

Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

TWO CHERUBIM, images of winged heavenly figures engraved in wood and overlaid with gold, were erected on the cover of the Ark in the holiest spot of the ancient Jewish Temple. They were featured in Moses' Mishkan in the desert and Solomon's Mikdash in Jerusalem (till 586 BCE), but were not repeated in the Second Temple (515 BCE-70 CE; Yoma 21b). The two cherubim, each with wings outstretched and a face of a child, formed the symbolic throne of God's presence and revelation within the people. In their relation to each other, the cherubim dramatized the love relationship between God and Israel: When the people failed to follow the will of God, the faces of the cherubim were turned away from each other (II Chro. 3:13); when they followed the will of God, the cherubim in turn faced each other (Ex. 37:9; BB 99a). Moreover, then, in the spirit of divine love, the cherubim had their bodies interlocked with one another as in an embrace of human intimacy. This love position would then have been displayed before the people during the pilgrim festivals, to demonstrate the completeness and intensity of God's love: "See, how endeared you are before God, as the endearment between male and female!" (Yoma 54a). Human love, in its beauty and sweetness—in its cherubic expression—is taken as model for the most sublime love—between God and His people.

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THE SHABBAT AND THE TEMPLE are interrelated in Judaism, both expressing sanctity — Shabbat in time, and the Temple in space. The precept of Shabbat is interwoven in Scripture within the details of the Temple's construction (Ex. 35:2-3): "On six days, work ("melacha") must be done; but the seventh day must be a sanctity to you, a Shabbat of complete rest dedicated to the Lord." No work on this day! Nor is the ignition of any flame allowed (3): "Do not kindle a fire in any of your dwellings on the day of Shabbat." The Hebrew for "work" in regard to Shabbat is "melacha;" this term means accomplishment, a fulfillment of human purpose and design — a creative act. "Melacha" is related to "mal'ach" (angel, messenger); it is the achievement of one who carries out and completes a task. The definition of what is considered "melacha" for Shabbat is derived from the construction of the Temple: All archetypes of human work invested and employed for the Temple (39 in number) are forbidden on the Shabbat. The Rabbis teach: How supreme is the sanctity of Shabbat! Even for the sake of the Temple, the Shabbat must not be desecrated. The highest Temple built in the eternity of time and within the hearts of the people, is the Shabbat.

Scriptural reading for Saturday morning, March 24:
VAYAKHEL-PEKUDE: Exodus 35:1-40:38, 12:1-20
HAFTARAH: Exekiel 45:16-46:18

Rosh Hodesh Nisan, Thursday, March 29

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THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

By RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

SYMBOLISM OF FIRE embraces the Book of Exodus from start to end -- from the devouring fire in Moscs' Burning Bush vision, to the shielding flame above the Tabernacle, glowing during the nights of the people's wanderings in the desert. Both fires symbolize the wondrous survivability and indestructibility of the Jewish people.

The Burning Bush illustrates that no destructive fire will ever consume the people. The blazing flame above the Tabernacle shows that even in moments of darkness, the protective fire of divine providence will warm the people's hopes and provide illumination to direct their ways. So concludes the Book that "fire was seen in the cloud by the entire people of Israel, throughout all their journeys!" (Exodus 40:38).

THOUGHT OF

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

WS / MARCH 15, 1996

HA-HODESH, THE FIRST MONTH of the biblical year. Its biblical name, *Aviv*, means, in classical Hebrew, "Month of the Ripe Grains" (not "spring"). The name of the city Tel Aviv in modern Israel stems from the experience of the Jews exiled in Babylon after the First Destruction (586 B.C.E.). They settled at the restored *tel* (ruins) near the Kevar River in Babylon and named it Tel Aviv (Ezekiel 3:15), meaning, the renovated "Hill of Ripe Grains." In post-exilic sources, the name of the month has been changed to *Nisan*, which means "Month of Nizanim," a reference to the wild, colorful

flowers of the season in the land of Israel (Song of Songs 2:12).

This month, "The First" (called Aviv or Nisan), marks the redemption of Israel by the Exodus, the birthday of the Jewish people. Correspondingly, the Seventh Month (known by its Akkadian name, *Tishrei* ("the beginning"), is considered in rabbinic view the cosmological New Year, marking the creation of the universe and the birth of humanity. No birthday of any hero or prophet (surely not any "god" or "divine being") is celebrated in the Torah. Only two pivotal birthdays are acclaimed: of the people, in the First Month (Pesach), and of the universe, in the Seventh Monday (Rosh Hashana).

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

SYMBOLISM OF LIGHT AND FIRE: The Book of Exodus concludes with the idea of Shabbat (35:1-3) and *Mishkan*, Israel's portable sanctuary in the desert (35:4-40:38). These two themes are linked, both representing the idea of *kedusha*, or holiness: mishkan in space and Shabbat in time. Both themes conclude with "fire" imagery – mishkan with Divine, protective "fire at night" (40:38) and Shabbat with human, productive fire: "Kindle no fire in all your households during Sabbath day" (35:3). But by amazing halachic logic, we kindle fire ritually, before and after Shabbat, as we welcome and depart from the holy day.

The Sadducees (c. 200 B.C.E.-100 C.E.), literally following Scriptures, banned fire on Shabbat altogether. In contrast, our sages ordained candle-lighting before Shabbat to bring light to our homes and promote domestic joy and peace. We,

thus, may enjoy the warmth and light of fire and warm food, all prepared before Shabbat.

As Shabbat ends, we re-enter the world of work and enterprise. We dramatize this idea by the *havdalah* at the day's conclusion, as we recite a blessing on "the lights of fire" symbolizing human enlightenment and creativity.

