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## **Towards *Ahavat Hashem*: Art and the Religious Experience**

**Rabbi Chaim Brovender**

Is there a place for the serious study of fine arts in an Orthodox school, and, if so, what is its specific purpose within the context of the larger curricular goals of Jewish education? In attempting to clarify these questions, let us at first try to discover what the purpose or the value in the study of fine arts might be; if we find that there is indeed value, then we will try to understand what place it should be given in a Torah-based standard curriculum.<sup>1</sup>

We are aware that there are many subjects or skills that students may study beyond or outside of the school curriculum (often outside of the school building itself, often for practical reasons). In fact, it has been shown that there is a clear advantage to this use of extra-curricular studies. If the economic realities are such that the extra hours are available to the student (assuming that someone is able to pay for this luxury), then the results are often superior to conventional school-based learning. This advantage exposes one of the great problems of modern education--how do we

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly, there are significant practical and ideological differences among the various types of Jewish schools (even within the Orthodox community), as well as between those in Israel and the Diaspora, and these differences may ultimately affect some of the attitudes to the study of fine arts. In this essay I will try to achieve a consensus statement and not attempt to resolve the nuances as they affect the study of fine arts in the various schools. In fact, since most of us are unfortunately very distant from the subject of this discourse, I think that the finer distinctions will necessarily have to await further study.

encourage the student to apply himself as an individual while functioning within a collective?

While it might not be practical to teach everyone how to play the harp, for example, a student especially talented in harp playing will surely gain from private hours of study. Those hours will usually be outside of the school structure and day and will be geared to the needs of the individual student, who will gain significantly by studying the harp privately.

In this essay, however, I am specifically asking a question about the standard curriculum, the one taught inside the school to all students. Should an Orthodox day school teach fine arts, include this material in its curriculum, and present this subject matter to all students? This would imply thereby that the study of such material is more than generally interesting or important for those few students with special talents. It indicates that in some way it is essential to the education of the particular Jew that the school and community are trying to develop.

For the sake of clarity, I will lay down the following postulates that I believe ought to be common to the Jewish schools considered in this essay. I focus on schools whose intention it is to produce students who are committed to and careful with the fulfillment of their *mitzvah* obligations and who are willing to accept that Torah study is a crucial part of life. In these schools the study of Torah should be presented as a unique value, and the student should be directed to maximize the time spent on the study of Torah. Therefore, one will necessarily conclude that while there are subjects or whole areas of study that are interesting and of value, they will occasionally have to be set aside because of the overriding demands of Torah study. Even schools that profess a certain parity between Torah study and secular studies recognize that the

study of Torah severely limits the time available for the pursuit of other material. The question, restated to reflect these Torah-based schools, is: In a program or curriculum that sees itself obligated to teach math and science intensively, and give serious time to history and English, where could we possibly find the time for the study of fine arts? Such study can clearly be described as a luxury--practically and ideologically.

### **Jewish Nature of Fine Arts**

Fine arts were not generally perceived as a Jewish subject and were not traditionally included as part of the Torah curriculum. They have not been included in the more recent additions to that curriculum (such as history, languages, math, etc). We are challenged to imagine or intuit what the Jewish “angle” might be that would justify the study of fine arts. It is equally difficult to envision the study of fine arts as a stepping-stone to riches or power (in most instances), unlike the salient promise of science or computers. Similarly, for those interested in exploring the nature of the Universe or benefiting mankind through technology, the arts do not seem to present the opportunities to probe these issues in the way that physics or mathematics offers. To justify taking valuable time from math or physics to study the nature of the enterprise called “art” can be hard to defend. Most important, the study of art does not seem to have any apparent value for the religious personality that Jewish schools ought to be trying to produce.<sup>2</sup> There does not seem to be a need for the student who wants to be well versed in Torah, be it in the narrow sense or even in the more modern, expanded view that includes general knowledge, to deal with the question of

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<sup>2</sup> I am not considering the halakhic issues that might come to the fore in the study of fine arts. In this regard, see Aaron Kirschenbaum, “*Ha-Omanut be-Halakhah*,” in *Ha-Yahadut ve-ha-Omanut*, ed. D. Cassuto (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan, 1989), pp. 31-69 (inc. responses).

fine arts. Furthermore, there is no obvious advantage to the study of art for the person interested in his Jewishness or in touching his or her own spirituality.

It is my intention to develop a short theory of aesthetics that is integratable with the wider curriculum of contemporary Torah institutions. I would like to suggest that, in spite of the very real problems (both technical and ideological), the study of art might have serious redeeming features that make it worthy of consideration for the standard curriculum. In fact, the study of art may be valuable in developing the religious personality and enabling the student to enter into a dialogue with Heaven. In this regard it is important to note that I do not refer to the exceptional or gifted student who might be drawn to art for a variety of personal reasons. Rather, I am referring to the average student looking for ways to develop his or her own position regarding Torah, spirituality, and a personal involvement in that enterprise.

### **Fine Arts and the Standard Curriculum**

First, let us review the commonly held positions on the purpose of fine arts in conventional curricula, which are generally arranged under four headings.<sup>3</sup>

The first position assumes that the student can be educated to derive “pleasure” from the encounter with the fine arts. There is no indication as to what determines the nature of the pleasure, or how we are to distinguish the pleasure of reflecting on a painting from, as an example, the pleasure of watching baseball. There is no doubt that baseball gives pleasure, and that many do participate in benefiting from that pleasure. As loyal fans will attest, there is a certain amount of study that

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<sup>3</sup> These four commonly held positions are outlined in the Hebrew *Entziklopediah Hinukhit* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1964), vol. 2, col. 4-5.

has to be engaged in to maximize the pleasure. We have to study the current and past statistics, reflecting player achievement, in order to increase the pleasure that can be derived from watching the event. In fact, it is difficult for me to explain why the pleasure of art is more important or more significant in any way than the pleasure of baseball.<sup>4</sup> Nor can I easily explain why the pleasure of art should be studied and developed in a school setting, while we are able to learn about the pleasures of baseball from our peers and elders in an informal setting. If there is some value to the study of art, surely it can be absorbed in the same *ad hoc* or informal way.

