

Every One of Us is a Sculptor

What happened when the famous sculptor called Rabbi Cunin?

Jews and Statues

Good Shabbos!

Over the past few years, there has been a movement to deface and destroy statues of famous historical figures like George Washington and Christopher Columbus.

What is the Jewish opinion of the matter? What is Judaism's opinion regarding statues in general?

Seemingly, the matter is very clear and simple; it's right there in the Ten Commandments: *"Lo saaseh l'cha pesel v'chol temunah..."*—"You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness" (Shmos 20:4). That means that not only is it prohibited by Judaism to worship idols or false gods, but it's also prohibited to even create a graven image—even if you don't worship it!

As for the gravity of the issue of idol worship, we learn that right here in this week's Torah portion. In Pinchas, right at the beginning, the Torah (Bamidbar 25:17) instructs our ancestors, "Distress the Midianites, and you shall smite them."

Why so? The Torah continues, "For they distress you with their

plots which they contrived against you in the incident of Peor.” Rashi (Bamidbar 25:17-18) explains, “So as to entice you to stray after Peor.” G-d’s “fury” was primarily over the fact that the Midianites had caused the Jews (40 years after the Sin of the Golden Calf) to once again worship idols. Clearly, idols in Judaism are absolutely forbidden.

The Famous Jewish Sculptor

Back in the 1950s and 60s, the most famous Jewish sculptor in the world was a man named Jacques Lipchitz. Mr. Lipchitz was born as Chaim Yaakov Lipchitz in Poland in 1891 to Orthodox Jewish parents. At his Pidyon Haben, the village rabbi placed his hands on young Chaim Yaakov’s head and, with a smile, wished him to not grow to be a rabbi. However, he blessed him to grow up to be a “Gadol B’Yisroel,” a “Great Man in Israel,” meaning, a prominent leader and figure in the Jewish community.

Even as a little boy, Jacques was drawn to sculpting. His father was a contractor for hire, and the boy learned from his father’s craftsmen how to sculpt various objects. His father didn’t like his attraction to sculpting. He saw it as a waste of time. But his mother always encouraged him and supported him. At age 18, he moved to Paris, where he very soon earned a name for himself as a first-rate sculptor. It was there that he forged lifetime friendships with world-renowned artists Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall.

While in Paris, he also rejected observance of Torah and mitzvos. Despite that, though, he always remained a proud Jew and would constantly declare himself as such.

In Paris, he married a Jewish woman, and they lived in France for over 20 years. But when WWII broke out, they fled to the United States, having been forced to abandon his home, his studio and all his major projects that were still there

After the war, he was invited back to Paris to do an exhibition of his works. So back to France they went—but while they were there, his wife said that she didn't like life in America and that she was going to stay in Paris. But Jacques decided to go back to the U.S. alone, and in a short time, they were divorced. Back in New York, he met another Jewish woman who even originally came from a Chasidic Jewish home and was much more traditional than him. They got married.

One fine morning in 1958, Jacques Lipchitz woke up not feeling well. He took several steps and promptly collapsed. He was rushed to the hospital, and when he came to, his wife informed him that they had discovered intestinal cancer and had already performed emergency surgery, and that he now needed a major recovery.

Mr. Lipchitz shook at the news; his wife, of course, was also very worried. Her brother told her to go visit the Lubavitcher Rebbe and ask him for a blessing for her husband. Well, Mrs. Lipchitz came to see the Rebbe. The Rebbe began by saying, "I know about you and I know your husband. Go home! You have nothing to worry about. He will live!" The Rebbe added a request, asking her to ask her husband to come see him when he recovered.

She went back to her husband and told him what the Rebbe had

said. Mr. Lipchitz immediately replied that if he were to live, he'd certainly be happy to come visit the Rebbe. Not a long time later, Jacques Lipchitz's situation improved, and he was discharged home from the hospital.

The Rebbe's Connection

That summer, he came to the Rebbe for a yechidus (private audience). Upon visiting, he related to the Rebbe his entire life history in great detail. He told him about his sculptures, many of which were standing in churches all over the world, and he even shared that he was working on a statue of the "virgin" for the Catholic church. The Rebbe listened to everything, not uttering a single word of comment about his sculpting career. In fact, the Rebbe only asked him two things: One, to start putting on tefillin every morning and two, to give his ex-wife a proper halachic get and to marry his current wife with a proper chupah.

Jacques Lipchitz obliged the Rebbe on both counts—after having not put on tefillin since the age of 18, he now resumed putting on tefillin at age 67. Over the course of the following years, he became quite close to the Rebbe and would even participate at farbrengens and frequently write to him.

On one such occasion, he asked the Rebbe what he could do for him. And the Rebbe told him, "You travel so much! Whenever you go to a place that has a Chabad shliach, help him." The Rebbe continued: "Call the shliach and introduce yourself. The shliach will not know who the famous Jacques Lipchitz is. So tell the shliach to ask one of his supporters who Jacques Lipchitz is, and he will already get an education."

