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**Sermon by Rabbi Shalom Paltiel
Delivered at Chabad of Port Washington**

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Art Metaphor - Torah as G-d's Masterpiece Artwork

A fellow in Boro Park decides that he wants a pet. Going into the neighborhood pet store, he's quickly attracted by the bright plumage and poise of the three parrots.

Pointing to the first, he asks the Jewish pet store owner, "How much for that parrot?"

He is stunned by the reply: "Five hundred dollars."

"What could possibly make that bird be worth that kind of money?" he wonders aloud.

"Well," explains the owner, "this parrot knows the entire Tanach (Five Books of Moses plus the Prophets and Writings) by heart!"

Sure enough, they say the first three words of a number of biblical verses, and the parrot flawlessly completes the verses!

The fellow expresses his amazement but, noting the stiff price tag, points to the second parrot and asks the price. He's even more astounded when he hears: "Two thousand dollars!" To explain the steep price, the storeowner continues, "This parrot knows the entire Talmud by heart -- with the commentaries of Rashi and Tosafos!"

Twenty minutes of testing follow, with the parrot responding precisely and correctly about even the most obscure Talmudic subjects!

Deciding that two grand was out of his price range, the customer pointed to the last parrot, hoping for a reasonable buying price. "Oh that one? He's \$5,000."

The customer exclaims, "What can this bird possibly know that could even remotely justify that outrageous price?!"

"Well, we really aren't sure what he knows," admitted the store owner. "But the other two call him 'Rebbi' (Teacher)!"

As a rabbi I am often called Rebbi, or teacher, but the truth is I learn from the people more than I teach them. I especially enjoy my conversations with children and teen agers in the congregation. They're so innocent and honest; there's much to be learned from them.

Today's sermon is inspired by a meeting I had with a Bat Mitzvah girl, Emma Podolsky, who celebrated his Bat Mitzvah at Chabad on Shabbat the week before last. Thank you Emma.

I asked the young lady to tell me what her favorite hobby is. She said she loved art. She said that she loved to draw and was pretty good at it.

I asked her why she loved it so much. She thought about it for a moment, and then gave me profound answer: "I enjoy seeing my imagination come out onto a piece of paper." Wow! How's that from a 12 year old girl...

In general people are attracted to art. We're intrigued by it; even mystified a little. I think we run to the art galleries to connect with something spiritual, less mundane, and to get away from the mechanics of the day to day grind.

And then it occurred to me that the Torah is exactly that: Art. G-d's masterpiece artwork!

No doubt many of you are thinking: Torah is art? Torah is law! At best, it's literature. But art?!

However, according to Emma's definition, which is absolutely correct, Torah is in fact art of the highest form. How do I know this? It says so in the 10 Commandments.

The 10 Commandments begin with the words: I am the L-rd your G-d; in Hebrew: Anochi Hashem Elokecho. In truth, the correct Hebrew term for "I am" is Ani, not Anochi. In fact, Anochi is borrowed from an Egyptian dialect. Why would G-d begin his first statement with an Egyptian word?

Our sages tell us it's because the word anochi is made up of 4 letters which stand for an acronym of a verse that says it all about what the Torah is: Ano nafshi ksovis yehovis; I (G-d) have taken my soul, I have written it down and I have given it to you.) So Torah is G-d's soul on paper; G-d's imagination right there on the parchment!

Just like loving, dedicated parents might envision in their minds the type of life and future they imagine and hope for their beloved child. G-d has painted a picture in Torah of the perfect life which He envisions for us, His beloved children.

He envisions a life with true values of family; marriage with real life-long, deep seated commitment; a life filled with goodness and kindness; a life where one day a week we stop to reflect on the Creator of life; a life where at every doorpost there is a sign reminding us of the Creator and His purpose; a life where before every bite of food or drink of water our children know they need to pause and acknowledge gratitude...

Torah than is the greatest masterpiece art from the greatest artist of all time.

