

REMBRANDT'S JEWISH VISION

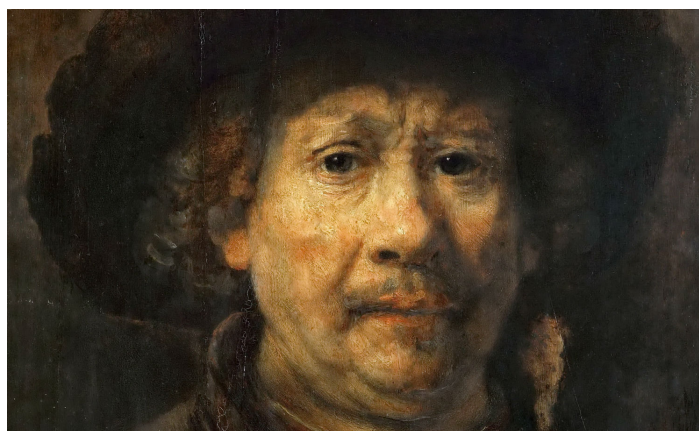
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If Judaism's idea of art is one that can truly represent our frail, fallible humanity, then Rembrandt, who captured faces "without any attempt to beautify them," is the artist for Jews.

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With this, we launch an occasional series of essays by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik on the intersection of Jews and Judaism with the artistic practice, and the aesthetic vision, of the great 17th-century Dutch master. "Rembrandt's Light," immediately below, introduces the series, and is followed by the first essay, "What Happened at Mount Moriah: Rembrandt and the Binding of Isaac."



From Rembrandt's Self-portrait with Beret, 1655.
Wikimedia.

Rembrandt's Light

Of all places on earth, this one was surely the least likely to be the favored haunt of a Lithuanian rabbi. Even more surprising than the place itself was how the rabbi reacted to what he found there.

The time was World War I. The place was the National Gallery in London, repository of one of the most extraordinary collections of art on earth. The rabbi was Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), a stellar product of the great Volozhin yeshiva in what is now Belarus and a genius of talmudic learning.

The war had left Rabbi Kook, at that point the chief rabbi of Jaffa in Palestine, stranded in England. Though most of his time was spent immersed in study, he sought inspiration among

the works in the National Gallery. And in those halls, there was one painter in particular to whom he gravitated. We know about this thanks to a report by a Jewish sculptor in Jerusalem named Avram Melnikoff, who in later years would consult the rabbi on a matter of halakhah. In the course of their conversation, Rabbi Kook divulged the name of his favorite artist: Rembrandt van Rijn.

“I really think that Rembrandt was a *tsaddik* [a righteous man],” Rabbi Kook told Melnikoff:

Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt’s works, they reminded me of the rabbinic statement about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light [on the first day of creation], it was so strong and pellucid that one could see from one end of the world to the other. But God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous [*tsaddikim*] in the world to come [before creating the natural light of the sun on the fourth day]. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that God created on that first day.

What *was* the light that Rabbi Kook saw in the Dutch master’s art, and that suffuses his pictures? It is true, of course, that Rembrandt painted many scenes out of Hebrew Scripture, as did many of his fellow Dutch artists; in general, Dutch Protestants tended to identify with Israel of old. But most of Rembrandt’s biblical paintings are not in the National Gallery; nor, in extolling Rembrandt’s genius, did Rabbi Kook make reference to them in particular. Neither, evidently, did he mention the well-known fact that Rembrandt not only lived in Amsterdam’s Jewish neighborhood but also peopled his biblical scenes with the likenesses of his real-life neighbors, many of whom were descended from Jews who had sought refuge in Holland in the wake of the 1492 expulsion from Spain, and similarly that he drew freely on other features of Jewish life to be observed all around him.

The story of Rembrandt’s personal connection with the Jews is in itself fascinating. But Rabbi Kook seems to have been referring to something else entirely, something more ethereal and more spiritual. Rembrandt’s art, he suggests, embodies nothing less than the light of God Himself. What could this mean? What does it tell us about Rembrandt? And what might it signify for the relation of Jews today, including religious Jews, to Rembrandt’s art—and for that matter to art in general?

