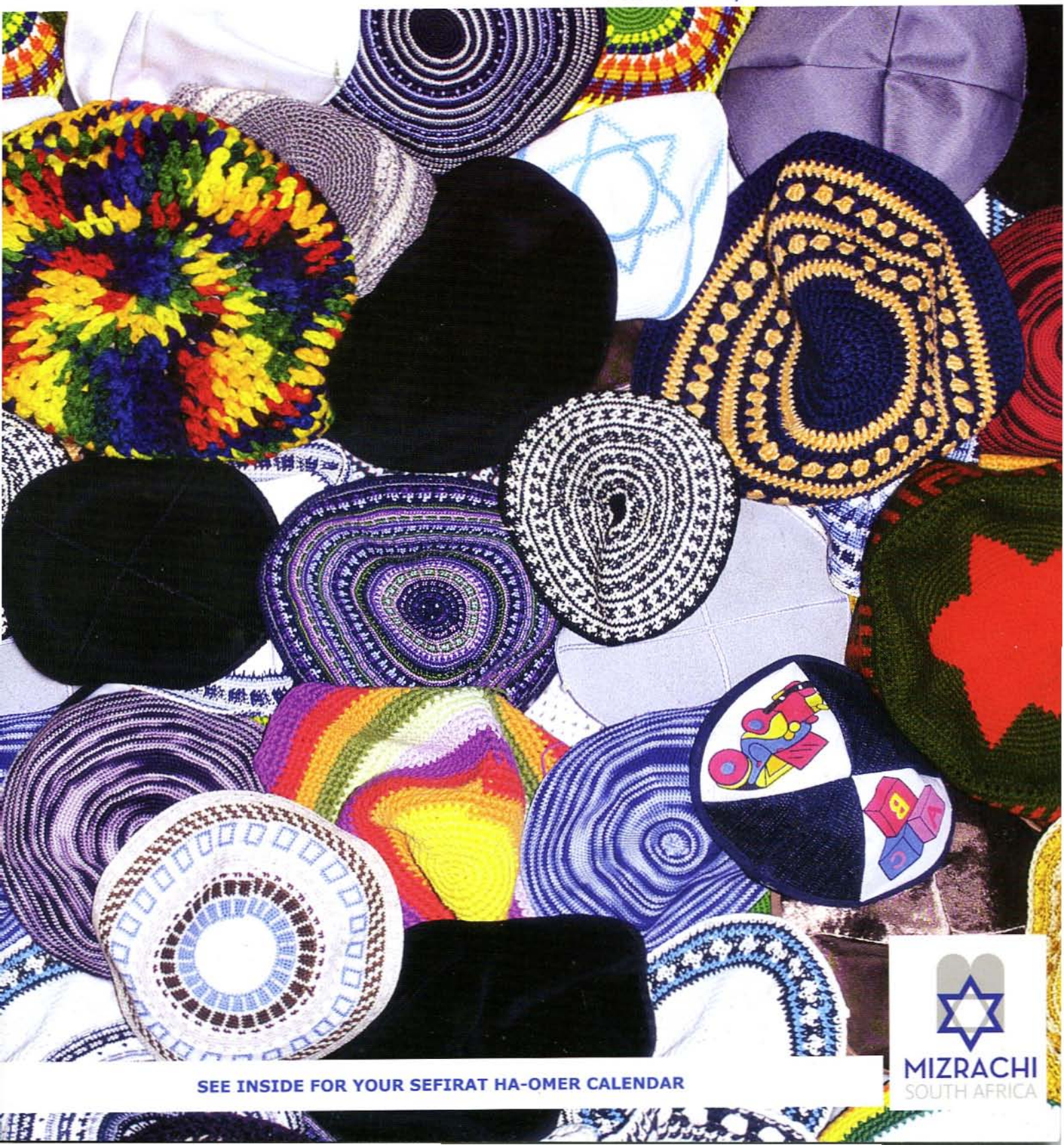


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GRAVEN IMAGES AND THE SCULPTURE OF HERMAN WALD

BY NATALIE KNIGHT

WE LEARN that the second of the Ten Commandments is: "Thou shall not make a graven image and bow down to it." How then, is it permissible to create sculptures purely for aesthetic reasons?

This debate was sparked by the exhibition **The Wings of the Shechina**

— **The Sculptural Art of Herman Wald**, which opened at the Jewish Museum in Cape Town in February 2012.

When approached with this dilemma, Rabbi Amittai explained that we should view the commandment as two separate parts.

