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Visual Images in Medieval Jewish Culture before the Age of Art

Kalman P. Bland

Historical research is akin to the exploration of alien, often impassible, territory: in both cases, investigators require expert help with logistics and navigation. On this expedition, I have relied on an unusual combination of suppliers and navigators, all of them splendid: Hans Belting, Franz Kafka and the *Ikhwān al-ṣafā*, the Brethren of Purity. Belting, our contemporary, is a quintessential art historian. Kafka is a quintessential modernist. The Brethren are quintessential premodernists. Their differences are striking. Kafka (1883–1924) was Jewish, lived in Prague and wrote celebrated fictions in German. The Brethren were Arabophone Muslims, cosmopolitan philosophers and intellectuals, tending towards Ismā'ili inflected Shiite loyalties. They flourished in the tenth century, living most probably in Iraq, in the southern city of Basra (see El-Bizri 2008; Callataÿ 2005; Hamdani 2007). Although striking, their differences are inconsequential compared to their commonalities. Like Kafka, the author of unforgettable animal fables, including *The Metamorphosis*, 'A Report to an Academy', and 'Investigations of a Dog', the Brethren were masters of the genre. Witness their unforgettable fable *The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn* (Goodman and McGregor 2009).

Kafka and the Brethren share a second trait: they were keen observers of visual art. They share an exquisite sensitivity to painting and sculpture with Hans Belting, author of *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. In the post-Reformation 'era of art', according to Belting, Christian images ceased being 'receptacles of the holy'. They were 'divested of aura', subordinated to 'the written word and interpretations of the preachers' and 'made subject to the general laws of nature, including optics'. Detached from the transcendence embodied in saintly beings and things, images ultimately devolved, becoming products of artistic 'imagination' and 'manifestations of art' (Belting 1994: 14, 458–9, 470–1). In Belting's pre-Reformation era of images, by contrast, paintings, mosaics, sculptures and architecture, at least the Christian ones, were understood to be agents exuding sacred power rather than mere expressions of an idea or displays of creative genius. In Belting's scheme of eras, where do Kafka and the Brethren fit?

Evidence of Kafka's engagement with the visual arts can be gathered from a book of personal recollections, *Conversations with Kafka*, written by his young friend, Gustav Janouch. One day, Janouch showed Kafka a portrait painted by the Czech artist Vladimir Sychra (1903–63). Janouch reports that Kafka was 'delighted with the portrait', and declared several times, 'The drawing is wonderful. It is filled with truth.' Janouch asked, 'Do you mean that it is true to life as a photograph is?' Kafka replied: 'What are you thinking of? Nothing can be so deceiving as a photograph. Truth, after all, is an affair of the heart. One can get at it only through art' (Janouch 1953: 87). Kafka's dual apotheosis of the human heart and art as the exclusive means of achieving truth exemplifies the post-Reformation, disenchanted, secularizing 'era of art'.

On yet another occasion, Janouch and Kafka were discussing illustrations drawn by George Grosz. Gazing upon one of them, Kafka remarked, 'This is the familiar view of Capital[ism] – the fat man in a top hat squatting on the money of the poor.' Noticing that the image did not depict the fat capitalist as a victim, Kafka was dissatisfied. He observed that 'the picture is not complete. For that reason it is not good. Capitalism is a system of relationships, which go from inside to out, from outside to in, from above to below, from below to above. Everything is relative, everything is in chains. Capitalism is a condition both of the world and of the soul.' Janouch challenged Kafka, 'Then how would you picture it?' Doctor Kafka shrugged his shoulders and smiled sadly. 'I don't know. In any case we Jews are not painters. We cannot depict things statically. We see them always in transition, in movement, as change. We are story tellers' (Janouch 1953: 86–7).¹