In Greek mythology, Prometheus had to steal the fire from the begrudging, malevolent gods who punished him harshly for his audacity. Jewish tradition, in contrast, views fire as a Divine gift to humanity, allowing us, God's partners, to create, control and employ fire for our benefit.

With tranquil light we welcome Shabbat to be a day of domestic rest and peace. With blazing lights of *avuka*, or candlestick, we depart from Shabbat entering a week of successful work, industry and creativity. From "Shabbat shalom" to a new "good week" (*shavu'a tov*).

THOUGHT OF THE WEEK

RABBI ZVI YEHUDA

REGARD FOR VISUAL ART is shown in Torah's design of the *mishkan*, Israel's portable tabernacle in the desert. The second word of the Decalogue prohibits idolatry, not artistry. Sculptures or paintings must not be worshipped, but may be created and enjoyed as objects of art and beauty.

In Judaism, depiction of the human figure has been avoided to guard pure monotheism; erection of monuments eschewed to curb human boast. But the quest for, and appreciation of, artistic expression has always been kept alive.

Table and altar were among the holy vessels in the ancient Temple. The table is a symbol of wealth and success; the altar, of sacrifice and

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giving. After the Temple's destruction (70 C.E.), however, its ritual was abolished, but its symbolism continued to mold Jewish thought and values.

Equating the common table at home with the holy altar of the Temple, the Talmud (TB Berakhot 55a) says that both have the power to affect atonement. When the food on the table is *kasher* ("fit" ritually and morally; prepared by dietary rules and obtained by honest means), prayers are recited and words of Torah exchanged around the table – and most importantly, when the needy are invited to partake and enjoy – then the table is sacred and atones as the altar. So remarks Targum Yerushalmi (Exodus 40:6).

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VAYAKHEL-PEKUDE

March 22, 2001

REGARD FOR VISUAL ART is shown in Torah's design of the *Mishkan*, Israel's portable Tabernacle in the desert. The Second Word of the Decalogue prohibits idolatry, not artistry. Sculptures or paintings must not be worshipped but may be created and enjoyed as objects of art and beauty. Rabban Gamaliel (2nd c.) was once bathing at the Aphrodite bathhouse (in Acre), which was dedicated to the Greek goddess of love and beauty. Questioned whether his conduct was not idolatrous, the Rabbi replied (*Mishna AZ 3:4*):

It is not the bathhouse that serves as an adornment to Aphrodite [the goddess]; it is an aphrodite [statute], which serves as an adornment to the bathhouse.

When used as a decorative ornament, and not as an object of worship, an aphrodite statute, or any other pagan figurine, is not a forbidden item of idolatry. In Judaism, depiction of the human figure has been avoided, to guard pure monotheism; erection of monuments eschewed, to curb human boast. But the quest for, and appreciation of, artistic expression have always been kept alive.

TABLE AND ALTAR: Both were among the holy vessels in the ancient Temple. The Table is a symbol of wealth and success; the Altar, of sacrifice and giving. After the Temple's Destruction (70 CE), however, its ritual was abolished but its symbolism continued to endure and mold Jewish thought and values.

Equating the common table at home used for food with the holy Altar of the Temple, the Talmud (*TB Berakhot 55a*) says that both have the power to affect atonement: When the table at home is used in sanctity and equity; when the food is *kasher* ("fit" ritually and morally; prepared by dietary rules and obtained by honest means); prayers are recited and words of Torah exchanged around the table - and most importantly, when the needy are invited to partake and enjoy - then the table is sacred and atones as the Altar. So remarks *Targum Yerushalmi* (on Exodus 40:6):

When the prosperous spread a table for the poor, it becomes an Altar and brings appeasement and forgiveness.

Thus, the Table, which symbolizes wealth and success, is linked with the Altar, which symbolizes sacrifice and giving.

Scriptural reading for Saturday morning, March 19:
VAYAKHEL-PEKUDE: Exodus 35:1-40:38; 12:1-20
HAFTARAH: Ezekiel 45:16-46:18
Rosh Chodesh Nisan: Sunday, March 20

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BEZALEL, builder of the Mishkan, Israel's wandering sanctuary in the Sinai desert, personified the Jewish genius of artistry. His name means: "Under the shadow (protection) of God." His art is described as divinely inspired; his craftsmanship, an expression of wisdom and insight. Art can be used or misused in various ways. It can be idolatrous, a form of worshipping nature and beauty. It can be blasphemous, a way of eliciting lust and violence. And it can be holy, a mode of devotion to and adoration of God. Imbued with the awareness of the Divine, an artist may create with a sense of marvel to the glory of divinity permeating all existence. Creativity in itself is a spark of divinity. In a sense, every true artist is a "Bezalel," living, feeling and creating "under the shadow - inspiration and authorization - of God." God Himself is described in Jewish tradition as the greatest "Tzayar" (painter) - the cosmological Artist.

Thought of the Week

BEZALEL BEN URI, builder of the Mishkan, is introduced in Torah with extraordinary warmth, in laudatory verses first spoken by God to Moses (Ex. 31:2-11), and then repeated by Moses to Israel (35:30-35):

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 wisdom, understanding, and skill for all types of craft, and has inspired him to design work in gold, silver and copper, to cut stones for setting, and carve wood, for any kind of designer's art . . .

This loving evaluation of Bezalel, stated twice before and after the meticulous detail of the design itself, reveals Torah's appreciation for artistic excellence. Bezalel means "He who is under the 'shadow' of God" -- His protection and inspiration.