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BAIS HAVAAD HALACHA CENTER
105 River Ave. #301, Lakewood NJ 08701
1.888.485.VAAD (8223)
www.baishavaad.org
info@baishavaad.org
Lakewood • Midwest • Brooklyn • South Florida

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SHOOTING STARS: MAY WE PHOTOGRAPH CELESTIAL BODIES?

Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

NASA's uncrewed Artemis I Moon-orbiting mission recently sent back some spectacular images of the Moon and the Earth,¹ and the Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS) instrument on the NOAA-21 satellite produced a stunning composite image of the Earth.²

Although the making of such images is certainly permitted for non-Jews, it is prohibited for Jews. The Torah commands: "You shall not make [images of what is]

with Me; gods of silver and gods of gold shall you not make for yourselves."³ While one might have thought that this *pasuk* is forbidding the construction of idols, Chazal and the *pshat*-oriented *mefarshim* interpret it to forbid fashioning depictions of certain entities, because people may err and ascribe divinity and power to them.⁴

Chazal list a number of entities that are included in this prohibition: *Ophanim*, Seraphim, *Chayos*, *malachei*

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1. Stunning photos from NASA's Artemis I Moon mission. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/nasa-moon-mission-artemis/>

2. First Image Released from NOAA-21 VIIRS instrument. National Environmental Satellite Data and Information Service (NESDIS).

3. Shmos 20:20.

4. Rashbam ibid.; Sefer Hamitzvos lo so'aseh 4; Raibag ibid. *biur hamilos*.



PARSHAS SHMOS

SECRET SOCIETY

Excerpted and adapted from a shiur by Dayan Yehoshua Grunwald

He replied, "Who made you a man, a ruler, and a judge over us? Are you saying that you are going to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?" Moshe was frightened and he thought, "Indeed, the matter has become known."

Shmos 2:14

Rabeinu Yonah (Sha'arei Teshuvah 3:225) writes that one may not reveal a secret that another person tells him, even if no prohibitions of *lashon hara* or *rechilus* are violated, because it can cause the source mental or emotional damage. Later *poskim* codify this ruling. The Gemara in Yoma (4b) says that without permission, it is improper to reveal information one received from another person in private, even if he was not explicitly instructed not to tell anyone. The Me'iri, the Orchos Chaim, and the Chofetz Chaim mention both precepts. The Tzitz Eliezer writes that a doctor may not reveal patient information, as this is considered a secret. The same

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Q&A from the
BAIS HAVAAD
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ask@baishavaad.org

Loan Disapproved

Q I recently discovered that the CEO of a bank where I hold an interest-bearing savings account is Jewish. What should I do?

A Depositing money into an interest-bearing bank account is a loan at interest to the bank. If the bank is Jewish owned, this is a violation of *ribbis*. If the Jewish ownership was discovered after the deposit was made, the funds should be withdrawn immediately so as not to accrue more interest.

If the bank is a corporation (which is always the case in the U.S.), there is room for leniency, because the shareholders make no personal guarantee. For this reason, R'

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hashareis, the Sun, the Moon, the stars, the constellations, and humans.⁵ While several Ashkenazi *Rishonim* maintain that the prohibition extends to animals, the consensus of the *poskim* is that it does not.⁶

In the course of its complex discussion of this prohibition, the Gemara distinguishes between protruding (*boleit*) images, which are prohibited, and sunken (*shokeia*) ones, which are permitted. The halacha follows the view of many (though not all) *Rishonim* that this distinction applies only to images of humans, but not to those of celestial objects. Because humans are “protruding” entities and clearly perceived as such, only protruding representations of them prohibited, but heavenly bodies are “sunken in the firmament,” or at least are so perceived by people, so even sunken representations of them are prohibited.⁷ There is an opinion that only protruding or sunken representations are prohibited, but flat ones of ink or paint are permitted, but the halachic consensus is that these are also prohibited.⁸

Since even flat images of celestial bodies are prohibited, some authorities maintain that photographs of them are too.⁹ But R’ Shmuel Vosner is unsure about this, “because the image is recorded by itself via the known processes of photography.”¹⁰ Some maintain that only complete images of celestial bodies are prohibited.

5 Rosh Hashanah 24b; Avodah Zarah 43b. There is an additional category of prohibited depictions comprising the Sanctuary (*heichal*), Entrance Hall (*ulam*), and Courtyard (*azarah*) of the Bais Hamikdash and its vessels. The contours of this portion of the prohibition are beyond the scope of this article; cf. Halachipedia: Drawing or Sculpting Forbidden Images: Replications of the Vessels of the Temple. For more information and sources on all the various aspects of this prohibition, see the Halachipedia article; R’ Doniel Neustadt, Making An Image Of Celestial Bodies; Halachos of Forbidden Images (Halachically Speaking-YWN).