Consider the set of visual images supplied here (Figures 6.1a–c).² They depict creation. They appear on the opening pages of an illuminated medieval Hebrew manuscript, in this case a Haggadah, the liturgical handbook meant for domestic use containing instructions, hymns, homilies, rabbinic prayers and biblical recitations for conducting the Passover Seder meal. Using Kafka's pronouncements as a framework for seeing them, what might we observe? Cognitive dissonance, anomaly and antinomy spring to mind. Since the language of the manuscript is liturgical, rabbinic Hebrew and the images read from right to left, the most likely provenance is Jewish. A modicum of research confirms the hypothesis: The illuminations were produced in late-fourteenth-century Spain, most likely commissioned by a wealthy Jewish patron living in the kingdom of Aragon, probably Barcelona, not too far removed from the cultural orbit of Provence. In 1492, the manuscript, like many of its kindred, accompanied its owners into exile. It may have spent some time in Venice before settling permanently in the Ottoman Empire, in the region surrounding the town called Sarajevo, from which it eventually took its name and where it survived first the Nazis and then more recent battles between Bosnia and Serbia (Roth 1962: 7–16).³ Facts, however, do not easily trump preconceptions. It is a foregone conclusion that the painter was not Jewish, because, as Kafka declared, 'we Jews are not painters'. The same holds true for the patron who commissioned the Sarajevo Haggadah or used it to celebrate Passover. He or she is unlikely to have been recognizably Jewish, because, as Kafka asserted, visual images are 'static', as static as this figure resting on a bench, and therefore inimical to Jewish habits of mind that prefer telling stories with words, habits which presumably accord with the biblical injunction against idolatrous depictions of the sacred and conform to the

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 6.1a Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit and being expelled from the garden (Genesis 3). Miniatures from the Sarajevo Haggadah, ca. 1350 CE, courtesy of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo.

Figure 6.1b Two pictures concluding the story of the flood and Noah (Genesis 6–8). Miniatures from the Sarajevo Haggadah, ca. 1350 CE, courtesy of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo.

Figure 6.1c Opening the story of Joseph and his brothers; Joseph having a dream and telling it to his father (Genesis 37). Miniatures from the Sarajevo Haggadah, ca. 1350 CE, courtesy of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo.

traditional Jewish way of seeing 'things always in transition, in movement, as change'.⁴ The difficulty of reconciling the obvious Jewish provenance of the illuminations with their Kafka-esque unJewishness is insurmountable. The difficulty can simply be made to disappear if we jettison Kafka's modernist preconceptions and replace them with the critical framework provided by the tenth-century Islamic Brethren of Purity. In their regime of seeing, the perception of visual art is emphatically non-modern, thoroughly enchanting and altogether occult.

The charming title of the chapter containing the Brethren's discussion of images reads as follows (see Callataÿ and Halfants 2011: 87):

On the quiddity of magic (*sihr*); incantations; the evil eye; enticements for the training of animals; intuition; and spells; on the modalities of the actions of talismans; on what the demons of the earth, the jinn, the devils, the angels are; and on the means of their deeds and mutual influences. The objective is to clearly expound that in the world there are autonomous and imperceptible agents that are called spiritual beings.

The exposition of these topics dwells upon the ubiquitous science of astrology and its practical application in the production of talismans. The Brethren are cosmopolitan; they avoid polemics; they evince no awareness of a distinctive family of Abrahamic religions composed of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; they do not privilege monotheism over polytheism. The first subsection of the chapter treats the nexus connecting magic and visual artefacts as documented by the ancient Greek writings of Plato. Subsequent sections first address the legitimacy of magic according to the Qur'an and authentic Islamic tradition and then 'magic according to the Jews and Christians', as found in scripture, the Torah. The most detailed subsection is devoted to 'magic among the Sabi'ans, Ḥarrānians, and Ḥanifs', especially to the construction and decoration of their numerous temples, where they worship the stars and initiate new members into the esoteric mysteries of their cult.