RELIGIOUS LENIENCIES

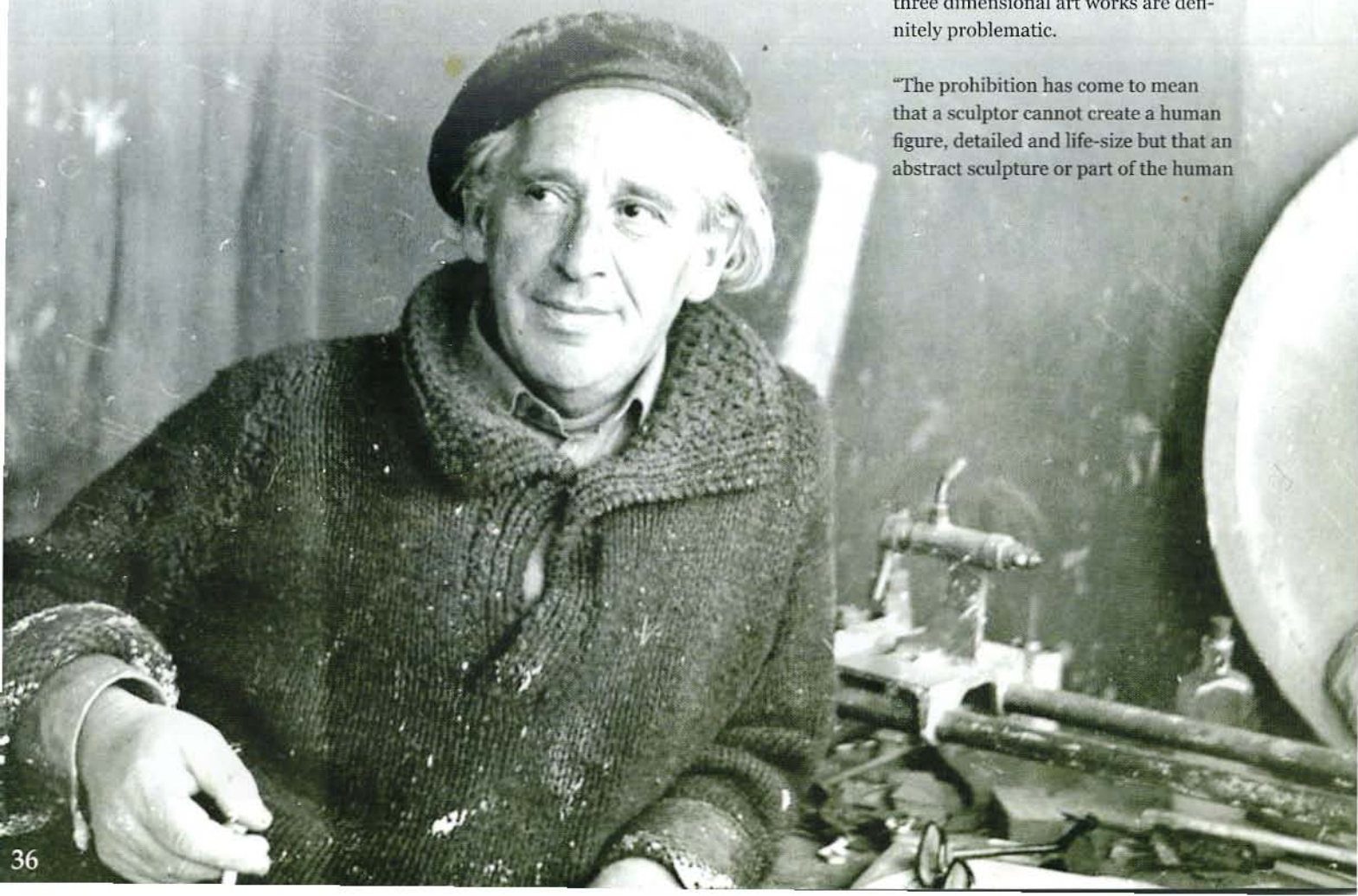
Jewish law not only allows but also encourages the skilled artist or craftsman to make beautiful objects for use because *Hashem* commanded Bezalel (Shemot 35:30-33) to make two, winged *kruvim* (cherubs) with human features for the temple.

For thousands of years skilled Jewish artists worked in this vein, decorating and illustrating books and making objects for use such as candlesticks, menorahs and *esrog boxes*.

"*Hashem* commanded man in general not to make graven images, and he commanded Bezalel to make the *kruvim* for a particular purpose," says Rabbi Amittai.