The second generally assumed purpose is to develop aesthetic refinement and to learn to distinguish the good from the bad in the plastic arts. Though one may not yet know what art is exactly, we can be certain that the distinctions of “good” and “bad” are important. It seems to me that the ability to make these distinctions can be developed from a wide array of activities and is not something limited to the study of art. Again, baseball (while not exactly the same as art) may also foster these qualities. But there must be some way to determine what the essential benefit in art might be in order to make any decisions about studying the material seriously. If we cannot determine what this benefit might be, baseball remains the better choice. It is important to remember that the study of baseball is conducted by most young people outside the school premises. They are able to create the necessary “curriculum” and become as expert as they wish without the intervention of schools or formal teaching.

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<sup>4</sup> That difficulty, of course, echoes the famous statement, attributed by John Stuart Mill to Jeremy Bentham, that the “quality of pleasure being equal, push-pin [a game of the time] is as good as poetry.” What Bentham actually said was “Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either.” Jeremy Bentham, “The Rationale of Reward,” in vol. II of Bentham’s *Works*, ed. Bowring (1843).

I can hardly imagine the effort that the system would have to expend to make the younger generation “fans” of the fine arts. For baseball, the fans are all there and the results seem to be very encouraging.

The third general assumption is that the study of art develops fine taste in work and in daily life. “Taste” is very much a matter of taste, and it is difficult to arrive at an objective definition in any sort of precise way. I imagine that baseball does not represent “good taste” to most people, but there is in fact an entire literature written about the game, and some of it is rather respectable.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the plastic arts have taken baseball as a theme and produced items of passable taste.

What might be the purpose of this “good taste”? How is it useful in work and in daily life? What is the profit that a person of taste has over a person lacking that quality? What if, for the sake of argument, the person with “no taste” is also a great Torah scholar? How are we to evaluate him and his “lack of taste”? Finally, what is the place of pursuing the acquisition of good taste in a Torah-based school?

The final commonly assumed goal of an arts curriculum is a national one. In Israel this is often meant to expose the student to the remains of ancient art in our land, with the assumption that this will foster a connection between the student and our national history in *Eretz Yisra'el*. This goal might also be pursued in the Diaspora, especially in schools that teach that Israel should be the first national love of its students.<sup>6</sup> On this point baseball cannot compete. (I know I may be selling baseball

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., *The Faith of 50 Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture*, ed. C. Evans and W. Herzog (Louisville: Knox Press, 2002), and of course the various books by Roger Angell and George F. Will.

<sup>6</sup> Here there may be a special issue, worthy of considering--the use of art in achieving more general educational goals--but this is not the specific topic that concerns us.

short, but that is not my intention. I am aware that international competition often gives the fans a feeling of national pride.)

Art in the service of the national ethos is a modern position (as is the concept of “national ethos” itself). Even if architecture, for example, was often seen in the ancient world as an expression of the national ethos, only in modern times has art been seen as an efficient and effective way of educating the masses. The Soviet Union excelled in this effort. I recall that the first time I visited Moscow I could not help noticing the heroic statue of Yuri Gagarin (the first man in space) set up at the entrance to the city. Art in the service of the national ethos--I admit I thought it was in poor taste.

I can understand this position (though I don't sympathize with propaganda generally, nor with the use of art for narrow purposes), but I don't think it deals with any essential questions relating to art itself. Propaganda is an important topic, and art in the service of propaganda is certainly an option in certain situations. But in a religious school (even in the Diaspora), where love of the land of Israel is taught in many different ways and our history is seen as invariably connected with the land, it seems unnecessary to study the art of ancient Israel in order to make the point that we are connected to the land and are directed to love it. Similarly, using the art of modern-day Israel to engender positive feelings for the State seems forced, and likely to prove ineffective in the long run.<sup>7</sup> These assumptions about the goals of art education do not address the specific issues of religious education. They do not help

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<sup>7</sup> A somewhat related, yet deeply more complex issue, is the use of art in Holocaust memorialization. See, e.g., C. Miriam Campanini-Fleer, “Holocaust Memorials: The Politics of Perception,” *Tradition* 28:2 (Winter 1994): 19-33; and Erica Brown “‘Turning All the Past to Pain’: Current Trends in the Memorialization of the Holocaust,” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 9 (2000): 108-132, esp. pp 110-13.

us in considering whether to set aside hours for the study of fine art in a situation where the hours available are limited. There is no attempt to determine the relative importance of such study, nor is it clear what reason there might be for undertaking such a program. Most lacking is a clearly articulated vision of what art contributes to the meta-goals of the Torah curriculum, or, for that matter, the religious personality. This being the case, I will attempt to put forth a preliminary vision, and try to answer these questions, in the hope that it may allow all entrusted with decision making for Jewish education to develop a more rigorous and sophisticated approach to the use of the arts in our schools.

### **Toward a Torah-Based Philosophy of Art**

Developing a Torah position on the study of art is difficult because there are no traditional sources that consider the question in a general way.<sup>8</sup> While some modern thinkers have touched briefly on the subject of art,<sup>9</sup> there is no systematic presentation that could enhance our ability to develop an educational position. We will have to develop an independent approach to the study of art for the person in the Torah education system by considering sources that have serious implications for the study of art, though they do not directly refer to it.