In the subsection on 'magic according to the Jews and Christians', we are reminded of the tension between the prophet Samuel and King Saul, who in the midst of his battles with the Philistines desperately consulted a sorceress to conjure the spirit of the lately departed Samuel. We are also reminded of the episode reported in Genesis 30 where Jacob profits immensely from peeling the bark from the branches of almond and other trees and displaying the speckled branches to the breeding flocks to influence the colour of their offspring. We are told the story of 'Esau, son of Isaac, and of the son of Nimrod, son of Canaan'. The story features a description of the 'shirt (*qamīṣ*) of Adam [...] on which were to be seen images (*ṣūwar*) of every creature of God Most High: wild beasts, birds and sea animals. When Adam, God bless him and grant him salvation, wished to hunt one of the wild beasts or other creatures, he used to put his hand on its image (*ṣūratihī*) on the shirt, and that game remained bewildered, stopped and blind until [Adam] had come to it and taken it.' With the advice of his father, Isaac, Esau tricked the son of Nimrod out of ownership of Adam's shirt, so that whenever 'Esau wished to hunt some wild beast, he put his hand on its image on the shirt, and it stopped, blind, without seeing, until Esau would come and take it' (Callataÿ and

Halfants 2011: 107–9 [English]; 32–6 [Arabic]). Note that Esau and Adam did not utter a spell, but they did place a physical hand on a material image, an icon, if you will.

With the Brethren in mind, we can temporarily escape the straitjacket of modern preconceptions and take a fresh look at the medieval Hebrew illuminations. As we did with Kafka, we can draw some provisional conclusions. First: The texts do not imply that the Brethren considered their talismans capable of doing what Christians believed icons and relics were capable of doing, but the texts do allow us to catch a glimpse of the phenomenological similarity. In one tradition, material artefacts, like icons, are receptacles and agents efficaciously mediating a cosmic, Christocentric power; in the other tradition, material artefacts, like talismans, are receptacles and agents efficaciously mediating an alternative cosmic power, astrological. This too is noteworthy: The Brethren affirmed that the Jews share their belief in the potency of visual images; the Brethren also assumed that the production and use of visual images are venerable and commonplace among the Jews, as venerable and commonplace as the production and use of visual images among other ethnic and religious communities; and finally, the Brethren did not notice that Jews consider words superior to images or regard storytelling more perfect than picture-making in representing reality or in bending reality to do humanity's will. Perhaps the Brethren did not notice this hierarchy of art forms because it was non-existent in their day. Thinking with the Brethren, then, we have no reason to doubt that the artist who painted the Sarajevo Haggadah and the patrons who commissioned and used it were Jews. As for the illuminated Haggadah itself, it no longer appears to be egregiously unorthodox or anomalous, since it was native in a culture that had normalized visual images and put them gainfully to work ever since biblical times.

The Brethren of Purity have therefore brought us closer to medieval Jewish culture than Kafka was able to do. To approach even closer, one might replace the mindset of the Brethren with a critical framework built out of the raw materials supplied by the same medieval Jewish culture that produced, put to use and preserved the illuminated Hebrew manuscripts: Jewish intellectual reverberations of astrology, talismans and theurgy (Bland 2000: 130–8; 144–8). What did medieval Jews think paintings were and what work did they expect those images to do?

Medieval rabbinic law, anchored in the bedrock of Talmudic precedent, the *halakhah*, provides the most authoritative answers. Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (1220–93) was pre-eminent among the illustrious jurists of the Rhine valley. He wrote the following responsum:

I was asked concerning the propriety of those who illuminate their holiday prayerbooks with pictures of birds and animals. I replied: It seems to me that they certainly are not behaving properly, for while they gaze upon those pictures they are not directing their hearts exclusively to their Father in heaven. Nevertheless, in this case, there is no trespass against the biblical prohibition, 'You shall not make either a sculpture or any image' [Exod. 20.3]. [...] Furthermore, there are no grounds for even a precautionary suspicion [of idolatry] regarding the pictures, since they are merely patches of pigment lacking sufficient tangible materiality. We only suspect idolatry with regard to a protruding, engraved seal, but not with

an intaglio seal, and all the more so in this case where [the image in prayerbooks] is neither protruding nor intaglio. [The image in a prayerbook] is merely flat pigment. Moreover it seems to me that a Jew is permitted to produce images using all sorts of pigment, without thereby [encroaching] on the prohibition [against idolatry] [...] since the only forbidden image is the painted sculpture of a complete frontal view.⁵