If you like, you can look at it as "paint by number." Imagine if a fine artist gives you the outline to fill in. Think of it as a Chagall by number. All you've got to do is follow the instructions and fill in the blanks and presto – you've got a Divine Masterpiece.

How much is this masterpiece worth? Well, we all know the value of art can be astronomical. A signed

original from a famous artist can be worth millions, even priceless. How about a “signed original” from the Master Artist of all times, an original more than 3000 years old?! Priceless!

We need to be very careful not to tamper or change even one iota of Torah’s timeless message. People often ask me why I am so stubborn about the old fashioned laws. Surely the Torah, like everything else in the world, needs an update from time to time to make sure it is still relevant...

You see, if we were dealing with a book, books tolerate change; at times they even necessitate updating. But art? Whoever heard of updating art? Maybe we should replace the Mona Lisa’s nose with something more creative based on the new designs of today’s plastic surgeons... how about that?

Impossible! Any change on a work of art brings its value down tremendously.

Why? It’s because art is an expression of the artist’s imagination, of their soul. That’s why the value can be so high. If I make even the slightest change it no longer is his soul’s expression. It might be beautiful, maybe even nicer than before, but it’s not his. Torah is the expression of Hashem’s soul... “I have taken my soul, I have written it down and I have given it to you...” We need to be very careful not to touch it... Any minutia of change and it no longer is G-d’s Torah. It might be wonderful and nice and helpful; but it no longer is His.

People often tell me: "Yes, Judaism is beautiful, it's wonderful. But aren't some of these things a little old fashioned?" To which I always have the same response: "I've never seen an expiration date on the Torah."

You see, we're used to things going in and out of style. Styles change, what used to be in, is now oldfashioned.

We had single-breasted suits, then double-breasted, 2 buttons, 3 buttons. I hear they're coming out with a new style: no buttons. If you ask me, I think that's great. If you lose your buttons it's no problem; you're in style! So, we're used to things becoming old fashioned and outdated. What we don't realize is that some things never go out of style.

You remember when Coke came out with the "New" Coke, it lasted about 6 months. Then they went back to what everyone wanted: Good old fashioned Classic Coke. Like Coke, Torah is the 'real thing', its best in its original classical form, it doesn't need to be updated.

A man was visiting the Louvre in Paris and he's looking at the most valuable collection of paintings. Try as he might, it didn't mean anything to him. He had no idea what was so beautiful and valuable here. (That's what happened to me when I went there....) "These paintings aren't anything special," he said. A man, who happened to be a fine artist, was standing nearby and overheard his comment. He turned to the man and said: "These paintings are not on trial. You are!"

The ancient, timeless wisdom of the Torah is not on trial. It has been tested and proven time and again. How many things do you know that are 3000 years old, unchanged... If Torah were a stock we'd sell everything we own and buy 'Torah'... It was the Torah's system of law and order, of right and wrong. If there is monotheism in the world today it is thanks to Torah. If there is morality in the world it is thanks to Torah. If there is goodness and kindness in the world it is thanks to Torah. If there is equality in the world it is thanks to Torah. These wonderful things that have become the bedrock of modern civilization were first introduced to the world by Abraham and Sarah and the generations of our ancestors that followed.

With all the advances and modernity of today's sophisticated world, we are still totally at a loss when it comes to issues of right and wrong. The lines are blurred. We find ourselves falling back on our past for answers to these and other pressing questions regarding life's purpose and the like, how our parents and grandparents lived, the Constitution, the 10 Commandments. Why are we always looking back for answers to these questions? Because these are not things the human mind can discover and develop.

These are self-evident truths based on the belief in a creator to the universe. If all our wise men of today would adhere to the 10 Commandments, society would be infinitely better off. The saying goes, "The best things in life never change." The Torah and its teachings are timeless, relevant today as they were 3,500 years ago.

