Scripture Envisioned: The Bible through the Eyes of Rembrandt

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In 1914 Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who would later become the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, visited the National Gallery in London. His aesthetic sensibilities were aroused by the artistic grandeur he encountered. He was particularly transfixed by Rembrandt's paintings:

When I lived in London I used to visit the National Gallery and my favorite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a *Tzadik* (a righteous person) Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt's works, they reminded me of the legend about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light it was so strong and pellucid, that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous when the Messiah should come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that was originally created by God Almighty. (*Jewish Chronicle of London*, September 13, 1935)

Rembrandt van Rijn, a master of *chiaroscuro* (light and shadow), infused his portraits with a transcendental vitality. While this is true of all of his portraits it is certainly the case with his paintings of biblical scenes. Rembrandt's penchant for the Bible is reflected in the number of biblical portraits, etchings, and drawings he created. In the field of portraiture in general Rembrandt left 400 paintings, 75 etchings, and only a few drawings. This may be contrasted with the 160 paintings, 80 etchings, and more than 600 drawings of biblical subjects that have come down to us.

Rembrandt's prodigious activity in this field reflects his love of and intimate knowledge of the Bible. Rembrandt's biblical scenes are not merely an exercise in historical painting; they contain his

own passion and intensity as well as a remarkable degree of his innovative biblical interpretation.

A picture is worth a thousand words. And in the case of Rembrandt this adage can be multiplied exponentially. I would like to survey two of Rembrandt's biblical paintings in order to gain insight into the biblical text through his artistic and interpretative grandeur. It is often the case that something in his painting will stir our souls to consider aspects of the story we hadn't considered before. Other times we will note something glaringly absent from the canvas, which focuses our attention on a dimension of the biblical narrative that is of great importance. In either case these pictures serve as a catalyst for profound analysis and speculation on the Book of Books—the Bible. "Scripture Envisioned: The Bible Through the Eyes of Rembrandt" (http://www.judaicaru.org/rembrandt_eng/) is a website that contains an impressive exhibit of Rembrandt's etchings and portraits of biblical stories. It also contains classical rabbinic, medieval, and modern exegesis, which complement, supplement, and enhance the illustrations on view.
Allow me to share with you the etiology of the site, which began with a class about the prophet Jeremiah, which I taught in the Kehilath Jeshurun Synagogue in Manhattan. In the audience sat George S. Blumenthal, the founder of COJS: The Center for On-Line Jewish Studies. At the end of the class he approached me and said, "Bryna, you brought the Bible to life. I want you to do that through Rembrandt's pictures of biblical scenes." Given that my first love is Bible, and that Rembrandt is my favorite artist, I was delighted. George procured permission from museums throughout the world to use the pictures and commissioned Ardon Bar Hama to digitize and design the website. He had the vision and magnanimity to have the site translated into Hebrew (http://www.judaicaru.org/rembrandt_heb/) translated by Sara Fuchs, and designed by Natan Bar; and into Russian (http://www.judaicaru.org/rembrandt_rus/) translated by Dr. Yona Shnaider, designed by Natan Bar.

All of this was done over ten years ago. George Blumenthal was the trailblazer, digitizing this site, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Aleppo Codex, and other great treasures as a gift to the world (www.cojs.org).

Let us begin with the painting in the London National Gallery, *Belshazzar's Feast,* which may have inspired Rabbi Kook to make his grandiloquent statement about the numinous light of creation that Rembrandt brought into the world.

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Belshazzar's Feast and the Writing on the Wall

Chapter five of the Book of Daniel describes the royal banquet of King Belshazzar, the son of Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian emperor who had conquered Jerusalem, exiled its people, destroyed the Temple, and carried off its sacred vessels in triumph. Interestingly, the Bible portrays him as eventually acknowledging his hubris and humbling himself, as he says, before the "Ever-Living One, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion and whose kingdom endures throughout the generations. All the inhabitants of the earth are of no account…" (Daniel 4:31–32). Belshazzar, his son, was nowhere near as humble. In the midst of a gala banquet he ordered the sacred vessels to be brought to his palace. In addition to profaning them by using them as common drinking cups, he added sacrilege by toasting and praising his pagan gods. As punishment for glorifying lifeless gods, the live hand of God writes a cryptic message on the palace wall:

> But you Belshazzar his son, did not humble yourself although you knew all this. You exalted yourself against the Lord of Heaven and had the vessels of His temple brought to you. You and your nobles, your consorts and your concubines drank

> wine from them and praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear, or understand; but the God who controls your life breath and every move you make—Him you did not glorify! He therefore made the hand appear and caused the writing that is inscribed: *Mene Mene Tekel U-pharsin*… (Daniel 5:22–25).

Mene Mene Tekel U-pharsin

Overcome by terror, Belshazzar called for his soothsayers. No one could interpret the inscription. The Queen suggested that they check with Daniel, one of the exiles from Jerusalem, who was summoned to solve the riddle. Daniel asserts that whereas his father Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself before the Lord, Belshazzar's impious desecration of the sacred vessels had called forth immediate punishment. The cryptograms, reduced to three, are to be deciphered as follows:

- *Mene*—numbered; God numbered your reign and ended it.
- *Tekel*—weighed; you have been weighed in the balance and have been found wanting.
- *Pharsin*—divided; your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

The story ends with Daniel being given the insignia of nobility and Belshazzar being killed that very night.