The beginning of an answer to such questions is contained in the same conversation memorialized by Avram Melnikoff after Rabbi Kook’s death in 1935. Aware of biblical warnings regarding graven images, Melnikoff, a sculptor of note, had approached Kook, who was by then the chief rabbi of Palestine, to inquire whether there was a halakhically permissible way to sculpt human beings:

One day, [Melnikoff recalled,] I talked to the late Rabbi Kook about this prohibition. I asked him whether it is true that somewhere in our holy commentaries there is a passage which says that under certain conditions sculpture is allowed to be done by Jews?

The rabbi knitted his brows. "Let me see, let me see," he was saying to himself. A few moments later he brought down huge [volumes of the Talmud] from the shelves; he piled them up on the table; he opened one after another, moving his delicate fingers along the lines of the holy script as he read. . . .

At last he stood up triumphantly. "Here it is," he said. "Now listen to what our sages say about your question." I don't remember the exact wording he quoted, but it was something like this: "Our sages say," he read out, "that it is permitted to Jews to make images, if they are done imperfectly and maimed."

This made me laugh. "Why are you laughing?" he asked. "Because my work is far from being perfect." Now it was his turn to laugh. He was all kindness.

To understand what is "Jewish" about Rembrandt, then, we must attend to the reasoning that governs rabbinic rulings concerning the enterprise of Jewish art. Sculptural or pictorial recreations of human beings must be "imperfect"—in the sense of conveying human imperfection—because God alone is endowed with perfection, and God may not be represented at all. Rabbi Kook would stress this point some years later in a congratulatory letter to Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Art and Design:

Toward the generality of artistic beauty as realized in concrete works, the product of human hands, our people takes an attitude which is positive and encouraging, but also restrained. We take care not to go to extremes or become intoxicated, even when dealing with the most sublime and lofty things.

Why is this rule so important, and so emblematic of the Jewish approach to art in general? Judaism, it is commonly said, has an uneasy if not downright antagonistic relation to images because it eschews the visual for the intellectual. But this is imprecise. Some of the most important moments imprinted in the Jewish national memory are those that were seen rather than apprehended abstractly: on the first Passover, "Israel *saw* Egypt dead on the edge of the sea; and Israel *saw* the great Hand that God had dealt against Egypt, and they believed in the Lord and in Moses His servant." At Sinai, similarly, the essentially auditory experience of God's revelation—His voice—is again rendered in visual terms: "And all the people *saw* the sounds and the lightning, and the mountain filled with smoke."

In a nutshell, Judaism rejects images that reflect or embody the pagan impulse to bestow divinity on nature or, even more problematically, on human beings. And herein lies the basis of the critique leveled by Judaism against the great ancient society in which the art of the image reached its own pinnacle of perfection. The art and sculpture of ancient Greece do not fail, even

today, to awe; in them we apprehend the quintessential Greek value of confidence in, and celebration of, the ideal human form and consummate human mastery of the world.

As the late Rabbi Aaron Lichtenstein put this point, the “essence of Greek culture” was distilled in the image of “man grasping and controlling the universe”—and this, he added, was not a “completely wicked” idea. But it was “flawed, incomplete, and imbalanced, to such a degree that [it] became totally corrupt”:

The dominion of man and his mastery over nature can be part of worship of the Creator, but man’s greatness can become so central that it becomes a religion in itself. [The historian Arnold] Toynbee holds humanism as Greece’s central iniquity, seeing man as the sole center of the universe, as a god of the cosmos. The problem with [pagan] Greece was not the belief in multiple deities, but rather the deification of man.

For Judaism, humans cannot, must not, be divinized; indeed, to deny their fragility, their finitude—their mortality—is to lose sight of their true moral grandeur. That grandeur, the source of the beauty of human life, lies precisely in its imperfections, its struggles and strivings, its potential for failure and even for decay: the same inescapable attributes that also give rise to human courage, fortitude, and fidelity. Resisting the temptation of idolatry, the ideal Jewish art captures the human sublime in flawed and imperfect human reality.

In this perspective, Rabbi Kook’s attraction to Rembrandt is completely intelligible. In referring to the “light” in his pictures, the rabbi had in mind, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has suggested, the light the artist saw in the faces of the ordinary people whom he painted and whose essence he captured “without any attempt to beautify them.”

