

# HALOCHOSCOPE

**This week's question:**

**Is there any problem with pictures of animals on the Eastern wall of a *shul*? If they are on the *parochess* or decorating a poster in front of the *amud*, should one turn away to bow?**

**The issues:**

- A) Pictures and images of animals
- B) *Davening* and bowing in front of pictures
- C) Beautifying a *shul* with artwork

**A) Pictures and images**

The biggest issues applying to images and figurines relate to the various *mitzvos* and levels of *avoda zara*, idolatry. These include *lo yihyeh lecha elohim acheirim ...*, *lo saase lecha pesel (graven image) ...*, *lo sishtachave lahem ...*, that forbid making the image to worship it, and include all types of image; *elohei maseicha (molten image) lo saase ...*, *elohei kesef ...*, *lo saasu lachem elilim*, apply to making images with no intent to worship them; *lo saasun iti ...*, do not make 'with Me' (Hashem), forbids making images of celestial bodies that appear to be working 'with' Hashem. These include images of 'angels', the sun, moon, stars or constellations. Such images may not be made even if they will never be worshiped. *Iti* may be read '*osi*', Myself, referring to an 'image of Hashem – human, created in the image of G-d'. One exception applies, when images of the moon are made to study the laws of sanctification of the new moon.

In terms of benefit or possession, there are levels of images. Most extreme is an icon or image belonging to, and worshiped by, a Jew. It must be totally destroyed. An idol belonging to a gentile can be denounced by him, and it may then be benefited from. Then there are icons made by Jews for gentile use, but not yet worshiped. Then there are icons made by the gentile but not yet worshiped. Then there are figures of unknown background. They represent common idols, but it is not known whether they were actually worshiped. Then come figures or images that represent celestial bodies. These include models and mythological representations, particularly the sun, moon and *drakon*, a snake like creature [possibly dragon, or a convoluted pagan reference to the *nachash* in *Beraishis*.] Other figures could be idols, but are not automatically assumed to be so. Worshiping any figure, even of a tiny worm, immediately forbids it. Images forbidden when there is no intent to worship them include four faces mentioned in a vision of *Yechezkel*, man, lion, ox and eagle. The simple meaning of this is a four-faced angel, but they might also be forbidden separately. Imagined or simplistic interpretations of images of angels are also forbidden. It is also forbidden to make images of spirits or of the 'zodiac' signs. Certain patterns or formations of stones, including the cross, are considered *avoda zara*, as are certain popular pictures such as a 'mother and baby'. According to most poskim, figures of animals that are not made to be worshiped are permitted.

The main prohibitions mention graven and molten images. These are free-standing and are totally shaped from solid material. Embossed surfaces, and, to a lesser degree, engraved surfaces, pose their own problems. Pictures or ink drawings are not considered embossed by most poskim. However, some poskim are concerned with the slightly raised surface of the paint, specifically in the case of glazed porcelain. In addition, they raise the issue with regard to embroidered figures on cloth, where the embroidery is indeed raised. Other poskim defend the common practice to depict 'lions and snakes' in *shuls*, and even on the *aron hakodesh*. However, if the image is solid rather than on a larger surface, the poskim disapprove of them. Keeping an image in one's possession that will never be worshiped is forbidden due to *chashad*, arousing suspicion. However, in a public place, such as a *shul*, most poskim maintain that there is no issue of suspicion. [See Yisro 20:3 20, etc. Rosh hashana 24b Sanhedrin 107b Avoda Zara 42b-43b, Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 90:23, YD 141:1-7, commentaries. Darkei Teshuva 2 3 5 9 35-48 etc.]

### **B) Bowing and davening in front of pictures**

Bowing to a friend is considered greeting. To a superior, it symbolizes respect. Bowing to a king signifies submission. Bowing to Hashem is a form of *avoda*, service. Bowing to an *avoda zara* image is considered a form of acceptance and service. It is the typical form of violation of the most serious commandment in the Torah. *Chashad* of bowing to *avoda zara* must be avoided. Therefore, if one drops something in front of an *avoda zara*, he may not stoop to pick it up in a manner that leads onlookers to think he is bowing. Rather, he should turn around, facing away from the idol or statue, or reach down in a manner that shows he is not bowing.

