

Images of God

Alexandra Wright

Images, I must suppose, have their use or they would not have been so popular. (It makes little difference whether they are pictures and statues outside the mind or imaginative constructions within.) To me, however, their danger is more obvious. Images of the Holy easily become holy images – sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast.¹

[God] has no attribute, no image, and no form. It is like the sea. The waters that come from the sea cannot be grasped, nor do they have form. But when the waters of the sea spread themselves over a vessel, which is the earth, an image is formed . . . But God has no image or form, and there is no vessel there with which to grasp Him, or to gain any knowledge of Him. Consequently, they said of Him, 'Do not enquire into what is too wonderful for you, and do not probe into what is concealed from you'.²

THERE ARE NO IMAGES OF GOD IN JUDAISM – no pictorial images that represent the essence of God. The second commandment appears to prohibit the sculpting of any form in the image of God: 'You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth' (Exod 20:4 and Deut 5:8). But precisely what was it that this commandment prohibited? The interdiction is followed by the qualification: 'You shall not bow down to them or serve them' (verse 5), suggesting that it is not figurative or symbolic representation in itself that is disallowed, but idolatry. Images are not to be used as vehicles for worship – 'Cursed be anyone who makes an idol or casts an image, anything abhorrent to the Eternal One, the work of an artisan, and sets it up in secret' (Deut 28:15). God is incomparable, eternal, unique, incorporeal, commanding obedience to the commandments and zealous devotion:

Thus says the Eternal One, the Sovereign of Israel . . . I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me . . . All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit . . .

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Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good? Look, all its devotees shall be put to shame; the artisans too are merely human. (Isai 44:6–7, 9–11)

The second commandment need not be interpreted as proscribing symbolic or figurative representation of other religious subjects. The artist, par excellence, of the Torah, Bezalel son of Uri, designer of the Tabernacle – which incorporated representations of the cherubim – is expressly singled out by God and ‘endowed with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge of every kind of craft’ (Exod 35:30–31).

A contrast has sometimes been drawn between the rich iconographical traditions of Christianity and the artistic austerity of the synagogue. Yet the ancient world of the Middle East has revealed some surprising treasures in the Jewish catacombs at Beth Shearim, for example, and in the rare discovery in 1932 of the Dura-Europos Synagogue on the western banks of the River Euphrates. Frescoes betray an artistic enjoyment in creating narrative art, illustrating biblical narratives and their ancient commentaries, the *midrash*, as well as symbolic representation of the Tabernacle among other things. Far from interpreting the second commandment literally, certain rabbinic authorities took a tolerant view and permitted the use of painting or mosaics in synagogues.³

There were periods of opposition to any form of aesthetic enhancement in the synagogue or home, but these were not widespread. Indeed, the enhancement of a *mitzvah* (commandment) known as *hiddur-mitzvah* was encouraged. To perform the commandment of *havdalah* (separation of the Sabbath and the weekday) at the end of the Sabbath with an elegantly created spice box, or to craft an exquisite *mezuzah* (holder containing the words of the *Shema* placed on the doorposts of Jewish homes) was worthy of praise. But these images were not objects of veneration. The *mezuzah* does not represent God. It is a reminder of the words, ‘Hear O Israel, the Eternal One is our God, the Eternal God is One’ (Deut 6:4), contained within it. The tabernacle was a sacred space, where the sacrificial offerings would be burnt by the priests as tokens of thanksgiving, praise or confession to God. Even the cloud that rested on the Tabernacle when the Israelites were stationary is no more than a symbol from God, indicating when they should rest or recommence their journey (Num 9:15). Solomon’s Temple was a larger and more ornate sacred space, but its appurtenances were never objects of worship. As the king himself says in the prayer of dedication at the opening of the Temple: ‘But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even

heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built' (1 Kg 8:27).

Conveying a sense of God's presence

If, then, there are no pictorial images to represent God in Judaism, how does Jewish tradition convey something of the presence of God or the essence of God's existence? For C. S. Lewis, the Incarnation is ironically the 'supreme example' of God's iconoclasm, and, at the same time, one of the marks of God's presence. Yet if God, so to speak, is not in creation⁴ – whether the Tabernacle or the Temple or in the natural world – how do we learn to recognize God's attributes? How do we learn to speak of God? 'How do we learn to use the word "God" correctly?'⁵

Judaism conveys the idea of God through a varied and rich tapestry of verbal imagery found in the Bible and *aggadah* (rabbinic commentary on the Hebrew Bible) as well as through the more rational writings of medieval Jewish philosophy and contemporary theology. In the Hebrew Bible, God is portrayed as mediating the Divine Will through language. As the Talmud states in various places in the name of Rabbi Ishmael, 'The Torah speaks in human language'. The Bible does conceive of God in anthropomorphic terms, which the *targumim* (Aramaic translations) and medieval philosophers are anxious to explain in non-anthropomorphic terms, but it is not God's essence with which the text is concerned, but with the way God works dynamically in history and with the delivering, receiving and practice of the commandments. 'Then the Eternal One spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice' (Deut 4:12), declaring to Israel the covenant and charging them to observe the commandments written on the two tablets of stone. The New Testament, for its own purposes, contrasts the revelation at Mount Sinai with the 'new covenant', mediated by Jesus.