Indeed, some of Rembrandt’s most heartbreakingly beautiful portraits, including his self-portraits, are those in which he makes manifest, in a seemingly pitiless manner, the mortality of his unbeautiful subjects. The historian Simon Schama has written that no painter before or after Rembrandt “ever mapped physiognomy, and the work that merciless time makes of it, with quite the same avid and detailed relish.” Nothing escaped his brush: “the droop of an octogenarian eyelid, the tightness of hair pulled back into a linen cap, the slight oiliness of a prosperous proboscis, the overlapping folds of a jowl, or the wateriness of the eye’s vitreous membrane.” A different artist, Schama writes about the stunning portrait of Aechje Claesdr., an eighty-three-year-old Dutch woman,

might have hesitated to make so much of the crow’s foot or the bulbous nose. The cosmetically averse Rembrandt, however, saw these not as compromising the moral nobility of his sitters, but as describing it. In his sympathetic eye there was no grotesque.

In turn, this same quality is what, in Rabbi Sacks’s words, allows us, Rembrandt’s viewers, to grasp for ourselves “the transcendental quality of the human, the only thing in the universe on

which God set His image.” If Judaism’s idea of art is an art that can truly represent our frail, fallible humanity, then Rembrandt is the artist for Jews.

And what is true of the ordinary human beings in his art is true as well of the biblical characters he portrayed. Through Rembrandt, we see them for the first time not merely as oversized protagonists in a familiar religious text but as human beings with complex lives and multifaceted souls. His David is not Michelangelo’s muscled Adonis, an Israelite transformed into a Greek god, but, in one painting, a father torn between implacable rage and unquenchable love for his rebellious and fratricidal son Absalom, who pleads for mercy in his arms. Similarly, Rembrandt’s Moses is not Michelangelo’s otherworldly prophet with horns of light but an aging, balding man who, out of devotion to the people who have failed him and betrayed God’s trust, has carved a second set of stone tablets, the symbol of Israel’s reconciliation with their leader and with God.

How does he do this? What lends him the ability to see so deeply into the soul of man, and then to bring that immaterial spirit to life on a canvas? The great art historian and humanist E.H. Gombrich sums up the matter in a single sentence: “Those keen and steady eyes that we know so well from Rembrandt’s self-portraits must have been able to look straight into the human heart.” Indeed they must have—but this doesn’t solve the mystery. For myself, I can’t single out with confidence what gave Rembrandt this miraculous insight, which was then brought to life through his unparalleled mastery of his artistic means; but one very great rabbi was convinced that the source was nothing less than the light lent him by God Himself.

What Happened at Mount Moriah: Rembrandt and the Binding of Isaac

For synagogue-going Jews in general at this time of year, and for Jewish parents in particular, the experience of Rosh Hashanah is often dominated by the story that is read from the Torah on the second day: the story of the sacrifice of Isaac or, more accurately, the binding of Isaac (*akeydat Yitshak*). It begins with what may be the Bible’s most unnerving words:

And it came to pass after these things, that God did test Abraham, and said to him, Abraham; and he said, Here I am. And He said, take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

Those preparing for the High Holy Days, in addition to engaging this episode via the exegetical wisdom of rabbinic tradition, would benefit by contemplating the *akeydat* as it appears in the work of Rembrandt, whose two depictions of the scene were created in different media and at very different points in the artist’s life.



Rembrandt. *Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1635. Click to enlarge.

The first, a painting dated to 1635, hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Artistically, the scene on the mountain is brought to a pitch of brilliant reality, registering powerful emotion and drama while capturing in fastidious still life the details of such objects as Abraham's knife and scabbard. Abraham, in fulfillment of God's command, is on the point of slaughtering his son; Isaac, tightly bound, is twisting his body in terror. In a departure from any prior depiction of the *akeydah*, Rembrandt adds a fascinating note: Abraham is covering—almost smothering—Isaac's face with his hand, as if capable of executing his commission only by concealing that countenance, so greatly loved, from his sight. We see them just at the moment when, with the

appearance of God's angel to relieve him of his charge, Abraham suddenly pulls back, the knife drops from his hand, and on his face is the look of (in Simon Schama's apt formulation) "a madman paroled from hell."