In this regard, I think it is helpful to review several points made by Rambam in his discussions about the *mitzvah* of the loving God (*ahavat Hashem*). In his introduction to *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah*, he enumerates the several

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<sup>8</sup> See Kirschenbaum, “*Ha-Omanut be-Halakhah*.”

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Rav Kook’s letter to the Betzalel School of Art in *Iggerot ha-Reiyah* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1962), vol. 1, #158. Cf. the famous passage in his introduction to *Shir ha-Shirim* in *Olat Reiyah* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1989), pp. 3-4.



*mitzvot* to be examined. The first three are intellectual (meaning that they do not seem to include a practical or active component) and demand acceptance of a certain opinion. Each of us is directed to believe that these principles are true, and we must assume each ought to be included in the basic curriculum. These principles are:

1. To know that God exists.
2. To not entertain the notion that there is any other God beside Him.
3. To possess some notion of God's "oneness."

Additionally, the fourth and fifth *mitzvot*, although different from the first three in nature, are of special interest to this study:

4. To love God.
5. To fear God.

These last two *mitzvot* interest me because they seem at first not to concern intellectual or rational understanding, but to represent human emotions. Love and fear are inner feelings and cannot be defined or easily comprehended (unlike the first three *mitzvot*). The person who accepts God as a matter of faith understands that there is some commonality in this feeling. Love and fear, however, are subjective emotional positions, with different meanings for different people and therefore difficult to prove or define. It is not immediately understood how Rambam thinks he can legislate love, or demand love by the halakhic Jew, when that emotion cannot be objectified. Nevertheless, Rambam sets out to teach us the secret, and to show us the existence of actions that may *lead to* a greater appreciation and awareness of the love of God.

Later in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, Rambam takes up the challenge of defining the parameters of this obligation. He directs us to develop the quality of love

for God, and to encourage actions that enhance this quality, just as we might encourage a person to develop a theory that helps him to assume other intellectual commitments (such as causality, on which see more below). He makes the following programmatic suggestion (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:1):

This God [whose nature is described earlier], honored and revered, it is our duty to love and fear Him; as it is said “You shall love the Lord your God” (Deut 6:5)...<sup>10</sup>

In *Hilkhot Teshuvah* (10:2), in a discussion of serving God with love, Rambam continues his assessment of this emotion, and its relation to devotion to God, making a significant comparison to human romantic love:

Whoever serves God with love, occupies himself with the study of Torah and fulfillment of *mitzvot* and walks in the paths of wisdom, impelled by no external motive whatsoever, moved neither by fear of calamity nor by the desire to obtain material benefits—such a person cleaves to the truth *because* it is true, and as a result happiness comes to him. This standard is very high indeed; not every Sage attained it. It was the standard of Abraham our father, who was called by God “my

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<sup>10</sup> There is an obvious anthropomorphic aspect to the directive. “Love” is something that we know about from our everyday relationships. Parents, siblings, and spouses teach us about love. But the connection of the love in the verse to the more general notion of devotion is not immediately clear. I mention this point because it represents the position of Rashi in his interpretation of the verse. Basing himself on the *midrash*, Rashi states:

“Love” [in Deut. 6:5] refers to assuming the mantle of the *mitzvot*, to accepting the yoke of the commandments. One who serves out of love cannot be compared to one who serves out of fear. If you serve out of fear and find that you are overburdened by the master’s demands, you will leave and go out in your own.

It seems obvious to Rashi that “love” implies unshakeable devotion. More than acceptance, we are directed to “cleave” to the *mitzvot*, to love God by doing his will, and to maintain that devotion even in difficult times. Rashi has changed the verse and its more obvious intention, love, and has depersonalized the sentiment, turning it into an act of devotion. There is a human activity that can be compared to the love of God, namely the love of the master. In both cases, love is expressed by a sense of duty and the willingness to suffer difficulty in doing that duty. According to Rashi, the metaphor (master-slave) helps us to understand the intention of the verse, such that its anthropomorphic content is no longer as offensive as it might be perceived in Rambam’s rendering. There is no doubt that Rambam does not shy away from this very human emotion and uses it to describe the relationship between man and God.

beloved,” because he served only out of love. We are commanded by God, through Moses, to achieve this state, as it is said: “And you shall love the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:5). When one loves God with this kind of love, he will then be able to do all the mitzvot with love.

While there is a connection between the two passages, they certainly differ in how they present love. In *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, the love referred to is a *mitzvah* act in and of itself. This means that everyone is obligated to achieve some minimum level of devotion (this in spite of the fact that a particular standard or set of halakhic parameters cannot be determined). There is a verse in the Torah that directs us all to love, and that verse has to be accepted and fulfilled. This is what the term *mitzvah* means--an obligation that devolves equally upon all the people.

In *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, however, Rambam has a different notion in mind. He states quite clearly that “whoever serves God out of love, occupies himself with the study of Torah and fulfillment of *mitzvot*.” Here, Rambam presents love not as an obligation, but as a quality or emotion that enables all other *mitzvot* to be made more significant. Further in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* (10:4) Rambam comments:

The Sages said, “Lest you will say, ‘I will study Torah in order that I may become rich, or that I may be called Rabbi, or that I may receive reward in the World to Come.’ It is therefore written ‘To love the Lord.’ Whatever you do, do it only out of love.”

It seems that the love Rambam refers to is that which makes the other *mitzvot* more significant. Torah study in itself might be a response to the divine will. Surely we study because we are directed to study! At the same time we study because it gives us the opportunity to have a profound relationship with God, and this relationship itself is called love. Regarding this love, Rambam says it is like the love of a man and

a woman (*Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:3). It is all consuming and it is romantic. This is the love that we try to achieve while studying Torah and doing the *mitzvot*.

