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Memory, Questions and Definitions: Images of Old and New
Rites of Passage

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Memory, Questions, and Definitions: Images of Old and New Rites of Passage

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ONE: DEFINITION AND IDENTITY WITHIN ART AND JEWISH ART

Jewish identity is rife with questions regarding definition. What is “Jewish”? Is it an identity tag that refers to religion, to nationality, to ethnicity, to historical association, to affiliation with a particular body of customs and traditions, or to a combination of features that might fall under the rubric “civilization,” as Mordecai M. Kaplan first argued seventy-five years ago?¹ Applied to art, that issue is multipliable in different directions. One might ask whether in using the phrase “Jewish art” one is referring to the identity of the artist (and then by what criteria is he or she judged to be Jewish—birth, conversion, conviction?) or to the nature of the art, in which case one asks whether it is Jewish by subject, symbol, style, content, or intent.

One might turn the definitional question in a completely different direction, which carries beyond the matter of Jewishness. One might ask how art—or perhaps “fine art” would be a more appropriate turn of phrase—is distinguished from craft. In the medieval period one could hardly distinguish the one from the other—the same anonymity usually appertained to sculptors and mural or panel painters as to tapestry weavers and furniture makers—and the closest identifiable category to what we might in our own time call “architects” were chief masons—but the extent to which they who supervised the construction of the cathedrals of the Romanesque and Gothic periods may be said to have designed them is more often than not almost impossible to determine.

Names emerge during the Renaissance, and with them a sense of definitional and categorical distinction that separated architecture, sculpture, and painting of various sorts (on walls, wooden panels, and eventually canvas) from gold- or silver-smithing or cabinetry-making and other crafts²—but many of the more important artists were first trained in their masters’ workshops in a range of craft-skills. Such training was as endemic to the creation of their major works as preliminary sketches and drawings were.

One of the issues that emerged for visual art as it approached the last third of the nineteenth century was a sense that both hierarchy among the arts and division between fine arts and crafts arts offer false categories. The

Arts and Crafts Movement in England and its siblings across Europe, from *Liberta* in Sicily and *Modernismo* in Spain to *Art Nouveau* in France and Belgium and *Jugendstil* in Austria, all sought, in a fundamental way, to eradicate the line between “art” and “craft”—a chair or even an ashtray could be as invested with aesthetic significance as a painting or a statue.

One of the places where this sensibility was echoed outside of Europe was in Jerusalem, where the Bezalel Academy of Art that opened under the leadership of Boris Schatz in 1906 pursued a similar ideology of blurring, if not eliminating altogether, the line between “fine arts” and “craft arts.” Bezalel’s goal was, moreover, to create work that could be called “Jewish art”—Jewish national art—at a time when the very definition of “Jewish” was first acquiring a national parameter in active political and cultural senses.

Certainly, if Schatz failed—because of the definitional problem pertaining to both “Jewish” and “art” but especially to “Jewish”—on the other hand, he nevertheless offered the first steps in shaping what would eventually become Israeli art.³ He also helped to further push open a door that had been slowly opening for at least a generation before him, regarding the consummate object matter of “craft” in a Jewish mode: Judaica. For centuries, guild restrictions and inhibitions had prevented Jews from becoming craftsmen and artisans of their own Jewish ceremonial objects.

Judaica had perforce been created throughout Christendom by non-Jewish artisans, who typically followed Western—essentially Christian—canons of style and symbol. So the definition of centuries of Judaica as “Jewish” would have to pertain to the Jewish ceremonial purpose it served rather than to the identity of the artist or the style, subject, or symbols of and on the object. But the eventual aftermath of Emancipation had been to open up new possibilities for Jews in a range of professions, including those that included work in metals in both secular and sacred contexts. And Schatz’s Bezalel Academy took that idea and ran with it, seeking to turn out scores of competent Jewish producers not only of ashtrays and statues but also of Torah pointers and *hanukkiyot* [Chanukah menorahs].⁴

Jewish ritual objects fall into two general categories. There are those artifacts that pertain to the cycle of the year and its diverse celebrations and commemorations—from the candelabra, *kiddush* cups, and spice boxes of the weekly Shabbat and *Havdalah* [ceremony at the conclusion of Shabbat] celebrations to the often elaborate multileveled plates that occupy the center of the Passover Seder table. On the other hand are those objects that pertain to life-cycle events, from circumcision to Bar/Bat Mitzvah to wedding celebration to funerary and *yahrtzeit* [anniversary of a loved one’s death] commemoration. One may view both these two categories and the ceremonial

objects that pertain to them as also marking a series of interweaves between the individual and the community, on the one hand, and between memory and focus on the past and thought directed toward the future, on the other hand.