It sometimes seems that underlying this view is the belief that the law was a burden, delivered in stern justice, rather than in love. Yet what could be further from the truth? The poet of Psalm 119 sees God gently guiding him and yearns for the teaching of the commandments – they are his delight because he loves them, they comfort him and bring him blessing, without them his soul languishes. Similarly, Psalm 19 prefaces its celebration of the Torah, not with an image of God, but with creation engaging in a glorious narrative about God's greatness: 'The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night

declares knowledge' (Ps 19:2-3/1-2). The act of creation is a speechless drama in which no sound is heard, 'yet their music⁶ goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world' (verse 5/4). If nature is evidence of God as Creator, these words which begin voiceless, but are given sound when they are received, testify to God as a compassionate, life-giving, enlightening Giver of the Torah, sweetening the lips of the people with honey (Ps 19: 8-10/7-10).

If God can only be 'seen' when evidence of the Divine Presence is present – creation or the Torah – what shall we make of passages such as Exodus 24:10-11(9-10): 'Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness'; or Numbers 12:8: 'With him [Moses] I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Eternal One'; or Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 33, where God tells him he cannot see God's face but will see God's 'back'? In the first passage, there is no description of God, only the setting of God's presence, and the use of the Hebrew particle *k-* suggests only an approximate likeness of heaven. The medieval commentator Rashbam draws an analogy with the covenant between God and Abraham.⁷ In Genesis 15:7 God 'projects a visual manifestation of His Presence by appearing as "a flaming torch which passed between those pieces"'.⁸ Maimonides (1135-1204) understands these passages to refer to 'intellectual perception of God, and by no means to perception with the eye as in its literal meaning'.⁹ When Moses is described as beholding 'the form of the Eternal One', we should understand that he 'comprehends the true essence of God'.¹⁰ Moses asks to see God's 'face', that is, he desires to gain higher knowledge of God, but God withholds this from him, granting him the 'knowledge of the acts attributed to God which . . . are considered to be different and separate attributes of the Supreme'. Maimonides draws our attention to the Aramaic translation of these passages and many others in which the translator, Onkelos, distracts us from a phrase which might give a corporeal sense of God by inserting a *nomen regens*, 'the Glory' or 'the Word' or the 'Divine Presence' before the word 'God', which removes any doubt in the mind of the interpreter that God's appearance is in any way corporeal. He ends his discussion on Exodus 24 with these words:

You may take [the] grand scene altogether as a prophetic vision, and the whole occurrence as a mental operation, and consider that what Moses sought, what was withheld from him, and what he attained were

things perceived by the intellect without the use of the senses . . . or you may assume that in addition there was a certain ocular perception of a material object, the sight of which would assist intellectual perception . . . You may also assume that in addition there was a perception of sound, and that there was a voice which passed before him, and was undoubtedly something material.¹¹

Carrying out the commandments

This interpretation contrasts strikingly with a passage in the Babylonian Talmud (*Berakhot 7a*) which asks, what did Moses see when God's hand was removed and he saw God's 'back'? A third-century teacher in Palestine responds: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, showed Moses the knot of the *tefillin*' (the phylacteries). In this startling passage, based on a verse in Psalm 56:7, God is portrayed as a man at prayer. Not only does God wear the garments of prayer, but God prays. And what does he pray? 'May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice' (*Berakhot 7a*). Similar to another passage where it is related of God's 'day', that he studies the Torah, sits in judgement on the world, sits and feeds the whole world and plays with Leviathan or sits and teaches Torah to the small children (Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah 3b*), this tells us not what God is or does, but what values are central to rabbinic teaching – namely learning, the balance of justice and mercy, concern with all living things and the expectation of the days of the Messiah, symbolized by the mythical sea-monster, Leviathan. The coming of the messianic age is guaranteed, implies the Talmud, by the teaching of small children.¹²

These are not images of God, but projections of rabbinic values. The passages are not for meditation, but for study, with the express purpose of carrying out the commandments of Judaism: study for its own sake, righteousness in our conduct, feeding the poor and clothing the naked, doing justice in the world. It is true that some mystical traditions used the creation narrative and the vision of Ezekiel as a focus for meditation, but even here God is not identified with creation or with the chariot *per se*. These are seen as attributes, vessels in which God's form is perceived according to our own limited understanding and knowledge.

In feminist discussion about the nature of God, the use of male imagery which has persisted for so long is constantly under evaluation

in modern prayer books and scholarly articles. Though we know that God is neither male nor female, to conceive of God using feminine images is not a new phenomenon. Among many other biblical images which have found their way into contemporary prayer books is the image of God as a mother comforting her child or as a woman nursing her child. The overriding image of God through the liturgy is an image of dominance and transcendent power. Modern prayer books have attempted to redress that balance by introducing gender-inclusive language and by neutralizing the hierarchical pattern which sets God as a kind of feudal overlord of creation.