How different is Rembrandt's depiction twenty years later of the same scene. A mere six inches in length, this 1655 etching—it can be seen today in Washington's National Gallery of Art—contains no color and must seem vanishingly small when compared with the painting that preceded it. Yet, if anything, it is much more powerful.

Worth pondering is how Rembrandt's own life experiences may have influenced his two disparate imaginings of the *akeydah*. The Hermitage painting is a dramatic, almost Rubens-like achievement by a young artist on the verge of a successful career; the etching, two decades later, is the work of a financially bankrupt artist who has lost many of his own nearest and dearest and whose dreams have largely gone up in smoke. The Catholic philosopher Bernard Prusak, who has written sensitively on Rembrandt's art, summarizes:

The etching was done after Rembrandt had married, lost three children in infancy, and lost his wife after she gave birth to their only child who lived to adulthood. (All that happened between 1635 and 1642.) These two quite different works suggest the spiritual distance Rembrandt traveled in the period between them. . . . There is no going back to the early vision, I think, once you have traveled with Rembrandt to the later one.

Indeed. In the etching, as Prusak notes, Abraham's face registers no relief; it is "gaunt and exhausted, his eyes dark and hollowed out; he is someone who has undergone an unspeakable trauma. . . . Isaac is born to new life, but Abraham has been crushed." Isaac, by contrast, is no longer a thrashing, terror-stricken youth but perfectly calm and to all appearances willingly accepting of the divine decree. Kneeling on the floor by his father's side, with his face again covered by his father's hand and his head and neck extended forward to receive the fatal blow, he is utterly trusting—so much so that he is completely unbound.



Rembrandt. *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, 1655. Click to enlarge.

What Rembrandt's etching thus asks us to ponder is the counterintuitive question of who is the story's truer hero. Abraham at least had been commanded directly to carry out a deed he would otherwise never have undertaken; Isaac, at this point in his life, had had no encounter with the divine, and his faith in God was utterly entwined with his faith in his father. Indeed, we know that Rembrandt was absorbed by this aspect of Isaac's life because in the 1640s he produced an etching of an earlier moment in the story—the moment when Isaac, without having been told a word of what God has asked, silently accedes to whatever will be demanded of him:

And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, and said, My father; and he said, here I am, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, God Himself will provide the lamb, my son; and they went both of them together.

“Together,” *yahdav*, for the rabbis, refers here to a melding of minds: intuiting what is being asked of him, Isaac willingly continues up the mountain with his father, the two together as one in fulfilling their divinely commanded mission.

Is Isaac, then, the uncelebrated hero of the saga? The question is one that medieval Jews often contemplated. Earlier rabbinic tradition tended to focus on the faith and heroism of Abraham. But in an age that witnessed wholesale persecutions of Jews—in the lands of Ashkenaz by Christian Crusaders, in the lands of Sepharad first by Islamic extremists and later by Christian rulers—they, too, like Isaac, were called upon to give their lives for their faith, and in circumstances where the countervailing divine assurance of success to Abraham and his progeny seemed nowhere in evidence.

In those circumstances, Isaac, a figure venerated for his faith, his courage, and his devotion, was the one with whom many Jews began to identify themselves and their own situation. No literary description of Isaac’s heroism is more powerful than that given in *Eyt Shaarey Ratson* (“The Gates of God’s Will”), a 12th-century liturgical poem by Judah ben Samuel ibn Abbas, whose verses are sung by Sephardi Jews immediately prior to blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. The poem’s refrain celebrates three entities: “*oked, v’ha-ne’ekad, v’ha-mizbeyah*: the father who binds and offers his son; the son who allows himself to be offered; and the altar atop Mount Moriah—which in Jewish history will ultimately become the Temple Mount, and the locus of Jewish spiritual aspirations. In ibn Abbas’s rendition, Isaac, exquisitely aware of what is about to occur, thinks not of himself but of the pain that his death will bring to his bereft mother Sarah, and asks Abraham to bring back to her what is left of his ashes as a final scent, a *reyah*, of her son.

