

[Send. March 17, 1960]

By the Grace of G-d
12th of Adar, 5720
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Mr. and Mrs. Ernest and Erna Weill
886 Alpine Drive
Teaneck, N. J.

Greeting and Blessing:

This is to acknowledge receipt of your letter of February 28, with further reference to the subject of sculpture in accord with the Torah, Torath Chayyim. You raise the question whether the traditional interpretation of the Torah should still be accepted, or should one rather go back to the source and seek another interpretation.

I believe I touched upon this topic during our conversation, but I will attempt to clarify it.

Even a cursory glance at the Torah (I mean the Pentateuch) leads one to the inevitable conclusion that together with it there came down to us also a broader explanation or interpretation, without which it would often be meaningless. Take, for example, the commandment of putting on Tefillin, which is given in the Torah in the words, "And it shall be for a sign upon thy hand and for frontlets between thine eyes." Obviously, accompanying this written precept there was an oral explanation as to how this precept was to be fulfilled in practice, pertaining to the phylacteries themselves, to the manner of their being put on, etc. Similarly in regard to all matters of the Written Torah. Moreover, considering the profound wisdom contained in the Torah, which is conceded by all, it is surely unthinkable that it would prescribe precepts the application of which was a mystery.

From this inevitable conclusion, namely, that the precepts given briefly in the Written Torah were simultaneously expanded orally, there follows necessarily also the conclusion that those who first received this oral explanation transmitted it to their children, and the latter to theirs, and so on, from generation to generation.

Since, further, it is an historical fact that there has never been a break in Jewish history, and that despite the dispersion and exile (or because of it), there has always been a continuity in Jewish history, with many hundreds of thousands of Jews always surviving and carrying on the Jewish tradition, the authenticity of it must be accepted without a doubt,

for it would contradict all common sense to suppose that anyone could have radically changed the tradition under such circumstances.

Now, to the point raised in your letter. If it is true, as stated above, that the Written Law was accompanied by an expanded Oral Law, it certainly stands to reason ~~that~~ with greater force that the Ten Commandments, which marked the inauguration of the Torah, were adequately explained. Thus when the Torah states, "Thou shalt not make unto thyself other gods... any graven image..." the people were certainly told unequivocally what was meant by these words. All the more so, having just been liberated from Egypt, where idolatry was so widespread, and where so many different cults and idols were worshipped, idols and images of all description, in sculpture, in drawing, relief, etc., representing forms of humans, animals, plants, insects, etc., as we now know from papyri, excavations, and so on. In other words, precisely in this field there would be ^{the most} detailed instructions as to what was prohibited and what was not.

From all that has been said above, it is clear that the traditional interpretation of the Torah must be accepted as authentic, and if some detail of it seems incomprehensible, we may inquire after an explanation of it, but it is no ground for considering the interpretation itself as faulty.

I emphasize this point because the subject under discussion is an art which is connected with the basic prohibition of idolatry, and which, on the other hand, if utilized in way which accords with the Torah, could have a strong impact on the emotional world of the sensitive beholder and inspire him. At the same time, it is a well-known principle of our Living Torah, that the end does not justify the means. Since the end of the art of sculpture is to evoke the highest emotions, it can best be achieved if and when the means and methods correspond in the maximum degree to the Torah.

My experience in similar situations, though not in the field of sculpture, has been to convince me that where the individuals in question have resolved to be guided by the Torah, they found their road much easier than anticipated and it has brought them more peace and harmony than they thought possible.

Hoping to hear good news from you, and wishing you a Happy Purim,

With blessing