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"Does Judaism impose limits on what art can, or should portray?"

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

In the category of Jewish misunderstandings, most of us have heard some version of the passage in Deuteronomy (4:16-18) that prohibits making any image of human or creature. But imbedded in this ban is a further note that may be less familiar. The prohibition, we learn, is only applied to creating an idol for worship purposes. Otherwise, the actual Jewish attitude towards art is permissive, if not progressive, and the outflow is unquestionably expansive. Far from limited to ceremonial objects worthy of adornment, we can point to generations of incredibly talented and productive Jewish artists who have worked in every medium imaginable.

Jewish artists have also routinely pushed the boundaries on what is acceptable. Consider the show "Too Jewish" mounted by the NY Jewish Museum in 1996 that explored this matter. However, the real question about limits on art is not uniquely a Jewish one, but is rather a thorny one for society generally. When does art cross a line from tasteful to offensive and who get to be the arbiters of these questions? Some would say, in fact, that the aim of art is to push the boundaries, to get us to think, to stir up conversation, even to effect change.

That, undoubtedly, has been the mission of the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, which has presented its version of irreverent, non-conformist political satire. The output of articles and cartoons has been welcomed and championed by many, but also, as we know too well, rejected by others who viewed it as insulting and incendiary provocation. The real question is not about the release of art but the murderous reactions to it.