

## Episode 19 Terumah

Have you ever had the strange experience of visiting the Louvre Museum in Paris? I suspect that many of you have. The Louvre has the most famous painting in the world—Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. I've been fortunate enough to see the real *Mona Lisa* about five or six times in my life. Yet, for those of you who have not seen it in real life, here is a spoiler alert: it's not that big of a deal. It looks more or less exactly the same as the thousands of other times you've seen it: on refrigerator magnets, in books, on coffee mugs, etcetera. It is a bit smaller than you might expect, but other than that, it basically looks the same. Not only that, but it's actually hard to see. It is behind bulletproof glass which has a distracting glare. And typically, there are crowds, sometimes of more than one-hundred people, gathering around the painting, pushing up against each other to get the best possible view of the great masterpiece.

Let's say a bit more about these crowds. I've always found these crowds around the *Mona Lisa* a bit disturbing, a bit humorous, and a bit inspiring. But mainly disturbing. The reasons why this is a disturbing and fascinating phenomenon are almost too many to name. Why do people come all over the world to see a painting they could see an even bigger version of by just ordering a poster on Amazon? Why do people go to such great effort to see the *Mona Lisa* but are often totally ignorant about what makes it a great painting? Why is it that the *Mona Lisa* receives hundreds of visitors every hour, but da Vinci's other masterpieces, equally stunning, and just about fifty meters down the hall, have an average of two or three onlookers? But I've saved the most confounding question for last. Why do people, when they finally get to see the *Mona Lisa* with their own eyes, decide to whip out their camera and take a picture of it? Especially when they can just go down to the Louvre gift shop and buy a postcard or a keychain or a calendar or a t-shirt, which will have that same image in one-thousand times better quality and can also serve as a souvenir.

To help us answer these questions, let us turn to the philosophy of Walter Benjamin. Who was Walter Benjamin? Walter Benjamin was born to an assimilated Jewish family in Berlin in 1892. He is yet of these secular, intellectual, fully assimilated German-Jews, who we've been hearing a lot about in the Schrift lately. He hailed from the same milieu as, say, Freud, Mahler, Kafka, and Marx. Benjamin was not exactly an author, and not exactly a philosopher, but more of what we might call a cultural critic. He acutely observed how European life in the early twentieth century was like nothing which had ever been experienced before. There was now mass transit, electric light, photography, film, the telephone, modern advertising, and so forth. He wrote essays on art, literature, urban life, religion, and psychology, but he did so often in a creative, aphoristic, indirect style. He wanted to show people how unparalleled European life had become in the early twentieth century, but he did not force conclusions on them, but rather, through enigmatic descriptive prose, allowed his readers to come to these conclusions themselves.

When the Nazis took control in Germany in 1933, Benjamin fled to Paris. But when war broke out in 1939, Benjamin was arrested by the French. He managed to escape and to flee to Spain. Yet, fearing that he would eventually be handed over to the Nazis, Benjamin decided to take his own life in 1940.

In 1936, while in exile in Paris, Benjamin wrote his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." With this essay, Benjamin wanted to ask and analyze a simple question: how does art change, now that it can be mass produced? For the first time in

human history, technology allowed copies of art to be easily produced in the thousands or even millions. Because we live in the twenty-first century, we take for granted how easy it is to produce copies. Let's take *The Schrift*, for example. All I have to do is speak into a microphone, click a few buttons, and my lecture can instantly be heard around the world, infinite number of times. This seems "normal" to us, but it is quite extraordinary. For most of human history, to hear a lecture, you had to be physically present in the lecture hall. Or consider music. It used to be that, to see one of Mozart's operas, you would have to wait for the opera to come to your town, buy a ticket, and actually go. Then, you would have to hope the memories of that opera would stay with you for the rest of your life, because there was a good chance you would never hear that music ever again. Now, of course, you need only click a few buttons and you can hear any of Mozart's operas within seconds—at home, in the park, on a plane—anywhere.

In Benjamin's time, 1936, it was obviously not as effortless to access art as it is today. But the reproducibility of art was a real and entirely new phenomenon. You didn't have to go to the theater anymore to see a performance; you could just go to the movies. You didn't have to go to a museum to see art; you could just buy a print of the painting you liked. You didn't have to go to a concert hall to hear music; you could just pop a record onto your phonograph. Benjamin wanted to ask: what does this mean for art and for culture?

Benjamin wrote that art, when it's massively reproduced, no longer has the same "aura" as the original work. Here, let us quote Walter Benjamin: "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Benjamin wanted to say that there is something sacred and precious about art in its original form. The original art retains its *aura*.