Well, Jacques Lipchitz was next visiting California, so he picked up the phone once he got to L.A. and called the shliach of the Golden State, Rabbi Cunin. And the conversation went something like this: “Hello, this is Jacques Lipchitz. Do you know who I am?” “This is Shloimeh Cunin. Do you know who I am?”

Jacques Lipchitz laughed. He explained that the Rebbe himself had instructed him to call the local shliach wherever he went and offer to help. The fact had been that Rabbi Cunin actually had no idea who Jacques Lipchitz was, as the Rebbe had said—but after a bit of clarification, he understood that he had a very important guest on his hands here! So he quickly organized an event centered on Jacques Lipchitz.

Wherever Jacques Lipchitz visited, he would always tell people that he put on tefillin. He explained that doing so connected him with his people and his G-d, giving him the power as an artisan to receive “divine inspiration”—because in order to come up with new ideas for his sculpting work, he needed a spiritual connection.

The Rebbe On Sculpting

In those days, the Rebbe sent him a letter addressing the issue of sculpting in Judaism. The Rebbe wrote as follows: “The subject at hand was a craft associated with the fundamental prohibition of idol worship.” On the other hand, the Rebbe continued, if it is performed in a way that is compatible with the Torah, it can strongly influence the world of emotions within the viewer. There is a known concept in the Torah that the end does not justify the means. And since the purpose of the art of sculpting is to inspire the viewer to the loftiest feelings, this can

be only be achieved when one's philosophy is compatible with the Torah.

In fact, Jewish law (Yoreh Deah 141:7) states that "Some say that a human form is only prohibited... specifically with a full form with all its limbs; but the form of a head, or the form of a body without a head, involves no prohibition whatsoever"—to which the famous Halachic authority Rabbi Moshe Isserlis adds, "And thus is the custom." In fact, the Halacha is that as long as the sculpture is missing one limb, it's permitted.

In 1973, Jacques Lipchitz died suddenly. After he passed away, his wife came to the Rebbe and related that the women of the Hadassah organization had commissioned her late husband to sculpt a statue of the legendary phoenix bird, which would then be donated to the Hadassah Hospital on Mt. Scopus in Jerusalem. Her husband had almost finished the project before he had died, and Mrs. Lipchitz—who was an artisan in her own right—told the Rebbe that she wanted to finish it, but several people had informed her that the phoenix was not a Jewish symbol. So now, she asked the Rebbe, how could such a sculpture be presented in Jerusalem?

The Rebbe summoned Rabbi Krinsky, who was waiting just outside the office, and asked him to bring him the Book of Job. The Rebbe turned to Chapter 29, Verse 18, and quoted: "And I said, I will perish with my nest, and I will multiply days as the phoenix." On that verse, the Rebbe continued, Rashi comments, "This is a bird named חויל, phoenix, upon which the punishment of death was not decreed because it did not taste of the Tree of Knowledge, and at the end of one thousand years, it renews

itself and returns to its youth.” And the Midrash explains, the Rebbe went on, that this bird dies and is reborn in an unusual way: When it turns 1,000, it spontaneously combusts and is burnt to ashes, and then, out of the ashes, it miraculously comes back to life. The Rebbe concluded that it’s clear that the phoenix is a Jewish symbol.

Mrs. Lipchitz was very happy to hear that, and the project was completed.

Every Jew — A Sculptor

In one of his letters to Jacques Lipchitz, the Rebbe explained to him how the sculptor in general, and the sculpture in particular, are very similar to the spiritual work of every Jew in this world, even more so than a painter who paints.

The Rebbe wrote: “One takes a chunk of unformed raw material, whether stone, wood or metal, and then gives it a form and a concept that relates entirely to the spiritual dimension—and thus infuses spirituality and life into something that beforehand was nothing more than a block of material. The creativity of the Jewish Nation runs along similar lines... At the highest level, the Jew transforms physical material into something elevated and holy” (14 Adar (Purim Katan), 5719).

This is an amazing idea. The sculptor and the sculpture take an inert block of material and transform it into an idea. They give it a message. They give it life. And this very concepts exists in Judaism—in fact, it comes from Judaism.

In Judaism, when a Jew does a physical mitzvah with a physical

object, he or she takes that physical object and, through that mitzvah, transforms the object not just into an intellectual concept but more so, into an object of holiness. For example, when one takes a piece of leather, made of animal skin, and writes “Shma Yisroel” on it, one turns it into a mezuzah by doing so—turning it into an object of holiness.

Every Jew is essentially a craftsman, taking physical matter and making it spiritual. By doing a mitzvah with a physical object, one brings to life that physical object, turning it into an object of holiness, or at least bringing it close to holiness. This, my friends, is the lesson: Every Jew is a craftsman, and our mission is to sculpt our part of the physical world and turn it into something spiritual—to bring it up to holiness.