Rembrandt has captured the startled expression of the king and his guests. The artist has remained true to the biblical text insofar as only the king beholds the inscription, while the others drop their vessels and gaze at the king. It is noteworthy that he has painted the words of the cryptic message in Hebrew letters, but has written them up and down rather than from right to left, offering an inventive explanation for why they could not be deciphered. This explanation is found in the Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 22a in the name of R. Samuel, and was probably known to Rembrandt by way of his Jewish friend R. Menashe b. Israel (see explanation of *David Defeats Goliath* on the website cited above).

Holy Vessels

The story itself and Rembrandt's dramatic depiction raise and highlight the basic question, what is the purpose of *kelei kodesh*, the holy vessels?

The notion of royal vessels belonging to the King of Kings seems somewhat primitive and anthropomorphic. Does the Master of the Universe need a set of tableware? The Rabbis grappled with this question:

What was the purpose of...all of the holy vessels? The Jewish people said to the Holy One Blessed Be He: Master of the Universe, the kings of the nations have a palace, a table, a candelabrum, incense burners...these are appurtenances of kingship. Every king needs them, and You are our king, our savior, our redeemer; shouldn't You have these royal paraphernalia so that the entire world will know that You are king? He said to them, My sons, you are flesh and blood, and so you have need of all this, but I have not need since I do not eat or drink, I need no light as my servants attest, since the sun and the moon illuminate the world and I shine my light upon them. I shall watch over you well in the merit of your fathers. (*Midrash Aggadah*, Exodus 27, Buber ed.)

The conclusion is clear: the vessels serve human needs, not divine ones. But precisely because humans depend on material forms as symbols, their misuse of such symbols—as in the case of Belshazzar—brings on catastrophe.

Man's Creative Offerings

We still are left to ponder why in the context of the biblical story of Belshazzar's feast we find such a stern and inexorable condemnation? What was it about the use of the holy vessels that signaled the fall of the curtain on the Babylonian empire?

In the description of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem, the Bible makes mention of the following bit of information:

> King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon marched against him [Jehoiachin]; he bound him in fetters to convey him to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar also brought some vessels of the House of the Lord to Babylon, and set them in his palace. (2 Chronicles 36:7)

In reaction to this, Hananiah son of Azzur, a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, proclaims:

> Thus said the Lord of Hosts the God of Israel: I hereby break the yoke of the king of Babylon. In two years I will restore to this place all the vessels of the House of the Lord which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took from this place and brought to Babylon. And I will bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the Judean exiles who went to Babylon—declares the Lord. Yes, I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. (Jeremiah 28:1–4)

The order in his description is telling; first vessels, then the king, then the people. The captured vessels signify a perceived defeat of the God of Judah. The symbolic value of these vessels was immense. That would explain why Belshazzar's misuse of them was so provocative, and induced the wrath of God. Biblical exegesis adds an additional observation about sacred vessels to explain why they played such a critical role in the story of Belshazzar. The Bible tells us that humans were created in the image of God. God's role as a creator is reflected in the creativity of humanity. In Genesis, six days of creation were followed by the creation of the day of rest, the Sabbath. In the Book of Exodus we learn of six other days that were followed by a special seventh day:

> The Presence of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai, and the cloud hid it for six days. On the seventh day, He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud… "Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him. And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple…And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." (Exodus 24:15–16, 25:1–9)

On the seventh day, Moses was instructed regarding the construction of the Sanctuary and its vessels. The parallel is so striking that the Rabbis determined that the kinds of labor prohibited on the Sabbath were all those acts necessary for the construction and furnishing of the Sanctuary in the desert. The royal privilege to create, to pursue aesthetic perfection and technical virtuosity, found expression in the crafting of the sacred vessels for use in God's sanctuaries. The vessels themselves were a form of offering. They were not merely receptacles for libations and sacrificial offering; they were inherently holy, having been consecrated to God by humans, as an expression of their divine spark—their *tzelem Elokim*—and as a form of thanksgiving.

Therefore, when Belshazzar defiled the sacred temple vessels through pagan use, he violated the relationship of the people of Israel with their ancestral God. It was this act that signaled an important turning point in Jewish history. When Belshazzar dislodged the spirit from the vessels where it was hiding, it openly revealed itself on the whitewashed wall from where it could never be erased,

portending the end of the Babylonian Empire and the return of the vessels and the people to where they belonged.
Using Rembrandt's portrait as springboard for teaching the story serves as a *keli,* an educational tool, for learning about *kelim.* The power of the visual and this interpretative approach move us from the Book of Daniel to the Books of Chronicles and Jeremiah and provide the teacher the opportunity to introduce and integrate rabbinic exegesis.