The range and nuanced aspects of both kinds of celebration and commemoration have expanded in the past several generations. Female baby-naming and male circumcision ceremonies have emerged, just as a broader spectrum of Jews has embraced Bat Mitzvah together with Bar Mitzvah; but weddings have become more evenly focused on both bride and groom for growing numbers of Jews. And on the other hand, new holidays, from Israeli Independence Day to Holocaust Memorial Day, have found their way onto the calendar. The array of Jewish artists eager to address aspects of Jewish being has exponentially expanded in the past generation. New ritual objects—such as the Miriam’s Goblet that now adorns the Seder table in many Jewish homes—have joined the array of newly designed but familiar ceremonial objects.

The world of visual imagery and its concomitants that reflect the matter of definition and of both memory and hope—that partake of both celebration and commiseration—have been nothing short of explosive in engaging Jewish being in the world. Part of this ever-expanding world of visual imagery follows directly from the ideology of which Bezalel was part a century ago: it blurs or altogether eliminates the line between craft and art by producing sculptures that may double as ritual objects and ritual objects that stand on an equal footing with painting and sculpture as fine arts.

* * * * *

As Jewish artists emerged in the last century—and with exponentially increasing vigor in the past few generations—an obvious question that many of them asked is “how exactly do I and my work fit into Western art, when for the past sixteen centuries or so, Western art has essentially been Christian art?” Among the most stunning of responses to that question are those that apprehend the triptych form (which for Christian art symbolized the triune God embraced by Christianity) but radically adapt it. For example, Barnett Newman’s 1950 *The Name II* is an all-white painting marked only by two thin gold vertical lines that turn the canvas into a conceptual triptych, thus re-articulating the subject matter of traditional Christian triptychs with a Jewish sensibility [fig. 1]. Instead of a figurative Christ—on the Cross, flanked by the two thieves; or on the Virgin Mother’s lap, flanked by saints—the artist offers blank space. As Judaism embraces an invisible God, and as traditional Jews refer even to God’s ineffable Name only by circumlocution—as *HaShem*:

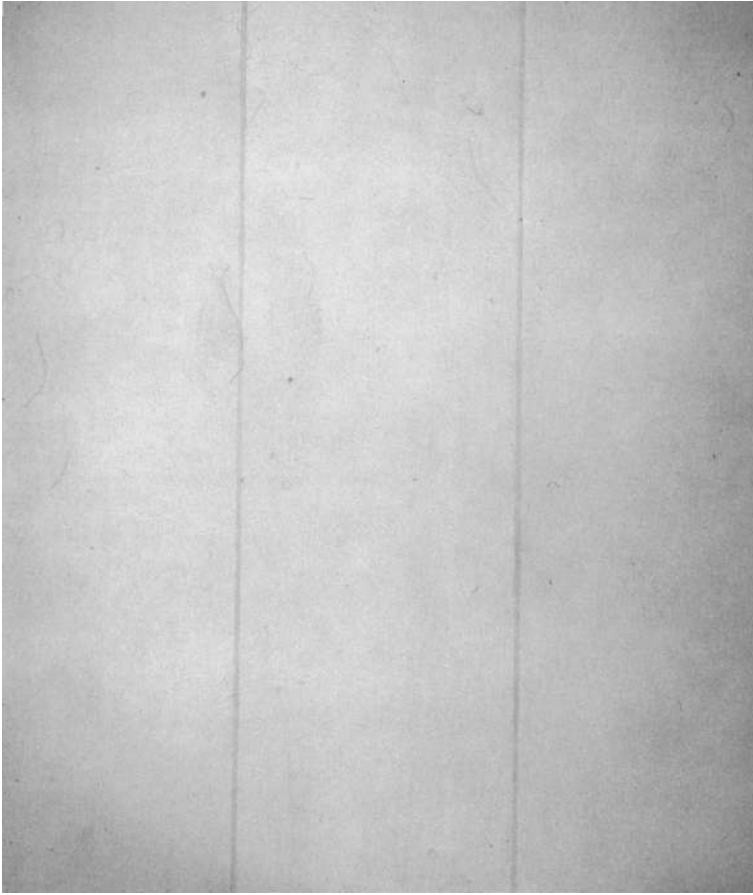


Fig 1: Barnett Newman, “The Name II.” 1950.
Magna and oil on canvas.

