

Worksheet D: The Second Commandment

The Bible prohibits Jews from making images. It seems like this could be a problem for Jewish photographers—and other kinds of Jewish artists.

This is what it says in the Second Commandment:

“You shall have no other gods besides me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them...”

- Exodus 20:3-5

1. What is the *p'shat* (surface) understanding of these verses, in relation to art?

2. Does the context of the prohibition against images help you interpret the rule?

Later in Exodus, God chooses a man by the name of Bezalel to design the Tabernacle (portable temple). Here's what it says:

“And Moses said to the Israelites: ‘See, the Lord has singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. He has endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft and has inspired him to make designs for work in gold, silver, and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of designer’s craft—and to give directions. He and Oholiab son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan have been endowed with the skill to do any work—of the carver, the designer, the embroiderer in blue, purple, crimson yarns, and in fine linen, and of the weaver—as workers in all crafts and as makers of designs.’”

- Exodus 35:30-35

3. Clearly, some kinds of artistic production are allowed. Do the two quotes contradict each other? How is Bezalel’s work different from the images described in the Second Commandment?

4. Bezalel and Oholiab were endowed with *hohmat lev* (literally, “wisdom of the heart”) in order to be able to carry out their tasks. What do you think this phrase means?

The prohibition of the Second Commandment has been understood differently in different times and places. Here’s how the scholar Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (also known as Maimonides or the Rambam) interpreted it 900 years ago:

“It is forbidden to make images for [the sake of beauty] even though they are not to be used for idolatry, because it is said in the Bible ‘You shall not make...’ [Exodus 20:4]. This [prohibition] includes even images of silver and gold which are made only for beauty, lest those who worship idols be misled by them and think they are for purposes of idolatry. However, this prohibition against fashioning images for beauty applies only to the human form and, therefore, we do not fashion a human form in wood or plaster or in stone. This holds when the form projects like the murals and paneling in a reception hall and the like. If one fashions these, he should be punished. However, if the form is sunken, or of a medium like that of images on panels or tablets or those woven in fabrics, it is permitted.”

- Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides), *Mishneh Torah*, 12th century

5. What distinctions does the Rambam make in terms of the types of images that are allowed or prohibited? What would he say about photographs?
6. Why do you think interpretations of the rule have changed over time? Why do you think most people today find it acceptable for artists to create images?