Friends, this doesn't mean we're all going to become observant Jews tomorrow. If you accept the Torah as whole and unchanged does not mean you'll be observing it all the next day. That's not practical and doesn't work. All I'm saying is, let's not cut the Torah down to size to fit our observance level. Let's not change the rules so that we are winners. Let's leave the bar where it is, and do the best we can to reach higher and higher towards the bar. We should take baby steps, beginning with one mitzvah at a time until we grow into our observance. But why tamper with the original?

Some years back we took a busload of people from this community for a tour of the Crown Heights Jewish community. We visited the Rebbe's shul, his personal library, the matzah bakery. Then we visited a Chassidic art gallery. The people were enthralled by a particular painting depicting pre war European shtetl life; they all wanted desperately to have this particular painting. But it was quite

expensive, perhaps \$10,000 or so. The group of people I was with were not very wealthy, but they really wanted it... so they settled for prints. Virtually every person on that trip came home with a \$20 print copy.

One man was especially taken by the piece. I saw him go to the back office where the curator of the gallery sat. He emerged a few minutes later with the original piece. I asked him what happened, knowing it wasn't within his budget. "I'm going to send him \$50 a week" was the reply. He'd pay it out.

We can choose to decide Judaism is too difficult, we can't "afford" it, and settle for the print. Or we can embrace the untouched, priceless original. True, we can't "afford" it right now, but we'll pay it out...

We have a whole lifetime to grow into it. First we'll start with Shabbat candles, a rather small commitment, (or Tefillin for the guys). A month or two later we can try having Shabbat dinners at least once a month at our homes. Later we might affix some kosher mezuzahs. Maybe we'll eventually consider going to shul once a month as a family. Its baby step by baby step... When we feel ready, we can become kosher, at home at first. Eventually maybe we'll go further... maybe we'll keep Shabbat once or twice a year... it's a long term plan of installments... but you get to take home the original...

You are introducing your family to authentic, timeless Judaism that is 3300 years old, unchanged since Sinai.

We all worry about Jewish continuity, about how we will transmit Judaism to our children and grandchildren. It's a very serious concern, nowadays more than ever. Think about what happens when you go out to an art museum and settle on the print... What happens to that print? It doesn't as much as make it out of the tube... You only bought it to placate your guilt at not buying the original, but it's not something you're proud of. Your children don't even know the family has it in its possession. There's no chance they'll pass it along to their children...

How about when you buy an original, signed masterpiece? It hangs right there prominently right over the fireplace in the family's living room. The children know about it and its important place in the family home. It has real meaning to them; they understand its value. You can be sure one day it will hang in their living rooms; and one day it will hang in their children's living rooms... Its pretty much guaranteed this will be passed along... no one leaves an expensive masterpiece behind... After all, it's something precious and valuable...

The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Schneerson, of blessed memory (father-in-law of our Rebbe) had an affinity for art. He often said that if one appreciates art and has a creative imagination, that this can be a useful tool in developing an appreciation for Torah and spiritual growth. Occasionally he would have opportunity to visit some of the famous art museums of Europe.

On one such visit, he came across a stunning work by the famous Italian artist Rafael. It was a painting depicting a battlefield, down to the last detail: the soldiers on their horses screaming as they attack and are being attacked; the generals on tall towers with binoculars in hand shouting commands; wounded being carried off by fellow soldiers; compassionate army physicians running alongside stretchers carrying the wounded; the entire picture down to the last detail, right there on the canvas, reflecting the reality precisely. The Rebbe writes in his diary that many tens of thousands of artists and army experts had visited this painting, and all agreed it was correct, down to the last stroke of the brush.

Legend has it, that a high level retired general from the Czar's army once visited that museum. He stood there motionless, gazing at the painting for seven consecutive hours... and then fainted... When they

revived him he said: "This painting is so real. I felt as if I was really at the battlefield. I fainted from sheer fright..."

My dear beloved friends, if Torah is our G-d given painting, we need to take the time if we want to appreciate it. Just walking by a work of art, giving it a moment of attention and nodding our approval doesn't cut it. We need to take the time to gaze deeply into the words of our holy, timeless Torah. We need to explore its every nuance and detail. We need to take it in... It will move us beyond what we think imaginable!