Rambam has introduced us to two categories of love that the Jew must strive to attain, but they differ from each other in scope and nature.<sup>11</sup> That of *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*—stated as a normative obligation—stands on its own and is not connected to any other *mitzvah*, per se. It is the love that establishes our connection to God, and it is generated through looking carefully upon the created world and being inspired by the love indicated in its workings. When we notice God's love reflected in the workings of the world, our response will be greater love for the creator.

The love described in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* is of a different sort, and poses a different challenge. This love and devotion is integrally connected to the performance of every other *mitzvah*, especially the *mitzvah* of Torah study.<sup>12</sup> This kind of love is that which is “very exalted and comparable to the love of a man and a woman.” Its source is in the relationship between God and humanity, expressed in His gift of the Torah and *mitzvot*—the essence of his will. For Rambam, this is the philosopher’s love of the truth, and we are directed to achieve this special and more esoteric love of God through his *mitzvot*.

Perhaps this distinction can be seen in another way. The love demanded in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* is based on observation (science) and is achieved by

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<sup>11</sup> In *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* Rambam seems to unite these two distinct categories of love—see Positive Commandment #3 (and cf. *Sefer ha-Hinukh* #418). It seems, however, that the presentation is more significant in the *Mishneh Torah*.

<sup>12</sup> Though every *mitzvah* indicates God’s love for His creation, Torah study opens the greatest aperture for returning that love. Torah study is about God’s declared intention for His created man. If I study Torah diligently, I will discover more and more about this will, and I will be filled with love for the source of this goodness. See *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* 4:6 and *Tanya*, chap. 22.

looking into the created world, studying it, and finally standing before that creation in wonder. The second kind of love, in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, is the philosopher's love—"the truth because it is true." While we are all directed to have the first kind of love (it is clearly a *mitzvah*), only some will achieve the second. We can all stand with wonder at the vision of creation, but only a few will be able to love the truth itself.

### **The Scientist's Love**

Let us look more carefully at the first category of Maimonidean love, the love of the scientist, of the observer, and of the organizer of information about the created world. The world is a reflection of the Creator's concern for His creatures, and if we look into that world carefully through scientific observation, and organize the information as scientists do, we will certainly come to love its Creator.

Love develops within us as the result of our awareness that the world reflects mutual concern. If someone feeds us when we are hungry, then we will surely develop special feelings for the source of sustenance. If we are convinced that the offer (of food, for example) is unflinching and will always be available, then we are overcome with feelings of love. We are directed to love God. Rambam teaches us that if we understand our relationship properly, if we are the "scientists" of divine creation, then the love becomes simple and obvious.

Look into the world and note that God gives us constant, ongoing support. There are no prior conditions, and the world is always there to serve us. We have only to notice that there is sustenance on earth and to realize, by implication, that there is one overwhelming source of support in heaven. This analysis will generate the desired feelings and enable us to perform the *mitzvah* of loving God. Look more

carefully and note the complexity of the world and the “extremes” to which the creator has gone in order to care for us. The more we know, the more our feelings of love are enhanced and strengthened. This is strongly expressed by Rambam elsewhere in *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* (2:2):

And what is the way that will lead to the love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightaway love, praise, and glorify Him, and exceedingly yearn and desire to know His great name; even as David said (Ps. 42:3): “My soul thirsts for God, the living God; O when will I come to appear before God?”

While it is true that *ahavat Hashem* seems difficult at first, there is nonetheless a democratic aspect to this *mitzvah* that enables all the Jews in the world to achieve this level of service. Apparently, everyone can stand in wonder at the world that God created for our good. Everyone can understand the love of a parent, which generates concern and support. Since every person can observe and reflect on his or her own state, just as a scientist might, we each can potentially achieve some aspect of the awareness that generates *ahavat Hashem*.

Rambam himself was a scientist, involved in observation and in deriving the correct inference from his observation. Further, he felt that if one developed this capacity for observation, one would certainly come to the conclusion that the relationship between God and the world is one of love. For Rambam, the study of science and serious observation of the world can only enhance the feelings of devotion of a religious person who accepts the first three principles of *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*. If you study science and you know how God’s world is formulated, you are necessarily impressed by the complexity of creation and the concern of the divine

for His creations--in general and, especially, for the least resilient, most dependent, and most aware of the creations, humanity. For Rambam, there is a simple relationship between science and religion, and that relationship produces the kind of awe that is a prerequisite for fulfilling the *mitzvah* of loving God.

The notion that Torah and worldly knowledge or science enhance each other is clearly present in Rambam's works. The created world was there to be observed, assessed, and analyzed, and, in turn, it could only enhance the believer in his convictions.<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that Rambam did not say that belief itself would be generated by science, only that science can enhance belief and make it more serious an endeavor for the practitioner. More correctly, Rambam thought that belief would be enhanced and strengthened by observing the created world in a scientific manner. It is true that belief in God may not have been a serious problem in Rambam's time, as people may have found believing in God an easier position to adopt than nonbelief. Nevertheless, to enhance and deepen belief, observing the world was absolutely necessary.

### **The Role of "Miracles" as an Introduction to Observation**

Rambam recognized the importance of miracles in the world organized and directed by God. But he did not believe that miracles were the *source* of one's belief in God; rather, they enhanced it and gave it certain substance. This is demonstrated by the recounting of the Exodus miracles on Passover night—an obligation on the wise and simple alike.

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<sup>13</sup> See generally, *Guide of the Perplexed* III:25-28 and discussion below.