"They are two different commandments, each coming from *Hashem*." Jewish artists are not prohibited from creating two-dimensional works of art (although there are some limitations here) but three dimensional art works are definitely problematic.

"The prohibition has come to mean that a sculptor cannot create a human figure, detailed and life-size but that an abstract sculpture or part of the human





form would be acceptable," says Rabbi Amittai.

ADAPTING TO THIS DILEMMA

Sculptor Herman Wald, the artist who created the Memorial to the Six Million Jews at the West Park Cemetery, the bronze wings for the Berea shul and other major public sculptures in Johannesburg, was faced with this dilemma.

Born in 1906, in the city of Cluj near Budapest, he was one of eight children of Rabbi Jacob Meir Wald (1866-1928). Rabbi Wald was descended from seven generations of Rabbis and served as *Dayan* in the rabbinical court in Cluj and then as *Rosh Beth Din*. His mother, Pearl, was the daughter of Rabbi Moshe Shmuel Glasner (1856-1924) who was the orthodox Rabbi of Cluj from 1877 to 1923 and established the Mizrahi movement there. When I interviewed

Herman Wald in his studio in 1970, three weeks before his sudden death at the age of 64, I found an artist who was concerned about religion but frustrated by the second Commandment.

While still a student, Wald recalled that his father refused to allow him to make three-dimensional art forms. However, he was a rebel and secretly made a realistic portrait bust of Theodore Hertzl, which he finally showed to his father.

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"While inspecting it I noticed a veil gradually lifting from his eyes – a screen that separated the religious prejudice from the instinctive understanding of the fine arts. He only shook his head in a noncommittal way, not knowing whether to be for or against my career," said Wald.

Later his father relented and sent his talented son to study art at the Budapest Academy of Arts. He also studied in the UK and Europe before he escaped to South Africa in 1937.

"Rabbi Jacob Meir Wald was a very wise man," says Rabbi Amitai. "He saw that his son was talented and he chose to guide his creativity where he could. He did not want to forbid his son from making art as the son may have defied his father. Instead he taught him the *halachot* and showed him how to work within the law."

Herman Wald knew that he could make art, which was abstract, and he did this whenever he was involved in a Jewish public commission. His commercial works, however, often included realistic figures such as the Unknown Miner (which has recently been installed on the West Campus at Wits) and the famous eighteen impala commissioned by Sir Ernest Oppenheimer to leap over the Oppenheimer Fountain in the centre of the city of Johannesburg.

Passionate depictions of biblical personalities abound in his work including Cain, Jacob, Moses, Job and many others. When a religious admirer complimented him on his work but expressed his regret that he could not buy a "graven image" at an exhibition Wald responded: "Do you keep the other nine commandments so rigorously as well?"

FINDING A SOLUTION

Rabbi Amitai says that we live in a time where people are asking questions and want to understand. They are not prepared to accept the *halacha* and want to know the deeper reasons for every command.

Over the centuries, the idols that were considered gods (*Avoda Zorah*) have lead to bloodshed and war. Rabbi Amitai refers, for example, to the Egyptians and the idol Baal Peor, where there were no limits to the degradation worshippers performed to serve this 'god'.

However, in the 20th and 21st centuries artists began making art simply for its appreciation, not for idolatry purposes, as shown by Jewish sculptors Jacob Epstein, Wald, Jacques Lipschitz and Moses Kottler. Rabbi Amitai argues that this still did not lead to an improvement in humankind. The most recent example was the Germans, who were considered cultured and refined.

Music, art and literature did not prevent them from committing the evils of the Holocaust. Hindus still create statues of sacred cows and bow down to figures of Buddha. Christians decorated their religious buildings with beautifully crafted life-size human sculptures while the Crusaders killed thousands, including Jews.

"Hashem instructed us to stay away from graven images to protect us from ever reverting back to those wild dark elements within man," says Rabbi Amitai.

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks states that: "Given the intense connection – until around the eighteenth century – between art and religion, image-making was seen as potentially idolatrous.

"This concern continued long after the biblical era. But today art is balm to the soul. When art lets us see the wonder of creation as G-d's work and the human person as G-d's image, it becomes a powerful part of the religious life, with one proviso.

"The Greeks believed in the holiness of beauty. Jews believe in *hadrat kodesh*, the beauty of holiness; not art for art's sake but art as a disclosure of the ultimate artistry of the Creator. That is how *omanut* enhances *emunah*, how art adds wonder to faith." □