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Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem

Let's now take a look at Rembrandt's magnificent biblical portrait, *Jeremiah lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem,* which inspired the birth of the website.
As noted above, in the year 586 b.c.e., the Babylonian tyrant Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city of Jerusalem, destroyed its Temple, and carried off its people into exile. Among the handful of those who remained was the prophet Jeremiah of Anatoth. In this portrait, Jeremiah is mourning the destruction of Jerusalem, alone with a few remaining holy vessels from the Temple, as the people of the city have been taken into exile by their Babylonian conquerors. Behind him, the ruined Temple smolders. The prophet sits desolate and lost in thought, leaving the viewer wondering what he is contemplating.
Is he focused upon the catastrophe of a people bereft of their sacred Temple and banished from their land? Or is he crushed not by the effect of the destruction but rather by its cause—the fatal breach of trust and loyalty toward the Lord God of Israel? Jeremiah's sadness might be a result of the fact that as a prophet, he strove with all his might to prevent that breach—and tragically failed in his attempt.
Rembrandt depicts Jeremiah leaning on the Bible, on his immortal words of prophecy. Does this symbolize the obsolescence of his words, which have fallen on deaf ears? Does it perhaps suggest that the book is closed to others, and now serves to support the prophet alone? Note that the prophet is leaning on his left hand. His right hand is not visible, reminiscent of the biblical verse:

> If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour. (Psalms 137:5–6)

Lingering Agony

> It is difficult to conceive of any situation more painful than that of a great man, condemned to watch the lingering agony of an exhausted country, to tend it during the alternate fits of stupefaction and raving which preceded its dissolution and to see the symptoms of vitality disappear one by one, till nothing is left but coldness, darkness and corruption. (*Critical and Historical Essays: The Complete Writings of Lord Macaulay*: "Machiavelli" (1827), pp. 117–118)

These words of Lord Macaulay could be used aptly to sum up the life of the prophet Jeremiah. For 40 years the prophet Jeremiah labored long and hard to prevent the destruction of Jerusalem and the holy Temple. He railed incessantly against the evil deeds of the people of Judah. What was it about their conduct that warranted such a terrible fate?

Crime and Punishment

Jeremiah, the prophet of the destruction of the first Temple, preached against the sins of idolatry, sexual misconduct, and bloodshed, but in his reproach he went beyond mere diatribes. He exposed the essence of these sins, exhibiting his keen grasp of the psychological motivation behind them. One classic example of Jeremiah's searing insight into the psyche of the sinner is his famous Temple Sermon:

> Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Mend your ways and your actions, and I will let you dwell in this place. Don't put your trust in illusions and say, "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these buildings." No! If you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between one man and another; if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan and the widow; if you do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place; if you do not follow other gods, to your own hurt then only will I let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers for all time. See, you are relying on illusions that are of no avail. Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely, and sacrifice to Baal, and follow other gods whom you have not experienced, and then come and stand before Me in this House which bears My name and say, "We are safe?" to do all these abhorrent things! Do you consider this House, which bears My name, to be a den of thieves? (Jeremiah 7:1–15)

The Temple Fallacy

It was not unusual for a biblical prophet to preach against sins of inhumanity toward strangers, orphans, and widows; idolatry; theft; adultery; and murder. What is special about Jeremiah is his deep understanding of the psychology of sin, and how he exposed the fallacy into which the people had fallen. They had deluded themselves into thinking that perfunctory rituals would atone for their sins. They assured themselves that the Temple of the Lord would provide them with asylum and expiation. It is from this malady that they suffer. Professor Nehama Leibowitz explains:

> What is the psychological incentive for idol worship? What causes people in all periods of history to place their trust in something external which is not contingent upon their actions but is confined to a particular space or time rather than to depend upon the moral imperative which is required of them?...In every generation people ignore God's will and His everyday requirements, preferring to seek a cheap form of atonement which lies outside of their quotidian lives. This atonement absolves them of performing radical changes in their life style.

Jeremiah accuses his constituency of abusing the Temple and relying upon its cultic efficacy rather than their own religious rehabilitation. Holiness, he insists, is not even in the holiest of buildings; it too shall be razed. Divine presence will only dwell in the midst of the people if they are able to find the spark of the holiness within themselves, and use it to ignite warmth and concern for others.
These paintings, two shining examples of the hidden light in Rembrandt's inspired work, provide a glimpse of the site, "Scripture Envisioned: The Bible through the Eyes of Rembrandt." Rembrandt's masterpieces help unravel the mysteries of the Bible and the Bible, in turn, illuminates his magnificent art, the one in soul-stirring conversation (*sihat nefesh*) with the other.
Let us conclude with an intriguing insight of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, regarding the designer of the vessels of the Mishkan, Bezalel (literally, *be'zal –El*—"in the shadow of God"), which sheds new light

on Rembrandt's technique of *chiaroscuro*.

. . . The light of God, The Omnipresent, Blessed be He, is heavenly wisdom and absolute justice. However, the aesthetic sensibility of the pure soul [that is] blessed with divine knowledge, creativity, skill and design, (Exodus 35:32–35) is in effect what **shadow** is to **light**, when they are together, they complete vision and the perception of reality in its entirety.
(*En Ayah* on *Berakhot* 55a, my translation)