



ART, FOR GOD'S SAKE

A man pulls off the road and climbs out of his car to gaze at the sky. He is unaware that his jaw has slackened as he surveys the view. His eyes as well as his mouth are wide open. He's never seen such gold, not even at the exhibit of King Tut's tomb. He is dazzled by this huge expanse of glittering clouds, with each blazing highlight more brilliant than the next, set off by shadows of pink and orange. "This can't be real. Why is there so much gold? How can anything be so beautiful?" he wonders. He longs to stay and drink in the spectacle for as long as it lasts, but he can hardly bear the thought of watching it fade. He rips his gaze from the sky and climbs back into his car. He sits, just staring at the steering wheel for minutes before he gets back on the road.

At home, his wife greets him at the door. "Traffic jam?" she asks, referring to the fact that he's slightly late. "No," he answers a bit embarrassed. "I stopped to watch a sunset."



Colette, Christine Thurow

The first demand that any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.

—C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*



In The Little Shtetl Of Vaysechvoos

Gitl pushed a renegade lock of auburn hair away from her face. She disliked her hair because she felt it set her apart from the other shtetl girls. She didn't realize that it wouldn't have made much difference if she'd had glossy black curls instead of her reddish-brown mane that seemed to capture every stray sunbeam. Her finely chiseled features and dreamy green eyes flecked with gold would still set her apart from the others. Nor did she realize how very pretty she was; she was too busy taking in the beauty around her. This, too, set her apart since most of her neighbors didn't find much to admire in the little shtetl of Vaysechvoos.

Gitl was the child that every mother in the village wondered about. They whispered about her in the *mikvah*—would she ever make a marriage? What right-minded parents would let her be considered for their son? The women convinced themselves they only posed such questions out of true concern for Gitl, and they pursued their concern by repeatedly inquiring of her mother, Malke, “When do you suppose that Gitl will outgrow this phase?” The “phase” that they referred to was Gitl's inability to mend a sock, pluck a chicken, prepare a meal or perform any other such duty that any girl Gitl's age should be able to do.

Malke always answered that Gitl was quite capable of cooking or sewing—she simply had no interest. “Her mind is always wandering. It wanders as much as she does,” she would sigh. As for plucking a chicken, Gitl was a sensitive soul, and though she tried to do whatever she was asked, she would become so distressed over a chicken carcass that the dead animal would end up drenched in tears. This was not Malke's idea of proper seasoning.

Malke told her inquiring neighbors that she wasn't worried. She'd smile and shrug as if to say, “No matter. She's certain to outgrow it.” But every night she would recount to her husband the many ways in which Gitl had been “impossible.”

“Yankel, this morning, I asked Gitl to bring in a few eggs, and she wasn't to be seen for a half hour's time! I sent Chaya out to bring her in. Sure enough, Yankel, she was out by that tree in the field with her pencil and a scrap of paper.”

“Did she offer any explanation?” Yankel was a fair man who was usually concerned to hear both sides of a story,

but he, too, was getting tired of Gitl's *mishegoss*.

“She told me that the ‘sun was dancing on the branches’ and she had to draw it before the light was lost. Yankel, I just don't know what to do with her. All of the women gossip about her, and I myself am beginning to wonder how we'll ever find a husband for Gitl. What man will be happy with, I forgot to prepare supper, but see the picture I drew of the chickens this morning?”

Yankel and Malke both knew that something had to be done. Their solution was to provide her with one activity after another. They hoped that the busier Gitl became with washing linens or scrubbing floors or baking challah, the less time she would find for her drawings, and they hoped that her interest would thus wane, then disappear.

Gitl tried hard to please her parents. She loved them, and besides, she knew that to honor God, she must honor them. But she was always making mistakes. If she tried to polish the Shabbos candlesticks, one of them inevitably slipped from her grasp and dented the wood floor. Gitl would pick it up, dust it off and go at it with her polishing rag again. But her eyes were always dancing around the contours of the candlesticks. “I wonder how I could make that shadow. How can I show that sparkle of light? Can I do that with my pencil?”

She would take several minutes to stare at the shadow or the spark of light, memorizing each detail. Then at night she would pull a few scraps of paper and her precious pencil from under her quilt and try to draw what she could still see in her mind's eye. She found it hard to sleep until she *had* found the way to show that sparkle or make that shadow.