As a young rabbinic student I was traveling Europe with a handful of friends. When we visited London we went to see the Crown Jewels of course. We were very taken by them.. (I believe we were especially moved considering our background as students of Chassidic thought and Kabala, which often use royalty as a metaphor for G-dliness.)

One of us was "the businessman" type, the kind of guy who would fit right into Jackie Mason's story about how when Jews go to restaurants they immediately begin figuring out how much money the guy is

making... they begin counting the tables, how many rows, times how many shifts, multiplied by how much per plate... this was exactly this guy's personality. So there we are, standing there at the Crown Jewels, taking it all in, when this fellow pipes up: "Excuse me, how much are these worth?" The woman tour guide seemed rather annoyed. She snapped back at him in her strong British accent: "Sir, I'll have you know, there's no price for them; it's the Crown Jewels."

It reminded me of the Midrash which says the following: When G-d wanted to give Shabbat to the Jewish people he called Moses and he said: Moshe, chemda genuzah yesh li b'veis otzorey, veshabbos

shmo. I have a precious gem in my treasury room... it's called Shabbat. Please go and tell my children I want to give it to them.

I've heard about this Midrash since I was five years old. I often wondered about it. Why did G-d need to make this elaborate introduction? If He wants to give us Shabbat, well, let Him give it to us. If he wants to give us another set of laws that will govern our behavior on the seventh day of the week, fine.

But why the dramatic introduction?

It's because He wants us to know this is not a set of rules. Shabbat is not a nice tradition that we do because that's what our ancestors did. It's Shabbat... It's the Crown Jewels!

G-d, the Creator of the entire world, who created everything around us, the people, the plants, the planets, the entire amazing, gorgeous universe of life, says to us: That's all fine and good. But Shabbat is different, it's from His treasury room! It's priceless... It's the Crown Jewels... It's the good stuff...

One of the arguments people have about Judaism is that it's too physical for a religion, with too many dos and don'ts. If you're going to give me religion, they argue, give me something spiritual, something transcendent; something that offers everlasting bliss and eternal salvation, maybe some outer-worldly experiences, mountain top meditation exercises. Now that's a religion. But Judaism? Who needs a religion that tells me what to do all the time? And down to the nitty gritty... what to eat and when to eat... who to marry and how to marry... what I can and can not do on the weekends...

My dear friends, please consider that Judaism is not really about detailed ritual at all. It's art! It's all about G-d giving us a chance to experience a life that He alone has imagined for us. It's all about our loving Father in Heaven, the Master Artist, giving us his color by number instructions so that we can go ahead and draw for ourselves our own masterpiece in the image of the Divine. He made it easy for us. All we got to do is follow the instructions and stay in the lines, and we'll end up with a Divine Masterpiece which will make life fulfilling, joyous, purposeful and blessed.

The Talmud tells us about a conversation the Sages had about Scripture, the 24 Books (comprised of Torah, Prophets and Writings) that make up the Written Book of Torah. Originally the Sages felt that only 23 Books should be included. They wanted to exclude Song of Songs, a prophetic work by king Solomon where he uses a loving relationship between a man and his beloved woman to describe our people's relationship to G-d. The Sages argued that Song of Songs is not "Torah" – there are no laws or instructions in it; it is merely a metaphor for the relationship. It is poetry, not Torah law. It's nice, but let it be an addendum to Torah.

Then Rabbi Akiba, the eldest and wisest of the Sages arose and said: "My dear colleagues and students. You don't understand... you missed the whole point. If all the other 23 Books are holy, Song of Songs is holy of holy." All the books of laws and instruction are there only because of G-d's deep, infinite love for His children. It is really all about the "art", the loving, limitless connection with Him that He wishes for us to appreciate; this is why the rules are there, so that we live our lives according to His dream and imagination for us... Embracing the Torah lifestyle is not compliance to a system of law. It's signing on to a marriage with a beloved... with all of the joy, radiance and blessing that come with it...