In the context of our discussion, we might say that the miracles teach us how to observe the world around us and direct us to discover more about God's goodness. This, in turn, enables us to participate actively in the *mitzvah* of loving God. Science does not relate to miracles per se, but the fact that there *are* miracles prods us to study further and to investigate the realities of the physical world. The miracle enhances faith generally because it proves (or shocks us into realizing) that God is concerned with His creation. The miracle also demands study, thereby giving us entrée to the world of God's love, forcing us to take note of His role in the created world.

In the modern world, miracles have become problematic. After Britain emerged from the long war with France in 1815, a new world was established. On the one hand, Britain was a great power and premier economy in the new world order. On the other hand, there was great urban poverty and social dismay. All this in the face of severe challenges to faith and a newfound uncertainty about ideas that were previously unassailable. It was a time of contradiction. The prudery, which is synonymous with the Victorian age, paralleled a violent immoralism, as seen in the writings of the Decadents.

Against the background of this controversy, Thomas Carlyle, in his philosophical satire, *Sartor Resartus*, argues for a new mode of spirituality in an age of mechanism. He was looking for a way of bringing the people back to a truer form of religious devotion, but one appropriate for his time. In an often-quoted line he states, "Wonder is the basis of worship."<sup>14</sup>

In the six centuries from Rambam to Carlyle, there had been no change. Wonder--or, as I have tried to explain, the love of God--remained the basis of

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<sup>14</sup> *Sartor Resartus* (1883), book 1, chap. 10.



worship. Rambam knew that to develop this sense of wonder and to be able to see God's concern in the world, an opening was needed--some way of creating more direct access to a feeling of relationship (scientific knowledge having been much less developed than it is in our time). In earlier times, this was accomplished through the experience of miracles. The reason that we continue to tell the stories of the miracles of the escape from Egypt, and are not content to tell only of the exalted change that the people experienced, is that we need the miracle and the memory of the miracle in order to enter the world of God's love for His people.

But miracles were problematic even in antiquity. In the first century B.C.E., Cicero, the Roman philosopher and man of letters, made a well-known denial of miracles:

Nothing can happen without cause; nothing happens that cannot happen, and when what was capable of happening has happened, it may not be interpreted as a miracle. Consequently, there are no miracles. We therefore draw this conclusion: what was capable of happening is not a miracle.<sup>15</sup>

I am less concerned with the truth of the statement than with its possible influence. To say that everything must have a cause is an attractive position, because it enables us to study phenomena and to classify and organize the material of nature in a systematic manner. Alternatively, one might say that the scientist, because of his powers of observation and analysis, might develop an antipathy to the notion of miracles. Even if one believed in the possibility of a miracle, he would tend to try to find a "scientific" explanation for a particular occurrence and not be inclined to claim the rationale of "miracle."

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<sup>15</sup> Cicero, *De Divinatione* 2:28.

As I have pointed out, miracles can often provide the student of Torah with the impetus necessary to concern himself with the workings of God's world and, especially, with the *mitzvah* of loving Him.

### **Rambam and Miracles**

Rambam, though disagreeing with Cicero, believed that miracles were not essentially beyond understanding. He agreed that a kind of causality was at the bottom of all things and that that causality had to be investigated and appreciated. This is not the place to present a full discussion of Rambam's position on miracles, but it is important to remember that, for Rambam, miracles do not necessarily imply an abrogation of the laws of nature. His position is that all miracles are predetermined at the time of creation and do not indicate a change in God's wisdom or intentions. The miracle of the splitting of the sea does not imply a change in the nature of the water; rather, it came about because of an extraordinary (but natural) wind that affected how the water was deployed. The conclusion is that even miracles are subject to the study of nature. It is fair to ask how a particular miracle was accomplished, since God works in accordance with the laws established at creation (divine will and wisdom).<sup>16</sup>

In sum, it appears that the difference between the position of Cicero and that of Rambam is narrow, a function of one's belief or faith in God. They agree that all things should make sense and can be understood as a reflection of the laws of nature. Rambam believes that there are unique events in history that can be explained as part of nature but that are, nonetheless, miraculous, either because of their infrequency or

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<sup>16</sup> For Rambam's theory of miracles, see esp. *Guide* II:29, III:25 and III:32 and his commentary to *Avot* 5:5. See also Menachem Kellner, "Maimonides' Allegiances to Science and Judaism," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 7 (1997): 88-104.

because there is independent substantiation (in the Torah) of their miraculous quality. For example, if the Torah indicates that the splitting of the Red Sea was a miracle, then it indeed is so, even though it can be explained as the result of a combination of natural events. The miracle is Heaven's way of reminding us that all observation should enhance our feeling about God's love.

Unfortunately, we live in a world in which miracles are no longer an effective prod to encourage the search for divine love. Rambam devalued the notion of miracle and rejected it as a primary sign of our relationship with God, but he saw the miracles related to us in the Torah as an entry point to understanding that the world reflects God's love for us. It is difficult for us today to recognize the miracle and to use it as a critical element in our own religious development. My instinctive feeling is that even when some people claim to be living in a miraculous world in which they are sure God is concerned about them, they often mean that the world is simply too complicated to assess. Instead of driving a person on to greater analysis and investigation of the created world, the use of miracles today is often a statement about the *inability* to investigate and to determine what is going on in a more precise manner. Instead of clarifying the miraculous nature of our existence, one becomes entrenched in a more limited position, where the designation "miracle" becomes a cover-up for a lack of general understanding and for serious confusion about one's position in the world of God's making.