Every morning, she would wake up tired, and her mother began to feel pangs of guilt as she watched Gitl stumble sleepy-eyed from their hut to bring in milk and eggs.

“Yankel, I know that she's up until all hours of the night with that silly pencil of hers. She hasn't once complained of all I've asked her to do, but I'm worried about her. She just doesn't seem happy. You should see the way her eyes linger on the clouds. I just know that she's thinking of drawing them. We must ask the Sage of Vaysechvoos what to do. We certainly can't have her wasting away her days, but the

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In the Beginning

The initial words of the Scriptures tell us, “In the beginning **God created** the heavens and the earth.” The Hebrew verb for create is *bara*’ and is used exclusively to refer to God’s activity. The fact that God revealed himself to us as the first and premier artist provides direction as we seek to understand the creative process.

The Master Artist created the universe and all its elements, but he then created humans *in his own image*. When we ponder that fact, we can understand why each of us has a creative spark. The British statesman, Benjamin Disraeli, once said that “man is made to create,



Fruit Bowl, Christine Thurow

from the poet to the potter.”¹ Humans have innate creativity. The Creator’s imprint on our very souls gives birth to our own urge to create. What God has fashioned is far beyond what even the most magnificent artist could hope to produce. He has gifted us, his creation, with the ability to reflect beauty and truth through art.

Art is “the conscious use of skill and creative imagination . . . and works so produced.”² That which both God and people create can be called art. God instituted art with purpose and intention. Marc Chagall once said, “There is no art for art’s sake. The artist must be interested in the entire realm of life.”³ Certainly, God did not create for the sake of creating, but for a purpose.⁴

To realize our artistic potential to its fullest, it is crucial for us to examine how the one who gave us the creative spark uses art.

The Creator’s Paradigm

God’s artistry serves many purposes. It gives pleasure and joy—to himself and to people. In Gan Eden, God “planted every kind of tree that is pleasant to the sight.”⁵ God looked at his handiwork, and “saw that it was good.”⁶ It was pleasing to behold. God valued its beauty.

The psalms are examples of art in the form of poetry, song and movement. They are filled with declarations of joy over creation and thanks to God for the wonders of his artistry: “To him who made the great lights . . . the sun to rule by day . . . the moon and stars to rule by night, for his loving kindness is everlasting.”⁷

God delights in giving us good things and wants us to admire the world that he made. In the same way that God’s art

gives him pleasure, we can receive enjoyment from exercising creativity. And while not everything we produce is beautiful, beautiful art is enjoyable to our senses and brings us satisfaction.

God not only seeks to please our senses, but he also seeks to engage us. God desires to reveal himself to people. Both the Hebrew Scriptures and what is commonly called the New Testament tell us that God speaks through creation. The prophet Isaiah declared, “Thus says the Lord, who created the heavens, who is God, who formed the earth and made it . . . ‘I am the Lord, and there is no other. I have not spoken in secret.’”⁸

Paul, who wrote the New Testament Book of Romans, was a rabbinically trained Jewish believer in Jesus and understood the Jewish concept of God’s revelation through creation: “For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made . . .”⁹

In the same way that one can look at the body of an artist’s work over time and gain some idea of that artist’s outlook or worldview, we can learn something of the Creator. God has provided the sky above and the grass underfoot, the expanse of the ocean and the teeming life in a simple puddle—all to reveal himself.

God’s declaration is that he has spoken and that he has done so in his role as Creator. God wants us to see him when we look at what he has made.

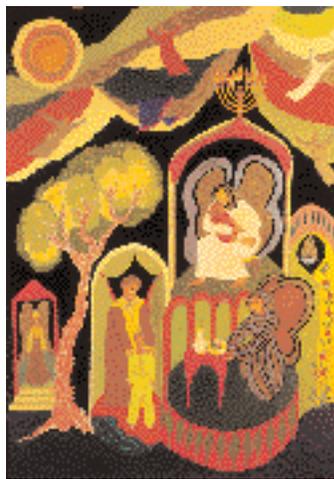


Untitled, M.B.

How Do We Honor God in Our Art?

Sarah Geffin, a Jewish believer in Jesus and a potter in London, comments, “I have a living faith in a living God. I hope that the beauty and character of God will be reflected in my work.” To Sarah, the main objective of her work is to communicate to others that there is a God, that he gave us the Messiah and that we can know him. Geffin works as a potter and uses her craft to portray biblical accounts.

