

SEASONS OF THE MOON

THE MONTHS OF KISLEV / TEVET

Kislev - Tevet 5760 / November 10, 1999 - January 7, 2000

PRE-MADONNA

Why are artists the most selfish people in the world? The petulant behavior of rock stars is legion. The solitary painter locked in his garret creating his masterpiece with uneaten meals piling up around him is a well-worn cliché. Bad temper and tantrums are not only tolerated but may be a yardstick of talent.

The *maestro* throwing down his baton and walking off the rehearsal stage after reducing the 15-year old Korean first violin to tears is a predictable scene in the life of many a symphony orchestra.

“Behaving like a *prima donna*” (literally the “first lady” of the opera) has found its way into the vernacular indicating arrogance and high-handedness.

Why are artists so unbearably selfish? And why do we let them get away with it? More. Why do we give their behavior our tacit approval?

An artist is like G-d. An artist starts off with a blank piece of paper and creates a universe. Being an artist is the closest thing there is to *creatio ex nihilo* — creation from nothing. The universe of the artist is entirely at the whim of its creator. He can draw and he can erase. He can form and he can fold. He can create worlds and he can destroy them. The sky can be blue — or gray. The next note could go up or down. And who says that all this has to be the way it is? Me. The artist.

Art For Art's Sake

TRUTH AND BEAUTY

If there's one nation in the world that symbolizes Art with a capital A, it's Ancient Greece. The Ancient Greeks quite literally wrote the book on aesthetics, poetics, dramatics, and several other artistic disciplines. Why was it the Greeks who epitomize Art more than any other people?

The wellspring of the art of Greece lies not in their geographic location nor their demographic or racial make-up; it comes from a verse in the Torah: “May G-d extend Yafet, but he will dwell in the tents of Shem.” Thus it was that Noah blessed Yafet, his eldest son, not only with expanded borders, but with expanded intellectual, artistic, and aesthetic capabilities as well. However, the blessing of beauty comes with a condition — that Yafet will “dwell in the tents of Shem.” Why did Noah stipulate that Yafet would be blessed with beauty provided that “he will dwell in the tents of Shem?”

Yafet comes from the same root in Hebrew as *yaffe*, “beauty.” Yafet's fourth son was Yavan. Yavan is the Hebrew name for Greece.

The Jewish People are the descendants of Shem. *Shem* means “name.” In the Holy Tongue, the name of something defines its essence. In all other languages, a name is a convention. Meanings of words evolve so society can operate. If I order a steak in a restaurant and the waiter brings me a



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ART FOR ART'S SAKE *continued*

screwdriver, the restaurant is not destined for great things. In all other languages, names are conventional — but they don't define essence. In the Holy Tongue, the name of something is essential, its connection to its spiritual root.

Yafet, Beauty, Art finds its correct place in the scheme of things when it “dwells in the tents of Shem,” when it expresses essence, when it reveals the truth of existence. Truth is Beauty, but Beauty may not be true. For when *Yafet* leaves the tents of Torah, when he leaves the world of essence, of Shem, and focuses on himself, then art becomes narcissistic, corrupt and corrupting.

SEVENTY SEALED ROOMS

Several key events that epitomize the relationship between Jerusalem and Athens, between Shem and *Yafet*, take place in the months of *Kislev* and *Tevet*. The festival of Chanuka which starts on the 25th of *Kislev* and finishes in the first days of *Tevet* is the most conspicuous. However, a few days later, there is a day of great sadness for the Jewish People which reveals another side to the symbiotic relationship between Shem and *Yafet*.

On the eighth of *Tevet*, three days of spiritual darkness descended on the world when King Ptolemy took 70 great Torah sages, locked them in separate cubicles and ordered them to translate the Torah into Greek. The lion that had been roaming free was locked in a cage. The Torah, the blue-print of all existence, was caged in a foreign tongue. It became just another book on a shelf. Now the nations of the world could come and say “Oh yes, we know your Torah. We have it on the shelves of our university library. It's over there in the philosophy/religion/new age section.”

What was the symbolism of putting the Sages into separate cubicles? A cubicle is like a tent. When Ptolemy the Greek took the Sages of Israel and locked them into separate cubicles, it signified Shem being made to sit in the “tent” of *Yafet*. When the Torah was translated into Greek it was made to sit in the halls of academia, the tent of *Yafet*, just like any other book. Essence was made to serve form. The internal world was made the servant of the external. The world was turned upside down.

ART/NOTart

*Who says that
red
is nicer than blue.
I do.*

ART FOR G-D'S SAKE

There would be religious art from the Greeks and the descendants of Greece. There would be a Donatello, a Michelangelo, a Bach, a Handel. But religion would only serve art — not the reverse. Religion would be the paymaster of the artist and even his raw material — but G-d would no longer be the focus of his striving. Man would not be serving G-d any more. G-d would be “made” to serve Man.

That was what Ptolemy the Greek was doing when he locked the Sages of Israel into cubicles. The natural order was reversed.

In the Greek view of the world, G-d in not the center of the world. Man is the center. Man's intellect, his ability to perceive G-d, “defines” G-d's “limits.” What I can't think, doesn't exist.

The Jewish People, the descendants of Shem, proclaim to the world that the mind of Man does not contain nor restrain G-d. G-d does not sit in the tent of Man.

THE BEAUTY OF TRUTH

The Jewish definition of beauty is that which reveals essence. It is that which hints to a reality beyond the hollow circle of the mind of Man.

The word for ugly in Hebrew is *achur*, which has another meaning — “opaque.” Anything that obscures the inside is ugly, however “beautiful” it might be. Nothing can be truly beautiful unless it expresses essence. In Hebrew, the word for face is *panim* which is spelled identically to the word *p'nim* which means “inside.” The face is the only part of the human being where you can see the inside of a person, where you can see the intellect dominating the physical.

“Truth” with a capital “T” is beyond the mind of Man. When we look at the beauty of this world, it whispers to us that there is a transcendent existence — an ultimate Truth. The true artist takes the awe of existence and turns it into notes, into paint, into words. Art is not a world where Man may rule as a tyrant. Art is but the most moving reflection of the world beyond.

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