To the question of illuminations and their ontological status, Jewish law replies: permissible 'patches of pigment'.⁶ Patches of flat pigment, unlike icons, do not invite veneration; they cannot weep, shed blood if stabbed, or miraculously heal the sick, blind and crippled. To the related question of what actions paintings perform, rabbinic law replies: an undesirable, but otherwise non-sinful, innocuous distraction from devoted prayer.

Complementing Rabbi Meir's judgement that images impinge on the psyche is the opinion of another authoritative master of rabbinic law, Moses ben Maimon, physician as well as philosopher, known to the West as Maimonides (1138–1204). The distinguished art historian Joseph Leo Koerner considered him an 'iconophobe' (Koerner 2004: 209; 465, n. 36). Uncharacteristically, Koerner missed the mark. In his ethical treatise, *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides explained, writing in Judaeo-Arabic, that a person whose priorities are properly aligned

will not trouble himself with adorning his walls with golden carving or with decorating his garments with golden embroidery, unless it be for the purpose of enlivening his soul, thus restoring it to health, or of banishing sickness from it, so that it become clear and pure, in proper condition to master the sciences. [...] It is therefore permitted to make designs and pictures on houses, utensils and garments for the soul grows weary and thought passes away as a result of constantly looking at ugly things [...] the soul must occupy itself with refreshing the senses by looking at beautiful carvings and pictures so that its weariness be removed. (Gorfinkle 1912: 72 [English]; 32–3 [Hebrew])

Almost two hundred years later, this passage was cited verbatim by Isaac ben Moses Halevi, known in Catalan as Profiat Duran, an Iberian Jewish scholar specializing in Hebrew biblical grammar, who offered pedagogic advice based on the utilitarian, hedonistic, psychotherapeutic theory of art endorsed by Maimonides:

One should always study from the most beautiful and lovely of books, whose script is attractive and whose pages are glorious both in ornamentation and binding. One's places of study [...] ought to be beautifully decorated buildings, for by increasing one's love of learning and the pleasure one takes in it, memory is improved. Moreover the studious beholding of lovely shapes, beautiful designs and pictures, expands the soul, stimulates it, and strengthens its faculties. [...] Just as God took delight in adorning his Temple with gold, silver, precious stones and treasure, so too should it be regarding his sacred books, especially this holy book [the Bible]. [...]⁷

This theory of art was equally welcome in medieval Islamic thought (Rosenthal 1992: 265–6), and it enjoyed an afterlife in early modern Jewish thought, for instance in Baruch Spinoza:

Certainly nothing but grim and gloomy superstition forbids enjoyment [...] the more we are affected with pleasure, the more we pass to state of greater perfection; that is, the more we necessarily participate in the divine nature. [...] It is [...] the part of a wise man to refresh and invigorate himself in moderation with good food and drink, as also with perfumes, with the beauty of blossoming plants, with dress, music, sporting activities, theatres and the like [...].⁸