There is another reason that the miracle can no longer be the basis for the development of serious *ahavat Hashem*, and that is our contemporary estrangement from the source of all goodness due to our perception of the rules of causality. In Cicero's time, it was quite clear (to him) that all things have a cause, leading him to

believe that there could be no miracles. Rambam wanted to assume both positions and claimed that there were miracles, but that they could be assessed on the same principles as other natural phenomena. In this way, he wanted to connect the possibility of miracle and analysis; true, the events could be understood and analyzed, but there also could be miracles. This satisfied the scientist who wanted to believe that ultimately God rules the world of his creation. Everything can be analyzed and understood, but the world belongs to God and operates with His wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

In modern times we are directed (by the Rambam) to believe in miracles, but also to believe that they can be explained by science and some acceptance of causality. As a result, the miracle, or the apparent miracle, is no longer a source of wonder, and it generates neither a love for God, nor a desire to reciprocate the miraculous event with that love. Instead, we are obsessed with the questions: How did that happen? What rules can explain this event? We are convinced that we can understand whatever happens, and we are further convinced that even if an event seems to contradict our perception or experience, we will shortly understand the principles or rules that govern it. We find it difficult to stand in awe and declare an event a miracle. We are confident that the seemingly miraculous event will soon be understood, as are all other events in our experience.<sup>18</sup>

For Rambam, miracles might be understood in some scientific way, but they remained indicators of God's love. As such, they were important for the continued religious development of man. Even though I might claim to understand the nuts and

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<sup>17</sup> See the somewhat similar sentiment in Albert Einstein, "Science and Religion II," in *Out of My Later Years* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 22-28.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of one result of the Maimonidean de-emphasis on the miraculous, see David Berger, "Some Ironic Consequences of Maimonides' Rationalistic Messianism" (Hebrew), *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1992): 1-8.

bolts of the miracle, that understanding need not devalue the “wonder” of the miracle. In our time, when faith in causality is virtually absolute, and we are convinced that we are able to precisely explain every phenomenon, the wonder in the miracle has disappeared. We are bereft of an entry-level experience into the world dominated by the *mitzvah* of loving of God.

There is, nevertheless, one great mystery we have discovered in modernity that Rambam was not aware of, but, unfortunately, even it has been unable to challenge our underlying denial of the miracle as an effective force for religious development. That has to do with Werner Heisenberg’s formulation in 1927 of what has become known as the “uncertainty principle.” According to this principle of quantum mechanics, it is impossible to simultaneously specify the position and momentum of a particle, such as an electron, with any precision. This implies something about the causal laws that exist in nature. In fact, it seems that causal laws cannot account for the behavior of these individual particles, and only the reactions of great groups of these electrons can be predicted, on the basis of statistical rules. The rules of causality have become approximate; it is no longer possible to know what the precise cause of any phenomenon is, and the world has, in theory, returned to a state of miracle and wonder. This uncertainty principle makes it necessary to reassess everything we see and experience as a new event, as a miracle.

Still, even uncertainty could not effect a change in modern skepticism, and it seems that as modern individuals we remain in the world of causality, avoiding the entry of the miraculous into our conscious. Even though many high school physics

students can explain the principle of uncertainty, they have not changed their world view. They remain tied to a world of causality.<sup>19</sup>

Not only are students of this mind; some leading modern physicists have similarly refused to give up causality despite their understanding of uncertainty. Einstein reportedly posited that what was excluded by the uncertainty principle was not the fact of the causality principle in nature, but merely the precise knowledge of it. We do not know it, but it is there. For these scientists, causality continues to rule. Just as there are many physicists who can speak of uncertainty, there are also many who know that causality lives even within uncertainty.

Rambam's model has become ever more difficult. He thought that the vision of the miracle would enable us to see God's goodness in the world of creation; that the laws of nature and the understanding of those laws would enable us to appreciate the creation--but this does not usually seem to be the case now. In fact, we are not necessarily interested in the rules as a source of faith. Our great trust in the principle of causality and in the explanatory power of science makes it almost impossible for us to stand with wonder before any particular natural event we might encounter.

Science has robbed us of the simple feelings of wonder when we think about the events of the physical world we inhabit. We would like to take Carlyle's advice, we would especially like to follow the Rambam into a world of loving God, but this has become almost impossible for us.

The question of love of God in our time can be restated: Is it possible to consider another point of entry for the religious personality who seeks to achieve

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<sup>19</sup> This is comparable to the continued use of Newtonian physics in our post-relativity world. We know that there is relativity, but we live and think in the world as described by Newton.

some degree of wonder when gazing upon the world of creation? Is it possible to circumvent the causality developed by science and reestablish a sense of wonder when looking upon God's works?

### **Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art**

We seem to have a natural predilection for the aesthetic; we are drawn to the beautiful and repulsed by the horrible in nature—even though it is difficult to define the exact parameters of each. Let us imagine a confrontation with the Scottish highlands. Can anyone remain neutral? Would he not draw a deep breath and say, “that is surely beautiful” or perhaps insist that this is the wonder of God’s creation? We can easily imagine that someone would find a particular sunset in a certain time and place remarkable. Astronauts are constantly commenting on the “beauty” and the “wonder” and the “vision” of creation. This is not the result of study or understanding, but a natural inclination with which we seem to be endowed.

It is true that the term “beautiful” can indicate a variety of things and lacks a clear or simple meaning. Almost everything can be seen as beautiful by someone, or as reflecting his or her particular point of view. But there are enough people who seem to be affected in a similar way by certain visions to make us think that “beautiful” is real and has been programmed into the human personality. It is possible that one of the reasons we are endowed with an innate sense of beauty is to enable us to stand with wonder and awe at the creation, or at least at those moments which, in an almost miraculous way, direct us to the beauty of the divine craft.

