraits were painted from photographs that she took by pointing the camera lens down at the naked body that is inalienably her own. So different to the contemporary 'selfie', her unflattering point of view is that of a sexual subject who refuses the idolisation/idealisation of the female body as the mere object of an aestheticising gaze. In later work, her idoloclastic attack on the mass production of the female became more explicit (see, e.g., *Hot Lips* (1997) and *Stacked* (1998), where women are imaged as mannequins). Or again, Laurie Simmons, in works like *The Love Doll* (2009–11), makes halakhically proscribed three-dimensional full-body sculptures of women to protest against the commodification of female beauty as a male/mail-order purchase. As I read her, she urges us to observe the Second Commandment by breaking it.

There is one final element of the Jewish prophetic aesthetic that I would like to present here: that which locates beauty in the transience, not the substance, of lives and things.¹² Here, a work of art can be created in the moment of its destruction and destroyed in the moment of its creation. The Jewish artist Gustav Metzger staged an auto-destructive, disintegrative art event on the South Bank in London 1961, un-making his piece with the application of hydrochloric acid on nylon. He later said of the work that 'The important thing about burning a hole in that sheet was that it opened up a new view across the Thames of St Paul's cathedral. Auto-destructive art was never merely destructive. Destroy a canvas and you create shapes.' As in his 2012 *Null Object* – a bit of stone with a hole drilled into it by a robot – beauty is not the property of an art object which, like a rare item, has an asset that sets its market value. His works, made from valueless materials such as nylon and newspaper mount a revolutionary attack on capitalism's commercial and militaristic values as the true disfigurement of beauty (Metzger 1959, 1960, 1961)¹³ and God, as *Kohelet* 3:11 puts it, has made things beautiful *in their time*. Compare *Psalms* 102:26 which says that even the

heavens will wear out and be changed, like garments. Like the Talmud's crowd of angels that are born in every instant, raise their voices in praise, and pass into nothingness on the very day of their creation (Chagigah 14a), beauty is *hevel* – fleeting (as well as vain, as the term is usually translated).

So, to conclude, Hegel was both right and wrong in his anti-semitic denial of aesthetic sensibilities to 'the Jews'.¹⁴ Hegel was right in so far as Jews are not aesthetes; beauty *in art*, as distinct from actual persons, is properly flawed. But he was wrong to see Jews as being sunk in servitude to a law governing a world to which they offer no freedom of idea or spirit to transform. On the contrary, modern and contemporary Jewish artists' disfiguration of the figure is also its transfiguration. A disfigured or defaced image of a person is a self-interpreting image. But this is no translation of flesh to spirit; immanence to transcendence, massivity to grace. What I have described is an aesthetic bid for the messianic freedom of idea and spirit in this world from a variety of ideological tyrannies, not the natural order, and one, thereby, rather well suited to the immediate crises and alienations of our age. ■

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- 12 It is halakhically permissible to build a snowman not only because it's not worshipped, but because it melts. A full-body toy doll is also permissible because it will eventually be discarded.
- 13 In 2009, Metzger co-curated *Voids: a Retrospective* at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, an anti-exhibition of classic non-works such as Yves Klein's 1959 blank gallery wall and Art and Language's 1967 air-conditioned air in an empty gallery. See Jeffries 2012.

- 14 Unlike Kant, he regarded Jewish resistance to the visual representation of God as a spiritual shortcoming; his idealisation of Greek art and his Christian incarnational sensibilities assumed the concretion, not the abstraction, of the divine (Hegel 1975: 1: 70; Bland 2000: 15; Leonard 2012: 89; Mack 2003: 60–1).

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