Yet, Benjamin did not necessarily see this as a bad thing. He believed that the ability to mass produce art could have profoundly positive changes on society. Benjamin saw, for example, how the Nazis mass produced propaganda which had the power to change how people think. Benjamin, as a Marxist, wanted to see how art could be used to counteract Fascism. Because art could be mass-produced, it could reach all corners of society, and bring about change.

Benjamin's essay, then, helps to explain why such strange human behavior goes on at the Louvre museum in front of the *Mona Lisa*. The reason there are such large crowds to begin with is that, because of the mass reproduction of art, billions of people can learn about the *Mona Lisa* from afar. Moreover, the fact that people come all the way to Paris to see a painting which they could just as easily see on their refrigerator magnet at home also supports Benjamin's theory about *aura*. We somehow recognize that there is something sacred and precious about art in its original form. Even the most perfect copy does not suffice for us.

Yet, there is also a dark side to the reproducibility of art. As I mentioned, many people go to the *Mona Lisa* and do not actually take the time to appreciate it. Rather, their first action is to snap a photo of the painting, thereby reproducing it once more, creating yet another copy. These visitors recognize the *aura* of the original painting, but in a kind of perverted and distorted way. They don't want to dwell in the aura of the work of art. They want to, we might say, *own* the aura. They have, in a sense, been spoiled by the reproducibility of art. By taking a photo, it is as if they want to take the *aura* home with them, which, of course, is impossible. The aura remains with the original work. And, let's be honest, the *aura* from the *Mona Lisa* today does not really even come from its artistic excellence. Rather, ironically, its *aura* is almost a result of how many times this work has been reproduced. It is famous only because it is famous, we might say. Its

*aura*, in a twisted way, comes from the absolute pulverization of the *aura* it once had before mass reproduction existed.

Moreover, there are hundreds of other masterpieces just a few meters away from *The Mona Lisa*, some painted by da Vinci himself, which receive little to no attention from these same visitors. The visitors are surrounded by the *aura* of other works. Maybe mass-producing art has brought more awareness to great paintings like the *Mona Lisa*. But regardless, it has cheapened art everywhere. As I *myself* even said at the beginning of this episode: you're not missing much if you don't go to the Louvre to see the *Mona Lisa*. Because you can see the exact same image with a quick google search. Mass-reproduction, then, has compromised the *aura* of art *in general*, not just the copies of great works.

In the Parsha for this week, Terumah, we find Moshe at the beginning of his famous forty days and forty nights atop Mount Sinai in the Sinai Desert. Moses goes up Mount Sinai where he will engage in the most intimate conversation with God. His people, the Hebrews, meanwhile, wait down below. Now, we would expect that when Moses at last speaks to God on Mount Sinai in the divine cloud, God would kick off with something very important. We would expect that God would begin by telling Moses a divine, transcendental, otherworldly truth, which explains the mysteries of the universe. But no, God does not do that. Instead, God seems to give Moses a kind of lesson in carpentry and interior decorating. The entire weekly Torah reading, which will extend into next week as well, is nothing less than an instruction manual. It is an instruction manual on how to build the ark, known as the Mishkan, and then how to build the ark of the covenant, known as the Aron ha Brit in Hebrew.

The Mishkan was basically a large tent-like structure which the Hebrews would carry with them throughout the desert. This was to be God's dwelling place. It was, in a way, the first temple or even the first synagogue. The Aron Ha Brit was a small box kept inside the mishkan, in which would eventually be stowed the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.

But God does not just say to Moses, build me a house and build me a box to put the Ten Commandments in. No, God gives Moses the most exact, precise details for the building of these structures. How long should it be, how high should it be, what kind of material it should be built out of, how it should be decorated. Here is how, for example, God instructs Moses to build the walls of the tent: "You shall make the enclosure of the Mishkan as follows: On the south side, a hundred cubits of hangings of fine twisted linen for the length of the enclosure on that side, the twenty posts and their twenty sockets should be made from copper, the hooks and bands of the posts should be made from silver."

This long list of rather mundane instructions from God raises two questions. First, why does God feel the need to go into such specific and mind-numbingly boring detail about how the Mishkan is to be built? Second, why does God choose to kick off his forty days with Moses by talking about something so mechanical, physical, tedious? Actually, I believe these questions are interrelated.

If you read this parsha superficially, at surface level, it seems like the mishkan is to be built so as to honor and sanctify and exalt God to the greatest extent possible. Each detail given seems to be just one more tribute to God. This Mishkan, this temple in the desert, is surely going to be quite breathtaking and sumptuous. If God had said to Moses, just build me a house, that would seem to cheapen God's holiness. So, instead God says to Moses, for example, make the poles of the house from acacia wood and overlay them with pure gold; build me a candelabra or menorah of the finest gold; use dolphin skins and tanned ram skins to cover the tent.