Bowing to any picture can raise the specter of *avoda zara*. Many poskim forbid images of animals in a *shul* (see above) particularly on the wall toward which people bow. It is also forbidden to *daven* facing a picture, a mirror, or even glass, if it reflects the image of the person *davening*. The concern is *chashad* of bowing to one's own reflection. While images that are not solid or embossed do not raise the specter of idols, intrinsically, one should not *daven* facing them. This applies specifically to cloth items, including the *parochess*, and to painted walls. The reasons for this are not merely due to the bowing aspect. The images can also distract one from concentrating properly on his *tefillah*.

For this reason, in addition to the bowing problem, the poskim maintain that one should not make any pictorial decorations at eye level in a *shul*. All such decorations must be above the normal height of a person. In many *shuls*, the *aron hakodesh* is raised up a few steps. Thus, if there are embroidered decorations, they are automatically above average height. At this height there is no concern that people will look at them and be distracted. Furthermore, one should really direct his eyes downwards while *davening*. However, there is still a concern that at eye level one will be attracted to the pictures. Evidently, placing them above average height also avoids the bowing issue.

When one chooses a room in his home to *daven* in, he should ideally use a room that has no pictures on the walls. Apparently, when *davening* at home one might not face one particular wall, except for *shemone esrai*. Therefore, any pictures could serve as a distraction. The poskim discuss a traveler *davening* in a non-Jewish inn. There are two issues. The presence of other travelers will certainly contribute to his being distracted and interrupted. The inn is also presumed to be full of icons or other religious items. While

entering the inn without *davening* there is not considered problematic, *davening* there raises two issues. We find that *Moshe* left the city of *Paroh* before *davening*. He could not *daven* to Hashem in a city full of idols. The Talmud also records, *Rebi* refused to enter the home of a gentile while wearing his *tefillin*. If one can, he should find a corner where he will not be disturbed. If the eastern wall has icons hanging, he should turn to face another wall. Two things seem to arise from this ruling. First, it does not seem to depend on the height that the icons are hanging. Since they are worshiped, or at least represent serious idolatry, one may not even be seen to be bowing to them above eye level. Second, it mentions specifically idols, implying that pictures, which usually abound on walls, do not pose the same problem. Indeed, the poskim rule that if there are pictures in one's line of vision, he should close his eyes or avert his gaze. This avoids distraction, and does not seem to be as serious when it comes to bowing. Perhaps this is because the venue is considered public, and in public certain types of *chashad* are mitigated. [The Talmud's example of bending down to pick up a coin in front of an idol, seems to apply anywhere at any time. Perhaps a real idol or statue raises more *chashad*.]

The poskim also discuss a decorated sign, often hung in front of the *amud*. The main issue raised is whether the holy Names written there are given due respect. They say that if it is protected from abuse, it is permitted. There seems to be no discussion on the fact that there are pictures on the sign. Furthermore, an acceptable way to protect it from abuse is to cover it with glass. There is no subsequent discussion about the reflection of the *chazan*. On the first point, the designs need not have pictures, but might be decorative in other ways. Nonetheless, since the issue of pictures is not raised, it seems that when they are blended in with the sign, and the sign serves a positive purpose, the pictures are not so objectionable. On the second point, it seems that the glass will not always reflect. It might be at an angle or height that prevents this.

In summary, the poskim generally frown on or forbid solid or embossed images of animals, especially lions, in a *shul*. Pictures above eye level are tolerated, even on the Eastern wall. If the pictures are at eye level, one should avoid seeing them by shutting his eyes or looking downwards. [See Avoda Zara 12a 40b etc., Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 1:1 90:23 949, commentaries. Tzedaka Umishpat 11:14, notes.]