The persistence and popularity of this aesthetic understanding of visual art allow for the flourish of a final example. It begins with an Arabic text, *Ādāb al-filāsifa*, *Gnomic Aphorisms of the Philosophers*, composed by Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq (809–73), a famous translator of Greek philosophy and science into Syriac and Arabic, a Nestorian Christian, who flourished in Baghdad, capital of the cosmopolitan Abbasid empire. The text itself deals with the practice of ancient Greek philosophers to gather in small groups in specially designated, luxuriously decorated buildings to swap wisdom.⁹ Almost four-hundred years later, Ḥunayn's revised Arabic text was translated with remarkable accuracy into Hebrew by Yehudah al-Ḥarizi, under the title *Sefer musare ha-pilosofim*, *The Book of Gnomic Aphorisms of the Philosophers*. Ḥarizi was a gifted poet, a brilliant translator, a champion of Hebrew *belles-lettres*. Born in Toledo in 1165, capital of Castile, he travelled throughout Christian Spain, settled as an adult in Provence, and returned to the life of an itinerant, traversing Islamic North Africa, continuing eastward from Cairo into Israel, Syria and Iraq, making his living as a translator and poet. He died in Aleppo, in 1225. He was culturally ambidextrous, a linguistic amphibian, writing Hebrew prose and poetry for Jews, Arabic poetry for Jews and Muslims. He was on the lookout for wealthy and generous patrons, constantly.¹⁰ Here is a translation of Ḥarizi's medieval Hebrew rendering of Ḥunayn's late ancient Arabic discussion of the practice of ancient Greek philosophers to gather in small groups in specially designated, luxuriously decorated buildings to swap wisdom:

Ḥananyah said, 'the foundational reason for these gatherings was because the kings of Greece and others like them used to educate their children in wisdom and philosophy, civilizing them (*meyassrim*) with various sorts of moral and cultural refinement (*musar*). They would construct for them buildings covered in gold and decorated with all sorts of images (*tziyyurim*), indeed making these images to refresh and expand (*leharvviah*) their hearts, in order that their eyes would desire to see them. So it was that the lads would diligently and studiously remain (*shoqdim*) in the halls of images to learn the lessons of moral and cultural refinement because of the images that were present there. Similarly, the Jews make ornamental designs and engravings (*pittuḥim*) in their halls (*hekhalehem*), the Christians draw images (*tziyyurim*) in their churches, while the Ishmaelites [i.e. Muslims] decorate with ornament their houses of worship. All of this is meant to refresh and expand their souls by their means and to engage their hearts with the [decorations, ornaments, and images] [...]'¹¹

Once again, we encounter medieval Islamic and Jewish engagement with the role of visual art in facilitating the pleasures of *paideia* or *Bildung* and their concomitant, humanistic refusal to privilege monotheism over polytheism.

With this array of medieval Jewish legal and philosophic texts in mind, let's take one last look at the illuminations from Sarajevo. Our taxonomy is deficient. What we see cannot be classified with icons before the era of art or images during the era of art. Neither can the illuminations be classified with the disempowered, disenchanted, didactic art of the Reformation itself, analysed so elegantly and cogently by Joseph Leo Koerner. The illuminations from Sarajevo appear to enjoy a life of their own, not slavishly bound to the text they accompany. That they show rather than tell is their virtue. They are unburdened by the responsibilities of formulating verbal arguments or teaching unequivocal lessons in doctrine. They are not understood to be objects to be studied, categorically unlike sacred texts or scientific treatises to be mastered. The images are primarily charged to be fascinating, eye-catching and beautiful. We may be witnessing a medieval Jewish form of play and entertainment, a flirtation with exuberant irrationality, a counterpart to what Meyer Schapiro (1977: 1–27) expertly called the 'aesthetic attitude in Romanesque [Christian] art'. Like their Romanesque counterparts, the illuminations reveal a medieval Jewish method for tickling the fancy, refreshing the sensorium and taking delight in the surprises of visual experience. Gazing upon the images, we behold a medieval Jewish device for making Jewish history, learning and ritual practice memorable, if not enjoyable. And finally, perhaps we also encounter a medieval Jewish stratagem in Christian Europe for simultaneously performing two contradictory tasks: on the one hand, showing commonality with all the other cultures that produce and use visual art, and on the other hand, repudiating with subtle mockery the misguided visual habits and errant beliefs of their non-Jewish neighbours.