Yet here, once again, I believe the Torah is being a bit ironic. It is a bit like the scene between Isaac and Jacob, which I discussed in episode 6. Isaac asks his son, Jacob, over and over again: are you *really* Esau? Really? Are you sure? It's obvious that Isaac knows that it's not Esau, it's just Jacob pretending to be Esau. Shakespeare would describe this as: The lady doth protest too much.

The same thing is going on, I believe, in the description of the Mishkan. We get to a point where the details and the gold and the instructions and the silver, etc., become so excessive, that it starts to seem to *detract* from God's holiness rather than add to it. After all, this is God. Do you think God really *cares* if his candelabra is made out of gold or not? Do you think God would be annoyed if the tent rings were made out of iron instead of copper? Do you think God would be offended if the poles were made of oak wood instead acacia wood? The Torah, by providing such an excess of details and instructions, seems to be hinting to us that, in fact, God could not care less about these decorations. God sees them with a bit of mockery, and the Torah wants us to see them in this ironical way, too. After all, it was only just a few chapters ago that God commanded the Hebrews in the third commandment that they were forbidden to worship idols or images.

Walter Benjamin's essay, "On the Reproducibility of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," can help us to grasp what is going on here in *Terumah*. The details God gives are so exact that this Mishkan could essentially be rebuilt by anyone, at any time. In this sense, this "art" is a bit like the reproducible art which Benjamin was grappling with. Obviously, it's not as easy to build a Mishkan as it is to print a poster of the *Mona Lisa*, but this instruction manual means that the Mishkan could be copied and copied, over and over again. The Mishkan was, in a way, the kind of mass-reproducible art of its day. After all, remember that in the ancient world, there was no printing press, no film, no photography. Pretty much every work of art or literature was unique, was one-of-a-kind, was special, or, put another way, retained its *aura*. Relative to its context, then, the Mishkan, in its ability to be so easily copied and reproduced, would have seemed to people to be as mass-producible as *Mona Lisa* prints would have seemed to Walter Benjamin. And, in fact, we even have evidence for this. If you google the Mishkan, you will find hundreds of images which will show exactly how the Mishkan would have looked. How do we know this? Because of the painstakingly precise details which God gives to Moses.

What is the Torah trying to tell us here? The Torah had the same realization as Benjamin. When art can be mass produced, the copy loses the aura of the original work. Because it is only a copy, and therefore can just be made again and again. Here, the "original work," we might say, is God Himself. And obviously, God, if anyone, has an aura around Him. At first glance, the mishkan seems to be a kind of worthy and admirable "replacement" for God. In its luxuriousness and beauty, it serves as a fine representation of God's incredibleness. But, like Benjamin's copies of paintings and records, a careful reading of the parsha shows how, in fact, *pathetic* the mishkan is to God Himself. After awhile, each additional detail given on how to build the mishkan seems to be an ironic hint at how *lifeless, senseless, aura-less*, is this glorified tent in comparison to the "original" work—to God. And, if you don't believe me, take one look at those Google pictures of the Mishkan. What does it look like? It looks like some weird, undersized palace, which is trying to keep up with the Joneses, as it were. You see it and think to yourself: this is God? No, this is just some pathetic attempt to imitate God. The image of the Mishkan, ironically, in its bling, in its ostentatious flashing of gold and copper and silver, seems so paltry, that it makes the "original" God, with His innate aura, seem even more amazing and inconceivable.

But I haven't yet answered the second question. Why does the Torah make it so the first thing Moses hears from God as he ascends Mount Sinai is this laundry list of instructions? These instructions are more fit for a mechanical engineering course than for a book of scripture. These detailed instructions, which are supposed to show how great this house to God will be, have a countereffect. There is, then, something even deeper going on here. There is more here than just the idea that God has the *aura* and his house, the Mishkan, is just a mere physical structure.

A few scenes later, in the desert, the Hebrews will throw God to the wind, as it were, and instead decide to build a golden calf to pray to. The golden calf will, like the Mishkan, be beautifully and carefully designed, overladen with jewels and silver and ostentatious decorations. Yet, this praying to the golden calf is the nadir, the absolute downfall, of the Hebrews, a downfall from which they will never fully recover in God's eyes. Is it just a coincidence that the Mishkan and the golden calf bear so much in common? The mishkan, when viewed ironically, is almost a premonition of what is to come. It is almost a warning of how ridiculous it is to worship gold, jewels, physical structures, instead of Being, the Eternal, the miracle of Life and Nature. The lesson, if you will, for both of these stories is: don't try to *replace* God with something manmade and artificial. Don't worship false idols.