Humanity in God's image

Humanity is created in God's image, but too often we create God in our image – a figure of political authority, morally endorsing those values that we place at the centre of our world, shunning those that are anathema to us. But the truth is that we are only created in God's image in that we are free to create or destroy as the Creator is free. A midrash from the mystical tradition expresses it in this way:

The whole work of Creation was done by these three [the water, the earth and the heavens] . . . When the sixth day came they were all prepared to create, as on the other days. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: No single one of you can make this creature, as you have made the other creatures that have been formed up till now. But you must all join together, and I shall be with you, and we shall make man; for you cannot make him on your own. You three will be responsible for the body, and I shall be responsible for the soul . . . with [the part] that he will receive from Me, namely the soul, he will leave the affairs of the world, and his yearning and desire will be for the holy, supernal things.¹³

The metaphorical images of God that are used throughout the Bible or Talmud, in mystical language or in liturgical use are immensely varied. Jews do not feel bound to only one of these expressions of God's attributes. Our own experience and the way in which we relate to God personally determines how we speak of God. Judaism does not require a pictorial iconography to convey God's presence to humanity. The language of the Hebrew Bible, *aggadah*, the liturgy, medieval philosophy and theology allow God to be transcendent and immanent, a God of justice and mercy, a universal God and a God who is deeply personal. The first words that are learnt by a Jewish child are the central

affirmation of Jewish belief: 'Hear O Israel, the Eternal One is our God, the Eternal God is One' (Deut 6:4). These are also the final words to be recited before one's death. There is no image conveyed by these words. No picture to tell us what is meant by oneness or uniqueness or unity. For Jews, what is important is the teaching that proceeds from the command of the One who is the Ultimate Reality, a teaching that governs the daily life of each individual.

Alexandra Wright read English and Medieval Arts at university and studied at Leo Baeck College in London where she was ordained in 1986. She was Associate Rabbi at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, London from 1986–1989 and is currently the Rabbi of Radlett and Bushey Reform Synagogue, Hertfordshire. She has lectured in Hebrew at Leo Baeck College where she is now co-ordinator of the rabbinic tutors. She has contributed to *Hear our voice* (1994) and *Taking up the timbrel* (due to be published Spring 2000), both edited by Sybil Sheridan, and to *Themes and issues in Judaism*, edited by Seith Kunin. She is married and has two children.

NOTES

1 C. S. Lewis, *A grief observed* (London, 1978), p 52.

2 Isaiah Tishby, *The wisdom of the Zohar* (Oxford University Press, 1989), Volume I, Part 1:6, p 265, quoting the Babylonian Talmud *Hagigah* 13a in the name of Ben Sira.

3 Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, *Ancient Jewish art* (Neuchâtel, 1985), pp 10–11. 'This permissive attitude, already quite accepted during Roman times, is certainly at the origin of the similar position adopted by the leaders of the medieval European communities. Whenever they were asked whether images (then commonly occurring in the synagogues on stained glass and in manuscripts) were lawful or not, their objections were inspired rather by fear that the faithful would be distracted, than by concern for the literal observance of the Second Commandment. Opposition on the grounds of religious principle prevailed during certain periods, particularly when society itself was in accord. Such was the case with Jews living in Byzantium during the iconoclastic period or of Jews in Islamic-ruled regions who were subject to the religious doctrines of Islam.

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his theological commentary to the beginning of Genesis writes: 'God loves his work, he loves it in its own being, for the creature honours the Creator. But still God does not recognize himself in his work; he sees his work but he does not see himself. "To see oneself" means as it were "to behold one's face in a mirror", "to see oneself in a likeness". How shall this come to pass? God remains totally the Creator. His work lies at his feet. How shall he find himself in his work? The work does not resemble the Creator, it is not his image. It is the form of his command' (*Creation and fall* (New York, 1964), p 33).

5 I am very grateful for Norman Solomon's essay, 'Picturing God', in *Themes and issues in Judaism* (London, 2000), pp 136–165, and would refer the reader to his very full treatment of the subject.

6 The Hebrew word for 'their music' is *kavvam* from *kav* ('line'). Is the poet perhaps punning on the Hebrew word *yikkavu* (Genesis 1:9): 'And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered

together into one place”’? In Psalm 19, it would appear as though the poet repeats the order of creation found in Genesis 1 – the heavens, the firmament, the gathering together of the waters. 7 Rabbinic commentary on passages in the Bible are not concerned with the historical or literary context of those verses. *Aggadah* or *midrash* (the ‘searching out’ for deeper and hidden meanings of the biblical text) aimed to draw out certain teachings that were central to rabbinic life. These commentaries tell us more about the rabbis and the period in which they lived following the destruction of the Second Temple than the biblical text itself.

8 Nahum M. Sarna, *Torah commentary on Exodus* (JPS, 1991), p 153.

9 *Guide for the perplexed*, trans M. Friedlaender, Part I, Chapter IV.

10 *Ibid.*, Chapter III.

11 *Ibid.*, Chapter XXI.

12 Norman Solomon, pp 141–142.

13 *The wisdom of the Zohar*, Part IV:2, pp 779–780.