### **C) Beautifying a shul with artwork**

Beautifying a *shul* is included in the general concept of *hidur mitzvah*, beautifying a *mitzvah*. This includes performing the *mitzvah* in a beautiful way, and beautifying the articles used for *mitzvos*. In specific cases, there are predetermined levels of *hidur*. For example, some say that the requirement to score the parchment of a *sefer torah* is *hidur mitzvah*. Some of the requirements for a kosher *esrog* are based on *hadar*, that is considered part of *hidur* by some poskim. On *Chanukah*, there are prescribed formula for *mehadrin*, those who perform *mitzvos* beautifully. In most instances, *hidur* is relative. This means that while one could easily fulfill the *mitzvah* with a minimum requirement, one should make an effort to beautify it. For example, one could purchase a more beautiful *esrog*, or use better quality wicks and oil for *Chanukah*. Some *hidur* cases apply to the actual article, while others apply to decorating it from outside, such as decorating *bikurim*, the first fruit offering. There is some discussion whether *hidur mitzvah* is a separate obligation or becomes incorporated in the performance of the *mitzvah* itself. The

poskim debate whether *hidur mitzvah* is a Scriptural concept, as it is based on a verse, 'this is my G-d, and I will beautify Him!' or whether it is Rabbinical, linked to the verse.

In addition to *hidur mitzvah*, the verse that one should do anything for the sake of Hashem implies that when doing anything for His sake it should be in the finest manner. When it comes to building a *shul*, the poskim cite an additional requirement. Since a *shul* is like a home, one building it applies his personal standards. One should build a *shul* more beautifully than his own home. This is based on the offerings one brings in the *Bais Hamikdash*, that should be the best of his flocks. 'All the fattest should go to Hashem!'

On the other side, there is an issue of *bizuy mitzvah*, one may not do anything that disgraces the *mitzvah*. This is also considered Scriptural, based on covering blood of slaughtered birds and undomesticated animals. When it comes to matters of holiness, such as *shul* items, there is an additional concept of *hakrivaihu na lefechasecha*. This refers to making offerings to Hashem that are too sub-standard to be offered to a human governor. It is at least *divrei kabala*, quasi-Scriptural, and disqualifies the items, rather than making them low quality. This excludes two types of item from being used in a *shul*, though they are both permissible for mundane use. If the item had become filthy and was cleaned or filtered, it should not be used in *shul*. If an item was prepared for use in a gentile religious function, it is considered filthy for use by a *shul*. Based on this consideration, some poskim discuss whether certain types of picture are considered *hidur*, or the opposite. Pictures that could be somewhat associated with idolatry by technicalities, that might be permitted at home for mundane usage, might be forbidden in *shul*. In actuality, the provision of *hakrivaihu* is based on an attitude toward *shul*. Adopting an attitude of trying to get away cheaply, either by using sub-standard, even filtered clean, or by using something that was purchased as a surplus from a church, fits this criterion. Buying something specially for a *shul*, albeit with other problems, should not constitute *hakrivaihu*. However, it might still be considered misguided *hidur*, and therefore defeat its own purpose. Some poskim caution against imitating the decorations in other religions' houses of worship. This can involve the Scriptural prohibition of *chukos hagoy*, forbidding copying gentile religious practices. [See Shabbos 21a-22b 133a Sukah 22b 48b 50a Baba Basra 97b Menachos 41a etc., Poskim. Tur Sh Ar OC 23:21 YD 248:8 etc., commentaries. Tzedaka Umishpat 11: n30 32. Sdei Chemed, Klalaim, Zayin, 12.]

*On the Parsha ... kayin brought .. Hevel also brought .. Hashem listened to Hevel .. But to kayin and to his offering He did not listen, and kayin was angry and his face fell ... [4:5-6]* Why does the Torah mention that the listening in the reverse order of the offerings? Chazal say that *Kayin* offered an inferior offering, consisting of flax. Why was the *korban* rejected, as though it was *pasul*, invalid? Chazal derive from here the aforementioned requirement that one must offer his best, better than his personal high standards. This was shown by the contrast between *Kayin* and *Hevel*. Hashem waited for *Hevel's korban* to show *Kayin* his mistake. In light of our discussion, *Kayin's* attitude was also cheap, making his *korban* invalid due to *hakrivaihu*.

♠ In honor and in memory of my mother, Yitele bas R. Shimon a'h, Henriette Silver. ♠

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