We tend to think of false idols in very limited terms. Don't bow down to a statue. Don't pray to a rock or to the sun. But, by depicting the Mishkan—God's house—as its own kind of "idol," I think the Torah wants us to see idol worship more broadly. Idols need not just be figures made out of clay. Idols can be ourselves, other people, ideologies, our daily routines, food, sports, sex and, most frighteningly, Art.

Nietzsche famously wrote, in 1885, that God was dead. And with the alleged death of God, philosophers rushed to find a replacement. Indeed, humans pretty much always find some kind of replacement for God. It seems to be a part of our nature. And for many philosophers around Nietzsche's time, the replacement for God was Art. In 1888, Nietzsche, that notorious atheist, wrote: "Art! Nothing else! Only art creates the possibility of life." In 1930, Freud would begin his book *Civilizations and its Discontents* with the following quote from Goethe: "He who has science and art therefore has religion. But he who possesses neither of these two: well, let him have religion!" And, as I've brought up any times in *the Schrift*, going back to episode 0, we have the case of the early German romantics from Jena. These young renegade philosophers made it their task to create Art which would carry within it the Eternal. The early German romantics believed that Art, if made fragmentary and paradoxical, could itself become Truth, could itself become Sacred.

Can Art replace Religion? Is Art just another form of idol worship? I came up against this question myself several years ago, when I was a student at Ben-Gurion University in Israel. I was in a literature seminar and, for whatever reason, I'm not sure why exactly, I blurted out Nietzsche's famous quote "God is dead." But I didn't say it as though it were a theory or an opinion, but as though it were an actual fact—God is dead. Now, I didn't mean it in the sense that there is no God, but rather that, in the modern world, God is no longer taken seriously, as he once was. And actually, this is how Nietzsche meant it, too. My professor, however, who, by the way, was an Orthodox Jew, offered an interesting rebuttal to my comment. He said that, while Nietzsche may once have written that "God is dead," now it is God who gets to have the last word. God now gets to say, "Nietzsche is dead."

This comment of my professor's has stayed with me ever since. Because what he was *really* saying, as I understood it, was that: the human can only go so far. For all of Nietzsche's philosophizing over the meaning of life, the existence of God, the eternity of the moment, and so

forth, the fact that he now lies dead in a grave in Saxony takes away from his credibility a bit. Who are *you* to say that God is dead? *You're* dead.

I've spoken many times on *The Schrift* about how the early German Romantics like Friedrich Schlegel wanted to create *transcendental* art, art which would contain within it the Infinite and the meaning of existence. Yet, I've always felt that something was lacking in this Romantic project. A fragmentary poem, transcendental as it may be, simply does not have the same *gravitas* and omniscience as someone like God would have. Or, put another way, what was missing from this Art was God. And Art for Art's sake is and will always be *manmade*. It will always be imperfect, transient, subjective. And therefore, what happens when we hold Romantic poetry up against the Torah, which allegedly has the authority of God himself backing it up. In the comparison, there just seems to be something *flimsy* about secular art and secular philosophy which is hard to ignore.

Now, I'm not here to force my opinion onto you as to whether God exists. People ask me all the time if I believe in God. I find this to be the most ludicrous of questions. It is as if the existence of God depends on whether I *think* he exists. If He exists, He exists. If He doesn't, He doesn't. Whatever I think won't change that. If God Himself tells you He exists, that's one thing. But if another human tells you He does or doesn't exist, I would be skeptical. This, after all, is little more than just a somebody talking. Ask follow-up questions, study, learn, meditate, go to Jerusalem, go to India—find out for yourself. Don't just ask someone and assume their answer means anything.

But one thing that does certainly exist is the Torah. There can be no doubting about that. And, with the building of the Mishkan, with all of its beauty, its gold, its jewelry, its decorations, God is telling the Jewish people how to create a great work of art. But why does the Torah make the instructions on how to build the Mishkan so tedious, so boring, so ordinary? Because the Torah wants to remind us that Art, even the greatest artistic masterpiece, cannot replace God. And this is true even if there is no God, by the way. Actually, then it would be even *more* true. And this, finally, explains why this lesson in carpentry and interior decorating was the first message Moses got from God when he ascended Mount Sinai. The Torah knows how quick humans are to find *replacements* for God, to create false idols, to believe that we can create our own gods. God begins his forty days with Moses with these ironic instructions to indirectly, surreptitiously send us a warning. This warning is that believing that Art can be God may be the most perilous threat to the human race. And if you don't believe me, just go to the *Louvre* and have a look at the hundreds of people crowding around *The Mona Lisa* with their clicking cameras in hand.