

## A Muse: Terumah

“And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold silver and copper; blue purple and crimson yarns fine linen, goats’ hair; tanned ram skin, dolphin skins, and acacia wood.” (Exodus 25:3-5)

From these descriptions one can assume that color, texture and materials were very important to the building of the Tabernacle. Indeed the aesthetics involved in the design of the structure was as important as the message emanating from it. Otherwise, why the detailed description in our text of the materials, colors and fabrics involved in the construction of the Tabernacle.

Over the centuries and perhaps because of the long exile Jewish religious aesthetics lost its unique signature and adopted many of the art forms from other neighboring or host cultures. During that time and perhaps because of our experience in exile we shunned art forms that were pagan or Christian in nature, perhaps as a way of maintaining our unique culture and resisting assimilating into the neighboring culture. Our sages and rabbis however were wise and they were able to draw a substantive as well as qualitative line between enjoying art for the sake of its beauty and appreciating it for its religious value.

There is a Mishna in Talmud Avoda Zara that tells an interesting anecdote about Rabban Gamliel, president of the Sanhedrin who frequently bathed in the Aphrodite bathhouse in Acre. One of the pagans bathing there at the time as Rabban Gamliel asked him how it was that he was bathing in a place where there was a statue of Aphrodite. Rabban Gamliel answered him that one has to make the distinction between that which is important and that which is irrelevant as well as the intent of the statue. Had the statue been placed there for religious worship it wouldn’t have been permissible to bath there, but as it is there only for aesthetics it is permissible to bath there and to enjoy the aesthetics. Rabbi Yosef Karo, editor of the Shulkan Aruch made a similar distinction when he said that statues in a small village aren’t to be viewed whereas those in larger

cities are permissible. The reasoning being that those placed in a small village were done so for religious purposes and therefore a Jew isn't allowed to derive any pleasure from it. However those placed in larger cities were placed there for the purpose of art and aesthetics, not for religious purposes and therefore can be viewed for appreciation.

It would appear that the ability of our sages and rabbis to make these fine distinctions in order to appreciate art and architecture of the ages has been lost on many of our 21<sup>st</sup> century rabbis and scholars. This is evident by many of the chumras assumed by modern day poskim who forbid the touring of church architecture and religious art representing significant benchmarks in the development of art through the ages.