Throughout the centuries, the haunting lyrics of *Eyt Shaarey Ratson* became the Sephardi version of the *Un’taneh Tokef*—the poetic prayer on the theme of divine judgment without which, for Ashkenazim, the marking of the new year is impossible to imagine. It is tempting to speculate whether Rembrandt himself might have learned about the poem from the ex-Portuguese Jews among whom he lived in Amsterdam and for whom it represented the acme of their High Holy Day experience—and whether he might also have learned that the poet’s own son Samuel had become one of the most notorious apostates of the age, having converted to Islam and embarked on a career as a polemicist against Judaism. How much more wrenching does this render *Eyt Shaarey Ratson*, the work of a Jewish father whose own son has been spiritually lost about a father on the brink of losing everything whose son will be miraculously restored to him.

In both painting and etching, there is another figure—the angel—whom we have not yet adequately considered and with whom we may conclude.

In the etching, Rembrandt once again deviates dramatically from previous portrayals, including his own, of the *akeydah*. The angel here does not swoop in to pull Abraham’s wrist away from the grisly deed but instead comes upon him from behind to “envelop him in a hug,” as Prusak phrases it. Or is the angel, instead, *restraining* him, and if so, from what? The rendering is a little

ambiguous—but tellingly, unlike in the Hermitage painting, Abraham here does not drop his knife. Instead he seems to be gripping it all the more stubbornly and avidly, as if the angelic intervention, rather than resolving his unbearable dilemma, has instead, by preventing his fulfillment of the divine command, intensified it.

This startling move by Rembrandt—a kind of exegetical leap—brings to mind an enigmatic statement by the ḥasidic rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk (1787-1859): namely, that God’s final instruction to Abraham to cease and desist proved a greater test than the prior charge to offer up his son. Citing this assertion by the Kotsker rabbi in a Rosh Hashanah sermon a few decades ago, Rabbi Norman Lamm lauded its “awesome psycho-spiritual insight.” Elaborating, he said:

The [talmudic] rabbis describe the inhuman anguish that Father Abraham had had to undergo between the divine commandment and the actual binding on the altar. In those three days he lived through 300 years. . . . He had to cut out a whole part of his heart, he had to subdue the tenderest, gentlest, most powerful love in order to obey what seemed to be such a cruel demand of his Lord. . . . Having made his decision, Abraham was no longer the same man. He aged, and was now—in his own image of himself—an old and bereft father, whose light of his life had been extinguished.

And so, Rabbi Lamm continues, at the moment prior to the angel’s appearance, Abraham “in the reality of his heart and mind had already sacrificed his son. . . . The pain, the suffering, the renunciation, the conflict, all of it was over—only the anticlimax of the actual physical act remained to be done.” And then—the angel appears and tells him to stop. What did *that* mean to Abraham? To be informed at this point that the entire episode was only a trial “would have meant invalidating all that he had done, his anguish and his fear, his commitment and his pain and especially his renunciation of his love for his child.” How much easier it would be instead to soldier on—to convince himself that the angel’s voice was the voice of temptation, deriving either from “his fatherly love, or [from] Satan, or [from an] inner resistance to the divine command.”

Rabbi Lamm concludes:

The Kotsker was right: binding Isaac on the altar was the act of *akeydat Yitshak*, the sacrifice of Isaac; taking him off was the act of *akeydat Avraham*, the sacrifice of Abraham.

Rabbi Lamm makes no mention of Rembrandt, but his application of the Kotsker’s insight to the *akeydah* story matches perfectly with the devastated visage of Abraham that presents itself to us in Rembrandt’s etching—and with a fact recorded by Prusak. Rembrandt did not title his artistic creations, but over the centuries the 1635 painting and the 1655 etching, both depicting the same scene, took on different names. The painting has been forever known as *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, the etching as *The Sacrifice of Abraham*. Isaac may have been intended as a sacrifice, but it is Abraham’s own heart, and life, that ended up as an offering. Both father and son leave Mount Moriah’s altar forever altered, forever after to serve as complementary polestars in Jewish history and in the Jewish imagination.