If we have been robbed of the miraculous moment, if we do not see anything in the workings of God’s world other than the causal principle, if “uncertainty” does

not create the option of awe, then perhaps we have to turn to beauty--the special quality of the creation which takes our breath away and leaves us enraptured with wonder. It may be that beauty and the aesthetic moment provide the only possible contemporary entrée to discovering God's love in the creation. The beautiful sunset is really there. The snow-capped mountains are really there--they inspire in us the notion that creation is perfect and appropriate for us and us alone. This feeling is often useful in *tefillah*, and it may be one of the reasons that the medieval kabbalists in Safed went out into nature to greet the Sabbath Queen.<sup>20</sup>

Difficult though it may be to define the subject of aesthetics, there is no doubt that we are impressed by "beauty" (or its opposite). But there is one further point. We are not simply given the gift of perceiving a beautiful landscape or moment; we are able as well to reproduce that beauty or moment in a variety of ways. The *ruah memallela*<sup>21</sup> enables man to practice his appreciation of aesthetics in creation in a number of ways. We are able, for example, to recreate the sunset, or the highlands of Scotland, by painting and reproducing God's world as art. Art (or poetry or music) becomes an interpretation of the aesthetic feeling within us. We take note of the sunset, deciding that it is a vision that has meaning and that leaves an impression, and

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<sup>20</sup> This is not the time to discuss the use of the aesthetic moment in the performance of *mitzvot*. Suffice it to say for the present that the aesthetic moment seems to enhance our ability to achieve *kavvanah*.

<sup>21</sup> Although generally associated with humanity's unique capacity for verbal communication (see Onkelos to Gen. 2:7, and also Rashi there, s.v. *la-nefesh*), I am using this term as synonymous with man's "godly" spirit and general creative capacity—including music, arts, etc.



we try to reproduce it as art.<sup>22</sup> Art as a human endeavor is an attempt to connect to that aspect of creation determined by the aesthetic consciousness to be beautiful.

Art represents the world of beauty (in the sense that it inspires wonder) but also necessarily interprets it. Art does not reproduce the feeling of awe that exists in the created world. Strictly speaking, that would not be possible, nor would there be any point in its being done. Art presents its own experience of the beauty of the creation as seen through the eyes of the artist, and, finally, through the eyes of the observer of the artist's work.

Art is about becoming part of the wondrous experience of gazing on beauty. The wonder of the world as created is sufficient; the enterprise of the artist is to restate it and to make it his or her own, in some way. If we learn to look at the work of art in the proper manner we should be able to connect to this human vision of beauty, which originates in God's created world but insists that beauty must ultimately be seen, reflected, or interpreted by the human view.

This can be understood from the opposite perspective. The literary critic Cleanth Brooks spoke of the "heresy of paraphrase."<sup>23</sup> In following an argument by the Italian critic and philosopher Benedetto Croce, Brooks posited that the meaning of a poem (or any work of art) consists in what is not translatable. The meaning of the poem is connected to the disposition of the words, their arrangement, and their rhythm. There is a sensory side to the poem as a work of art. You don't just read the poem; you experience it. To alter any of the above (by translation for example) is to

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<sup>22</sup> This act of "reproduction" is clearly evident in classical—or "representational"—art, but is also true when the reproduction is more interpretative, such as in impressionism or, certainly, abstract art.

<sup>23</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1947).

produce *another* work, which may or may not have merit as art. A poem is like a sunset in that it is rooted in a sensory experience. But the poem uses special talents that are indigenous to the human being. Words, rhythm, order, and meaning are all things that give the poem its structure and produce aesthetic merit and the quality of wonder.

Looking at the divine sunset in nature encourages us to produce our own sunset; to use words, music, and the plastic arts to reproduce, and then to express in a personal way, the sunset that is God's gift of beauty. Further, the sunset we have produced, written of, or painted, becomes in itself an object of wonder and amazement. If it is true that for the believing person a sunset can be inspiring, if the natural beauty we encounter tells us that we are experiencing God's love and should reciprocate, then it may also be true that the representation of the beauty in nature through art grants us entrée into the special experience of God's love, seen through the prism of human creativity. This notion is expressed by Joseph Conrad in the preface to his 1897 novel *The Nigger of the Narcissus*:

[The artist] speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation...<sup>24</sup>

To students of Torah it is clear that the capacity to speak and to clarify ideas using reason and words enables us to connect to God and His Torah in a unique manner. We experience the Torah's grandeur by engaging it with those talents that God has bestowed upon us. God has given us the Torah as an act of love, and we engage that love through study of it.

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (New York, 1897; many reprints), p. xlvi.

The significance of the relationship between study and love can be further extended. Creation itself is connected to the Torah. “God gazed into the Torah and created the world”<sup>25</sup> is a notion that guides the student of the Torah. Through study, we gain information and expertise, both necessary to follow the demands of the Torah. But we are also involved in *hiddush* (new or novel interpretation), which can be explained as new understanding of the Torah’s system and, by implication, clarification of God’s love for his chosen creations.

Looking into the created world is available to all who have faith, in order to prod and develop that faith. Looking into the Torah is available to those who accept the Torah from the Creator of the world, to be used in determining the more refined nuances and facets of that love. Learning Torah is experiential in the sense that it enables one to stand with wonder before God’s goodness, which has been bestowed upon the students of the Torah. And there is a democratic principle at work here. Everyone can study Torah, though it represents the greatest “crown” available to man. As Rambam states (*Hilkhos Talmud Torah* 3:1):

The crown of Torah lies ready and is accessible to all of Israel, as it says (Deut. 33:4): "Moses commanded us the Torah, as the heritage of the [entire] congregation of Jacob"--anyone who wishes may come and take [this crown].

