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The New Life of the Second Commandment in the Internet Age

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Today, images — graven or otherwise — are absolutely everywhere. We have billboards, Times Square, 3D printing, holograms. And Pinterest. Indeed, images as we experience them are far too common to be sacred idols. We imbue them with no holiness, nor even the possibility of holiness. Their makers are not magicians — they are engineers, coders, techies. We know that. Still, there are many images we distrust — and many more we are learning to distrust. We (and I speak here of we broadly as “American society”) have almost always distrusted the images of pornography as a facsimile of intimacy. We have learned in an age *prior* to Trump to distrust politicians, though his wife may still be the most airbrushed in history. And we are learning (slowly and painfully) to distrust the

media. See below, a composite photo printed on the cover of the *Los Angeles Times*.

This week's Parsha — Parashat Yitro — contains the 10 commandments. The second of those commandments, “make no graven image,” though it feels central to who we are as Jews, might, at first blush, appear somewhat irrelevant. But in an era of Photoshop, Kardashian memes and Twitter bots, it begins to sound less quaint and more applicable. If Pizzagate can take over the Internet and threaten an election based on a few badly forged photos — we need to talk about what it means to distort creation.

The first thing I noticed reading this prohibition is that its continuation contains language that could have been lifted from Genesis. It references the “heavens above and the waters below,” and later, in Deuteronomy when the prohibition is repeated, the Genesisian air is amplified. We are prohibited from creating “the form of any beast on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth.”

Perhaps even more important is that the root “ASE” is used in the story of the creation of man (“*na'ase Adam b'tzalmenu k'dmuteinu*”) as well as in the prohibition against distortive creation (“*al ta'ase lekha pesel kol tmunah*”). The difference in pronoun is striking and informative. When God conceives of making Adam, the plural is used. “Let us make Man,” says the verse in Genesis. The Midrash teaches us there that while God created Man by himself, God consulted with the angels on the process. God paused. There was a contemplative moment, an engagement with a “cohort” (if you will ;-), an intentionality. This moment of consideration in God's creative process is important — it models a mindfulness that can and should be present in our own moments. The moment that Man was brought to life was creation at its most considered. And it means that to “make” something in good faith means to make it unselfishly, thoughtfully, and potentially with the input of others. Rashi on “*kidmuteinu*” says that God's “likeness” means too that Man would have the power “to comprehend and to discern.” These are the powerful positive elements available for employment into Man's creation.

In contrast, the prohibition on making graven images is directed at the individual. It says “al ta’ase” – a single person should not make an image. It is as though the verse is saying that one should not have the hubris to imagine that they can extort creation for some kind of personal profit. The lure of our capacity for creation interrupts our attention and provides the possibility of a catharsis in this world that is not well-earned. It can be cheap. And it is almost always cheap when it not made with “comprehension and discernment.” These are the images we distrust. This is pornography at its worst. An airbrushed Melania Trump. [Even a rat dragging a slice of pizza up the stairs.](#)

We are re-learning, in the era of Photoshop, memes and Twitter bots to distrust our eyes. And we are learning to look out for these new “graven images” created in bad faith. In some ways, thanks to the Internet, the second commandment just got a whole new life. The only way forward is intentionally, thoughtfully, and in consultation with our better angels.

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