“The Name”—except when praying, the God of no-thing-ness, whose Name may not even be spoken outside prayer, has been “portrayed” by the absolute absence of color. But white also chemically encompasses the totality of color—so the invisible God contains all things within it.⁵

Nearly two generations later, in the 1990s, Susan Schwalb created an entire series of paintings on wood panels—actual hinged triptychs that can hang on a wall or rest on a surface. Called *The Creation Series*, these works add to Newman’s response two new elements. First, while retaining the abstract sensibility of his work, she adds color—browns, blues, as well as gold leaf, silverpoint, and copperpoint [fig. 2]. Nor is this arbitrary, for Schwalb was inspired by the opening series of illuminations—the cycle of creation, presented in an abstract, utterly nonfigurative style—found in the *Sarajevo Haggadah*, the fourteenth century manuscript with arguably the most



Fig 2: Susan Schwalb, “Beginnings.” 1988. Silver point, acrylic, gold leaf on wood. From the *Creation Series*.

renowned illuminations and illustrations in the medieval Jewish tradition. So, part of her response to the question of fitting in as a Jewish artist is to impose an abstract style, based on a specific medieval Jewish visual work, onto the triptych form.

The second element that carries beyond Newman’s formulation—and like his, is in part conveyed by the titles of individual works within the series—is that Schwalb introduces specific geometric and other elements that connote femaleness. Most obvious among these is the downward-pointing triangle that has been associated in art with the female pubis since the Neolithic period; and the swirling, undulating lines of silverpoint encased in circles that suggest the waters of the womb. Thus her *Creation Series* is not only about God’s creation of the universe but also about venerating female fertility and creativity in the child-bearing, facilitating-the-survival-through-continuity-of-the-species sense and redirecting that fecundity toward the creation of visual art.

Thus, Schwalb’s engagement is relevant to this discussion on two fronts. On the one hand, the instances when women artists have been acknowledged before the twentieth century—or even been permitted to become artists when their inclinations and talents pointed in that direction—have been relatively few

and far between. So reconnecting female creativity to the realm of visual art is taking on a subject that transcends national, ethnic, or religious categories, just as the matter of defining “art” versus “craft” does. On the other hand, the specifically “Jewish” aspect of Schwalb’s symbolic and stylistic sources evokes the question that Jewish women might well ask—and that a growing array of contemporary Jewish female (and occasional male) artists have asked: to wit, “how do I, as a woman, fit in to Judaism, which in its traditional form excludes me from any number of key individual and communal roles, such as reading publicly from the Torah or reciting the *Kaddish* [the mourner’s prayer] for my deceased father?”

TWO: ART AND ARTIFACT ADDRESS THE BEGINNING OF THE LIFE CYCLE

This array of issues and questions, pertaining to definition and identity, to past memory and future hope, reflected in a range of different modes of what might be perceived as “Jewish art,” is generally addressed and richly expressed in contemporary works that pertain to rites of passage. Thus the 2008 acrylic and mixed-media work by Washington, DC, artist Marilyn Banner, called *Prayer* offers a broad spiritual subject that encompasses both individual and communal aspects of celebration, commemoration, and simple communion within the human-divine relationship [fig. 3]. Into the acrylic paint she has embedded not only bits of chiffon, lace, and even some wallpaper but also two photographic transfers. One, in the lower right-hand side of the image, depicts her parents—perhaps even before they were married—and across from them, to the lower left, is an image of herself as perhaps an eighteen-month-old toddler.⁶

Add to these the childlike rendering of ghost-figures, flowers, and seven hearts—seven, the number of completeness within the Jewish tradition (among others) going back to antiquity—and the domination of the work by spring-like colors—sky blue, grass green, and flower violet—and what do we see in this fecund work? A religious concept become secularly spiritual; prayer as love and love as prayer—birth and rebirth, which are the most basic needs addressed by religion from its beginnings and expressed in visual art that has served religion from its beginnings.

