Judaism as Art
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This week, I did something I rarely do: I read a novel.

I love to read, and I read a ton, but my reading of choice is almost always nonfiction. That's because I like to learn when I read. I generally don't read novels because, well, it feels like time I could be using to learn something new.

But I'm changing my mind about that, mainly because of a conversation we had in our Thursday morning prayer-book class a couple weeks ago. As usual, the congregants in our class challenge my basic assumptions and help me see things differently. That particular morning, I gained an insight from our discussion that reoriented my self-perception.

I have always thought of myself as an intellectual person: In elementary school, my favorite activity was the math team; in college, I majored in finance; I went into politics with an interest in public policy, and I chose the rabbinate because of Judaism's emphasis on rigorous study.

But in that class a couple weeks ago, I finally admitted something to myself that I have resisted for a long time: I am an artist.

I say that because I am a religious professional, and religion is an art, not a science.

The philosopher Michel Foucault taught that the category in which we place something tells us how to make sense of it. If you tell me that religion is a science, I will take that to mean that it conforms to the rules and features of other things we call "science." For example, I will expect that it is logical, that it is empirically provable, and that by reading its literature, I will learn factual information.

Religion fails as a science. The Torah is not a history book, and the siddur is not an encyclopedia.

But, if I tell you that religion is an art, how does that change your expectations?

Art is not provable but, then again, that's a nonsensical statement because provability has nothing to do with art. We look to art to inspire us, to make us think and feel, to move us, and to stir our imagination. Art speaks to a different part of our being than science does.

In preparation for this sermon, I asked Len Schiff to share something with me that he finds meaningful about the power of art. He gave me an essay by Ursula Le Guin, a prolific author of fantasy and science fiction. Here's what she says:

"Fantasy and science fiction in their very conception offer alternatives to the reader's present, actual world. Young people in general welcome this kind of story because in their vigor and eagerness for experience they welcome alternatives, possibilities, change. [But] having come to fear even the imagination of true change, many adults refuse all imaginative literature, priding themselves on seeing nothing beyond what they already know, or think they know."1

This was me for much of my life; until at one point in rabbinic school, one of my classmates, a former symphony conductor, told me he thought I should visit an art museum. He meant that my view of the world

was too narrow, too rigid, too black and white. And he knew that art could help change that, if I were open to it.

This is the purpose of religion, specifically our form of liberal Judaism. We look to Judaism not to regulate our lives with rules but to help us see "beyond what we already know, or think we know."

For the first time, I see this expressed in the Torah itself, in our parashah this week, Parashat T'rumah.

The parashah is all about the design of the *mishkan*, the portable sanctuary the Israelites carried through the wilderness, the dwelling place of God. I'm not going to lie: It's a boring read. The poles have to be this high, the perimeter of the ark has to be this many cubits, gold here, dolphin skin there.

But Carol Meyers, a Duke University archaeologist and biblical scholar writing in the *URJ Women's Torah Commentary*, explains that "The wealth of seemingly exact details in the instructions for the Tabernacle belies the fact that such a structure probably never existed."2

That's the kicker: the palace we are told to build for God is a fantasy, an artistic creation of our spiritual imagination. To think of it as an historical physical construct is to diminish it, to miss the point entirely. The *mishkan*—the place where God's presence dwells in its purest form—is, to borrow Le Guin's term, a "utopia."

Imagining utopias, says Le Guin, helps us "enlarge the field of social possibility and moral understanding. … We cannot demand that anyone try to attain justice and freedom who has not had a chance to imagine them as attainable."

This is what religion offers us, if we put it in the right category. It invites us to imagine a self, a life, a world that isn't yet, but *could be* if we aspire to it and work toward it.

We should not read Parashat T'rumah as engineers studying the dimensions of a building, nor should we read the Torah, the siddur, or Jewish religious literature as scientists or historians.

Instead, think of it this way: When we come to a Jewish text or worship service, we are stepping into the world of art, and our encounter with it should invite the same kind of experience as reading a great novel, or looking at a painting, or listening to a piece of music:

What do you think about when you read this text or say this prayer? What does it remind you of? What emotions does it stir up in you, and why are you feeling those things? What do they tell you about yourself, about the world, about life? What do you feel moved to do in response to it?

This is what we do in our Miriam & Moses Center for Pluralistic Adult Jewish Learning: When we interpret text, follow associations, and weave stories and moral insights together from each other's ideas, we are making art.

This is the kind of experience we try to create in our Shabbat services, too. Here's how Stephanie puts it:

"I use whatever tools I have at my disposal to convey a message as accurately as possible—and then open myself to express that message as honestly and vulnerably as possible in front of the congregation," she says.

“The hope is that someone in the congregation will recognize the humanity in that message and it will remind them of the humanity we all share. They will feel heard, seen, comforted, consoled, cheered, or whatever it is they need.”

That’s the power of Judaism as art. And that, we hope, is what we offer you whenever you walk through our doors.

1 Ursula K. LeGuin, “A War Without End,” A War Without End by Ursula K. Le Guin | Verso Books
2 Carol Meyers, “Parashat Terumah: Introduction,” In: *A Women’s Torah Commentary*, https://www.sefaria.org/The_Torah%3B_A_Women's_Commentary%2C_Parashah_Introductions%2C_Terumah.3?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en