It is truly a fine reflection of our Creator when one is able to use one’s craft to proclaim truth about him. But God does more than direct our attention to himself by what he fashioned. God has also provided us with something to offer back to him once he has gained our attention. He takes satisfaction from what we create. God gave us the ability to express ourselves through dance, drama, poetry, music and art. There are examples of each in Scripture. And they all work toward worshiping God. God reveals who he is to us so that we might enter into a relationship—a relationship that brings us to the point of worshiping him.



Untitled, Marilyn Ramsdale



Pottery by Sarah Geffin

Jewish St...



Still Life, Dan Clouts

Paul Meer is a ceramics instructor in Woodside, California. He defines his expression as an artist as “taking in everything around me, as a person, as a Jewish man. I sit here and take in a lot. I try to organize those things and express them as an offering to the Lord. Everything that I do is presenting it back to him.” God wants us to engage with what he has given to us. He uses creation to reveal himself to us, but why does he reveal himself? So that we might know, interact with, relate to and give back to him. Creation is a tool

to relate to the God who formed it.

Marc Chagall said that “the artist must penetrate into the world.”¹⁰ Meer puts it this way, “I am responsible for how I take in stimulus, how I sift through it, how I put things together and present it back to the Lord in a way that would be pleasing to him.



A good example of this is King David’s poetic prayer, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”¹¹ The Hebrew verb *bara*’ is used here to describe a transformation or restoration done by God.¹² David used his skill as a psalmist to

offer his heart to God, that God might “restore to him the enjoyment of his salvation by renewing his heart and his spirit as a newly forgiven sinner.”¹³

Art Can Dishonor God

Art, like any good thing, can be twisted to serve a purpose that is neither true nor beautiful. The second commandment is, “You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”¹⁴ For centuries, people interpreted this commandment as a prohibition against all representational art, in reaction to pagan religions that made religious art a focus for worship.¹⁵ This affects Jewish artists even today. Painter Marilyn

Ramsdale, a Jewish believer in Jesus from upstate New York, speaks of “drawing inside of closets at night because I had been told not to make graven images.”

Did God prohibit all forms of visual art?

Not according to the Book of Exodus, where God laid out specific instructions for an artist to adorn the Tabernacle, “I have called by name Bezalel . . . to design artistic works . . . and to work in all manners of workmanship.”¹⁶ 1 Kings 7

recounts the adornment of Solomon’s Temple with pomegranates, ornamental buds, wreaths and lattice work.

God does not prohibit artistry. Rather, the prohibition is against worshipping the creation.¹⁷ Consider the carefully fashioned golden calf that Aaron created for the people when they complained that Moses was never going to return from Mount Sinai. Most likely it was an artistic marvel, but it was an abomination before a holy and jealous God.



Painted by Paul Meer

Despite all that God had done, the moment the people could not see something or someone to reassure them of his presence, they were ready to turn from him. “Give us a god we can see” is, in effect, what they demanded of Aaron. So he used his artistic skill to present them with something visual—an image of an animal. Not only did the people worship the creation instead of the Creator, but they also worshiped the work of human hands, which fashioned the image of God’s creation.

Elevating creation without recognizing the Creator degrades the gift of art.

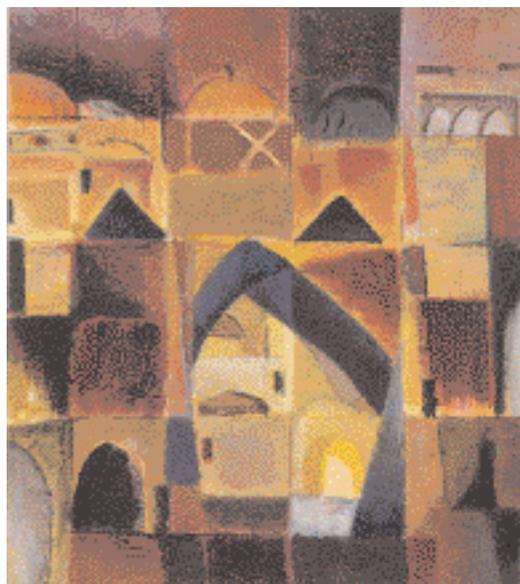
The artist faces another dangerous misuse of art—forgetting one’s place as God’s creation. Just as people can esteem a work of art above the Creator, artists can intentionally or unknowingly elevate themselves to that same place. It is important to recognize that people’s creativity is only a shadow of the infinite creativity of God. In fact, the name *Bezalel*, means “in the shadow of God.”¹⁸

Our creativity is only a flickering reflection of God’s. Think of it; the painter does not have all the Creator’s colors on his

palette and can only approximate a sunset. The photographer can only produce a glimmer of what can be seen with the naked eye. The dancer is limited in movement to how his body is constructed. The writer has only those words that are part of her vocabulary. And so on.