6 See Bais Yosef Y.D. siman 14; Shu”t Lechem Rav siman 15. Cf. Halachipedia: Drawing or Sculpting Forbidden Images: Animals and Plants.

7 See Hilchos Avodah Zarah 3:10-11; Hasagos HaRa’avad ibid.; Ran Avodah Zarah 43b (9a in Rif pagination); Bais Yosef ibid.

8 See Lechem Rav ibid.; Shu”t Divrei Malkiel cheilek 3 siman 58.

9 Divrei Malkiel ibid. takes for granted that a photograph is the equivalent of a flat ink or paint image (although he is discussing photographing human beings, not celestial bodies). Shu”t Minchas Yitzchak cheilek 10 siman 72 takes for granted that photography of celestial bodies is prohibited. Chut Shani also forbids photographing the Sun (in its entirety—see below).

10 Shu”t Sheivet Halevi cheilek 7 siman 134 otos 5, 7. Cf. Halachipedia: Drawing or Sculpting Forbidden Images: Sun, Moon, and Stars.

Others argue that partial images of the Moon are prohibited, because the partial Moon appears in the sky,¹¹ but partial images of the Sun are permitted, because the Sun appears in the sky whole (even though it emerges and disappears gradually, so part of its disc is not visible at sunrise and sunset).¹² Others maintain that partial images of the Sun are also prohibited.¹³

This author is aware of only limited discussion of the permissibility of displaying and viewing images of the celestial bodies on electronic screens, which present images without producing a permanent record.¹⁴

R’ Yitzchak Yaakov Weiss (the Minchas Yitzchak) considers it obvious that with regard to heavenly bodies, “there is no distinction between permanent (*miskayemes*) and impermanent (*eino miskayemes*)” images, and he accordingly forbids using a film projector to display an image of the Sun upon a wall. It would seem to follow that displaying an image on a computer screen should be prohibited as well, unless we distinguish between the two on the grounds that in the case of the film projector, the projected image is a manifestation of a real image on the film, while in the case of the computer screen, there is no “real” image at all.

Extending the prohibition to computer screens would obviously be a rather onerous stringency, as one would have to refrain from viewing any image or video containing celestial bodies. Further analysis of this question is required.¹⁵

11 See Darchei Teshuvah Y.D. siman 141 os 38.

12 Sheivet Halevi ibid. os 7; Chut Shani.

13 Mekor Mayim Chayim Y.D. ibid. end of se’if 7 (cited in Darchei Teshuvah ibid. os 5) and Minchas Yitzchak ibid., and cf. Shu”t Yabia Omer cheilek 10 Y.D. siman 58 Kovetz He’aros Vehe’aros al Shu”t Rav Pe’alim cheilek 4 cheilek Y.D. os 6 p. 478; Halachipedia ibid. nn. 38-40.

14 In other halachic contexts, there is substantial discussion among recent authorities as to the status of text displayed on computer screens. See, e.g. Shu”t Sheivet Halevi cheilek 7 siman 4 and Daily Halacha 8 Adar, 5782. Erasing Hashem’s Name from Computer Files.

15 Cf. Halachos of Forbidden Images at n. 33.

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Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe Y.D. 2:62) allows the lending of money at interest to such institutions. But the majority of *poskim* disagree and say that the Rabbinic prohibition of *ribbis* still applies (Minchas Shlomo 1:28, Minchas Yitzchak 3:1, et al.). Rabanim therefore advise to avoid Jewish banks.



RAV ARYEH FINKEL

Regarding the already-accrued interest, the Torah requires a lender to return *ribbis* that was collected, unless the borrower forgives it (Y.D. 161:2 and 160:5). According to the majority view above, you must return all interest that accumulated during the lifetime of the account. If it is a financial strain to return those funds, you may ask the bank to forgive it. It is impractical to attempt to speak with the leadership of a large bank, so mail a letter to the headquarters with an attached check, explaining that you wish to return all the interest for religious reasons unless the bank willingly waives the obligation. If the letter is ignored (which is most likely to happen), you can consider the obligation forgiven.

The fact that the CEO is Jewish doesn’t necessarily mean your bank is Jewish owned. If the company is publicly traded, it can be assumed that most of its shares are owned by non-Jews, and a company’s Jewishness is determined not by its leadership but by its shareholders. But some *poskim* say that if executives hold a significant number of shares—which is common—they determine the business’s character, and it is considered Jewish owned. (The details, though, are beyond the scope of this forum; see Mishnas Ribbis perek 2 footnote 10.)

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would apply to other professionals like therapists and rabanim. But contemporary *poskim* note that it may be permitted in cases where withholding

information could cause damage to others, like in the realm of *shiduchim*.

It is reported in the name of R’ Yaakov Kamenetsky that it may be permissible to share secret information

with a spouse, because that is expected by the one who revealed the information. But there is no such expectation when information is shared with professionals.

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