As educators, we are witness to the fact that not all students are affected equally by the opportunity to study Torah. Ideally, everyone who entered the paradise of Torah would find sure footing therein. But that is not the reality, and, whatever the reason, some of those who attempt to study are rejected by the enterprise. They do not find the study of Torah an entry-level experience into God’s love for His creation.

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<sup>25</sup> *Zohar, Terumah* 161a-b.

Tragically, some find it so oppressive that it stymies any pure religious thought or experience the student might have.

It has been suggested that there may be other ways to gain access to God's love. Some have suggested that it can take place in the social context of young people striving to express themselves religiously, and others think that a "Carlebach *minyan*" is the best option. I would like to propose that reconnecting to our human spirit, and standing in wonder at God's creation through the use of that spirit, may provide us a significant option. Not every student will find his or her way to God's love through the arts and with the understanding that the human capacity to render the created world in a special way is a gift that should be exploited; but for some it might provide the necessary spiritual moment in an essentially nonspiritual existence that would enable them to begin to consider and later to experience God's love.

### **A Final Note: Artwork and an Explanation**

Two specific paintings by the seventeenth century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer are significant to our discussion (as are many others, but Vermeer's stand out in my mind). I refer to his paintings *The Geographer* and *The Astronomer*.<sup>26</sup>

In *The Geographer* (see fig. 1, on p. 32) we encounter the man who is trying to map the world in which he lives. He deals with small matters, trying to orient the small sections of our existence into a comprehensive whole, and the painting clearly depicts a moment of insight--the light streaming in draws our attention to his eyes. He holds his cartographer's instrument in midair, as if he has suddenly been caught by an

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<sup>26</sup> For more on Vermeer see the books by Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. esp. his *Vermeer and the Art of Painting* (New Haven: Yale, 1995) and, most recently, Bryan Jay Wolf, *Vermeer and the Invention of Seeing* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2001).

idea, and, again, the window's light shines on those hands for emphasis. Just as the window allows that light in, it allows the geographer's gaze to escape the confines of the room—emphasizing his interest in the outside world. The globe is tucked away on a shelf behind the geographer and is irrelevant to the enterprise of the mapmaker since it depicts the *entire* world—our man is interested in the details. The picture on the wall behind the geographer is that of a sea chart—very much part of the world in which he lives. *The Geographer* is a pictorial representation of “a man discovering a new fact about reality in a world wide open to his inquiring mind.”<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, in *The Astronomer* (fig. 2), the surveyor of the heavens holds in his hand the globe with the constellations, indicating his yearning to be part of the greater conception. The two paintings were clearly meant to go together, yet the contrast is stark. Unlike the geographer—caught in mid-action, gazing out of the window—the astronomer is at rest, contemplating his celestial globe. On the wall behind him is the painting *Finding of Moses*. This is one of the great moments of salvation in world history. The Jewish people were saved because the child Moses was saved from the river (Exodus, chap. 2). Art historians have pointed out that the inclusion of this “painting within a painting” was meant for allegorical purposes, reinforcing the artist's underlying meaning—God's divine providence in the finding of Moses, symbolizing that spiritual guidance in man's attempt to discover His world.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Dianne Durante, “Vermeer's *Geographer*,” *AOB News* 9:2 (1999): 13. See also James Welu, “Vermeer's *Astronomer*,” *Art Bulletin* 68:2 (1986): 263-67.

<sup>28</sup> See Wheelock, *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*, pp. 161-62. Vermeer used the *Finding of Moses* in the background of another painting, *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin), in which that scene is reproduced more fully and on a larger scale.

We read these pictures as though they were a *midrash*. They introduce us to the two aspects of human wonder. The geographer tries to measure and describe the world in which he lives; the astronomer tries to understand things that go beyond and through them, to grasp our position in that greater world.<sup>29</sup> We understand salvation as being an act of God's love, enabling us to reciprocate that love.

Surely these ideas can be stated in language and are found in the words of *Hazal*. But not everyone can appreciate the wonder in the world through the word, and not everyone can appreciate the love that is expressed in creation through the use of language.

Vermeer enables us to look upon these notions through an amazing representation of reality. For those who make the effort, the interpretation is greatly enhanced by the work of art itself. It gives us the opportunity to stand with wonder before the idea, to be able to find ways of connecting to the Creator through the beauty of the represented creation. It is hard to ignore the ability of the artist to present an idea through his art, and it is impossible not to draw a deep breath when confronting these works.

I have attempted in broad strokes to articulate the promise of art as an alternate avenue to achieving *ahavat Hashem* in Torah education. I do not pretend that there are any easy solutions. We are well served to remember Conrad's concluding warning:

Art is long and life is short, and success is very far off. And thus, doubtful of strength to travel so far, we talk a little about the aim--the

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<sup>29</sup> Two outstanding works by the historian Daniel J. Boorstin detail these different poles of human creativity. See his *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to Know Himself and His World* (New York: Random House, 1983), and *The Creators: A History of Heroes of the Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1992).

aim of art, which, like life itself, is inspiring, difficult--obscured by mists. It is not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature. It is not less great, but only more difficult. To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile--such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished--behold!--all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile--and the return to an eternal rest.<sup>30</sup>

The way to love of God has many paths; art is surely one of them.

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<sup>30</sup> Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, pp. 1-li.

Fig. 1



*The Geographer* (c. 1668-69)  
Oil on canvas, 53x46 cm.  
Steadelsches Kunstinstitut  
Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Fig. 2



*The Astronomer* (1668)  
Oil on canvas, 50x45 cm.  
Le Louvre  
Paris, France