Zoe-Lynn Cohen, a graphic artist in Pennsylvania, says, “There are so many things that artists see, and I realize that God is the most incredible artist. I find that we just try to recre-

ate.” Dan Clouts, a British Jewish artist, adds, “The act of painting or drawing is helping me to express some of the wonders of God’s creation, and I really sense that it is God who has given me the gift of creativity.”



Untitled, M.B.

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Let's Get Real about Art

God *has* gifted us with creativity and an ability to create things of beauty. However, if art is to reflect reality, we must face the fact that not all reality is beautiful. God's creativity did not stop with that which is aesthetically pleasing and neither should our art be merely a matter of self-gratification. Art can draw our attention to the human condition, to our separation and utter otherness from God. Many artists, who do not have the hope of a forever with their Creator, leave us out there, hanging over an abyss of despair and depravity.

No one is more creative than God when it comes to giving a graphic picture of the consequences of our separation from him. The models for atonement given in the Book of Leviticus call for visual drama, yes, even tragedy, for God commanded the substitutionary sacrifice



Jeremiah 18:6, Shelley Skoropinski

of animals to communicate that sin causes death.

Even more startling is the amazing "mixed media" presentation that God made with the prophet Ezekiel. God used the mediums of drawing, drama and sculpture to communicate a message. He even chose the materials: clay, metal, wood and, above all, the body of the prophet Ezekiel. The Artist's instructions are found in Ezekiel 4:1-8.

We don't know how long it took Ezekiel to prepare the drawing of the city or to erect the siege works, but we do know that he acted as a living sculpture, lying on the ground first on one side, then the other, for over a year. What was the point of this very elaborate, avant garde piece of work? At least three points are clear from this portion of the text:

- It would be a sign to the house of Israel for a literal battle that would be waged against them.
- It would symbolize Ezekiel taking the sin of the house of Judah and the house of Israel upon himself.
- It would provide a stage from which Ezekiel was to bare his arm and prophesy against Jerusalem.

The picture painted in these eight verses is devoid of beauty but full of truth. The Book of Ezekiel continues to show forth the horrors brought about by the sins of the people until finally there is a glimmer of hope for the remnant of Israel in chapter eleven.

Our Creator God went to great lengths to communicate his judgment for the idolatry and sinful behavior of his people. This same Creator went to great lengths to communicate grace, love and forgiveness to those willing to receive it.

Whether one is a believer in Y'shua (Jesus) or not, it is

nearly impossible to escape the impact carried by the imagery of the crucifixion. Y'shua's death has captured the imagination of artists for centuries as they have tried to recreate the drama, the anguish and the hope of that moment. Marc Chagall, who depicted Moses receiving the Law and Elijah praying on Mount Carmel, could not resist attempting his own portrayal of the crucifixion.

The comparison between the Ezekiel drama and the Jesus drama begs to be addressed. Ezekiel, as a living sculpture, could only symbolize what Jesus accomplished in death . . . to take upon himself the sins of the people.

Ezekiel was righteous in comparison to his people, but he was an *ordinary* person. Even a relatively righteous person needs atonement for his own sin and therefore cannot atone for the sins of another. Those of us who believe that Jesus is the Messiah know that he was no ordinary person. Y'shua alone could take upon himself the sins of the people. He did so according to the blueprint for substitutionary atonement God first unfolded in the Book of Leviticus.

Ezekiel was bound by ropes so that he could not move in either direction. Jesus, with hands and feet nailed to two pieces of wood could not move to the right or the left. When Ezekiel's "siege" was finished, God instructed him to bare his arm to prophesy against Jerusalem. When Jesus had given his life's blood, his drama nearly at an end, both his arms were bared and outstretched as well. Yet he did not prophesy against sinners. Instead, his arms were opened wide to receive them as he said to his heavenly Father, "Forgive them. They do not know what they are doing."¹⁹

As an artist reaches out through what he or she depicts, God reaches out to us. He wants us to recognize his involvement in the drama of our lives. He wants to forgive us and to restore us—to awaken us to the beauty of life with him. He

wants each of us to be a new creation. But it is up to us to respond to his invitation. "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near."²⁰



Joshua 24:15, Shelley Skoropinski

¹⁹Psalm 51:10 NIV. ²⁰Ron Allen, *The Majesty of Man* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1978), 205. ¹Ibid. ²Exodus 20:4. ³W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: UAHC, 1981), 677. ⁴Exodus 30:1-5. ⁵Exodus 20:5. ⁶The Torah, 677. ⁷Luke 23:34. ⁸Isaiah 55:6.

¹Contarini Fleming, 1832.

²*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam, 1977).

³Reuben Alcalay, *A Basic Encyclopedia of Jewish Proverbs and Quotations and Folk Wisdom* (New York: Hartmore House, 1973), 19. ⁴Proverbs 16:4. ⁵Genesis 2:9. ⁶Genesis 1:4. ⁷Psalm 136:7-9. ⁸Isaiah 45:18-19. ⁹Romans 1:20. ¹⁰Jewish Spectator, Sept. 1951, 21.

TWO JEWISH BELIEVERS IN JESUS AND THEIR ART



Paul Meer is a high school ceramics teacher. He is a Jewish believer in Jesus and worships at Congregation Tiferet Israel in San Francisco with other Jewish believers in Jesus.

“I was born into an Orthodox family. I went to Hebrew school and attended synagogue with my father, yet I was very restless. Through my adolescence, I knew that anything I embraced had to be consistent with my Jewish identity, and I just didn’t see that in Jesus. Then in the sixties, I was a hippie. I was into a lot of things—because I was searching. That’s when I became a believer in Jesus, realizing that he was the Jewish Messiah.”

Whenever Meer has the opportunity to talk about his art, he inevitably uses it to say something about the Lord. “When I make a pot, I know that it’s intrinsically flawed. How can what I produce be perfect when I’m not? Then I look in the Bible and read, ‘And God said, let there be light.’ I think about what God wrought in one moment with just a word while I work for years, trying to perfect a simple thing. I relish that because it continues to make me smaller in comparison, and my sense of awe for the Lord grows.”

Meer says there are countless spiritual insights to be gained through working in clay. “I try to be clay on God’s wheel. I am the work, and the clay is only the medium. By working in clay, I can see the limitations, and I can look for limitations in myself. You learn things in clay. There is a point at which it’s still malleable, and there’s a point at which it isn’t any longer. It’s transformed. Once you’ve gone through a certain fire, you’re changed. You can’t go back to what you were. I’m learning what God can do with a lump of clay.”

Laurie Shenkman is a Jewish believer in Jesus and a working artist in Allentown, Pennsylvania. One of her greeting cards is pictured here.

“I was raised in a Conservative Synagogue. My grandmother was from Poland, very traditional. She lit candles every

Friday night and baked challah. I loved that but wanted more. I had a strong awareness of God. It was like a driving force, I think, all through my childhood and adolescence. I really wanted to know God personally.

“My grandmother told me about Jesus, I think she hoped that by giving me her perspective, she would put a lid on whatever curiosity I might have about him. She said he was a great teacher, like a prophet, and left it at that.” Laurie also “left it at that” for the time being, but when she went to college, she started to read the New Testament. “I minored in religion, so it was actually required reading. The courses were very intellectual and academic, yet I found that this book seemed to speak to my heart. I also was studying the Holocaust. I think that much of my coming to faith in Jesus had to do with the fact that I really wanted to understand the issue of suffering. I found myself taken with the figure of Jesus as the suffering servant. I really identified with it.”

Laurie’s reading extended to the realm of philosophy. She says that it was through reading Kierkegaard that she finally came to believe in Jesus. “I would say that he brought me to the Lord. At that time I had a revelation and knew that it was time to ‘sin no more’ and start a new life.”



Laurie works in acrylics, then reduces her work into card format. She says that her art changed after she became a believer in Jesus. “I found it difficult to conceptualize original drawings or paintings before I accepted Y’shua. After I became a believer, pictures came clearer. All of my work is inspired by the Bible. I’m especially inspired by the psalms because they relate to everyday, practical issues. I’m looking to encourage people where they need it, to show them that there is another life, a life with God.”



When There Was Nothing

*When there was nothing
There was I
Lighting volcanoes
Stretching the sky
Sketching the veins of an acorn leaf
Painting the gloss on the tiger's teeth*

*When there was nothing
I was there
Buffing the buffalo
Grooming the bear
Curling the cobra in his coiled-up cave
Rippling the river and frothing the wave*

*When there was nothing
There was Me
Expanding the girth
Of the Redwood tree
Molding the moon whilst counting the bugs
And no matter if you're squeamish
But I even made the slug*

*When there was nothing
Just I AM
Before I'd even offered you
My punctured lamb
I juggled all the planets
Then equipped the frog
With the energetic means
To leap from log to bog*

*When there was nothing
There was I
When there was nothing
I was there
When there was nothing
There were always Three
Spirit
Son
And Me*



—Stewart Henderson

child must sleep, and I can't bear to see her so unhappy."

The very next morning Yankel went to see the Sage. The wise man had anticipated this visit, knowing that it wouldn't be long before Gitl's parents would need his counsel. He often noticed her sitting with paper and pencil under a tree while other children played games. He had sensed a certain thoughtfulness about her and had considered how best to encourage her special talents.

The Sage surmised from the worried look on Yankel's face that Gitl was the reason for this visit. "Yankel, I know why you're here. You have a daughter who is happier with a pencil and a piece of paper than she is doing the things that other girls her age are doing."

Yankel looked relieved, "Yes! And I must know what is to be done. She'll soon be too old for this kind of foolishness!"

The Sage sat back in his chair and folded his hands across his ever-increasing girth. He said nothing for a few moments, and Yankel felt the weight of silence with each second that crept by.

When the old man finally took a breath to speak, Yankel leaned forward to listen. "Do you ever wonder about things, Yankel? I find myself wondering about so many things. Like what our lives would be like if each of us took time to admire what God has given to us. We worry so about getting food on our tables and staying out of the way of the *goyim*. It is true that these things are reality, but it seems to me that maybe God wants more for us than mere survival. I don't think that you need to spend too much time worrying about Gitl. Life will creep up on her as it has crept up on the rest of us. Let her enjoy drawing the clouds before she has to worry about whether they are going to bring rain or not." With that, the Sage stood up from his chair. "I think I smell *piroshki*. I must go see what my Leah has made for me."

Yankel showed himself out and walked slowly home. On the way, he chanced to meet a peddler, and he made a purchase. When he arrived home, Malke was shaking linens out the window, Chaya was kneading a large ball of dough and Gitl was stooping to retrieve a candlestick she'd just dropped.

"Gitl!" Yankel exclaimed. Gitl stood up at once and grasped the candlestick in her hand, certain that her father was about to reprimand her for being careless. "Bring me your pencil and those scraps of paper you've

been hoarding at once!"

Gitl walked solemnly to get her treasures. *Now I've done it. He must know that I've been drawing at night. Why did I let the candlestick drop? He thinks it's because I'm tired. What will I do without my pencil and paper?* As her thoughts tumbled through her mind, Gitl felt tears stinging her eyes. But she stood straight when she held the pencil and a small pile of paper out to her father, and she fought to hold back her tears. She didn't notice the parcel he held in one hand even as he took away her pencil and assorted papers with the other.

"Gitl, I don't want you wasting your time with this stubby pencil and these half crumpled up pieces of paper anymore!"

"But Papa, I—"

"Don't but Papa me. I want you should learn an important lesson." Gitl braced herself. She had always feared the day would come when she would be forbidden to draw.

"And the lesson is this. Always use the right tool for the job!" Yankel tried to maintain a scowl as he handed Gitl the package, but he could not conceal a smile.

And ever so carefully, so as not to waste any of the precious

brown paper, Gitl opened her gift. "Oh Papa!" she exclaimed. She ran her fingers across the pages of the smooth white drawing tablet and tested the points of the three brand-new, perfectly sharpened pencils.

"Oh Papa," she repeated breathlessly, and then she kissed his cheek. When she saw his smile break into a wide grin, she became bold. "Could you sit for just a minute? I want to see if I can draw that sparkle in your eyes."



GLOSSARY

- mikvah:** ritual cleansing
mishegoss: nonsense
goyim: gentiles
piroshki: pastry filled with meat or vegetables

PRONUNCIATION

- | | | | |
|-----------|--------------------------|----------|--|
| a | as in far | i | as in bee (where it's the final or only vowel in a word) |
| oy | as in boy | | |
| e | as in yes | | |
| i | as in is (within a word) | | |