Art and, within art, ceremonial objects pertain to prayer in pertaining to the human need to address divinity so that we survive—so that what has created us and what we therefore believe can destroy us blesses us and does not curse us. And the most fundamental aspect of survival and blessing is expressed, in nature, by spring and its color-laden explosions and in ourselves



Fig 3: Marilyn Banner, “Prayer.” 2008.
Acrylic and mixed media on wood.

by the creation, through love, of the children who carry us from past to future.

Santa Monica-based artist Ruth Snyder also addresses a broad ceremonial and celebrational concept by means of a modernist mode, in her 1998 mixed-media collage *Life Cycle* [fig. 4].⁷ A white, gender-ambiguous, but somehow female-seeming (at least to my eye) figure stands purposefully within a sea of abstract patterns. These are torn (literally) from diverse flotsam and jetsam—found objects and materials—that include tiny Chinese scroll writing and the odd letter (W) and numbers (1, 2, 4, 8). It is as if the penchant for text so emphatically ascribed to Jews has been turned inside out and upside down: the words are unintelligible to the uninitiated—but in Chinese, not Hebrew—and

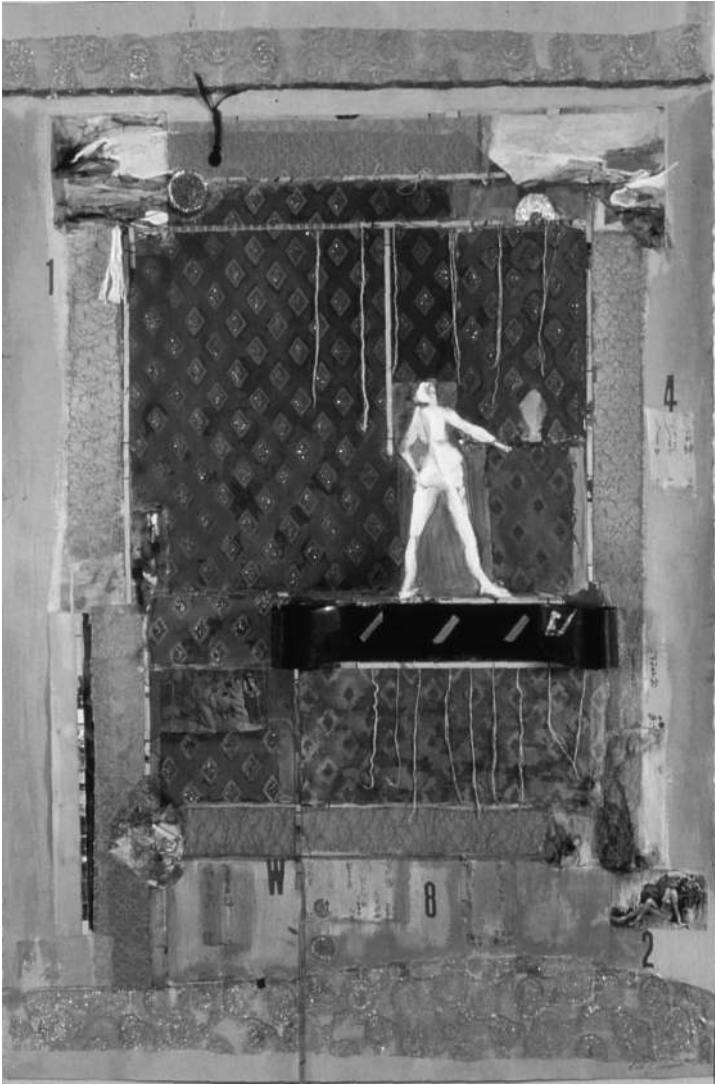


Fig 4: Ruth Snyder, "Life Cycle #II." 1998.
Mixed media, collage.

the isolated letter and numbers add to the playful ambiguity of the entire composition. Does the "W" stand for "woman" within the life cycle—near to the "8," which is, after all the number referring to the day after birth when a Jewish boy is circumcised, but which in the last generation has come to mark ceremonies welcoming Jewish girls into the community as well?

But what of the other floating numbers? Does "1" symbolize God? Does "2" stand for the parallel—male and female—aspects of the life cycle? (There is a bare-breasted female figure discreetly posed in a grisaille image

hovering above the number “2.”) What of the number “4” that surges along the upper right of the image, near the white figure and almost across from the “1”? Could it refer both to the Tetragrammaton—the ineffable four-lettered name of God—and to the four-directioned world contrived by God with all of its ambiguities? Ambiguity defines the Jewish life cycle in its traditional articulation—particularly from a female perspective—at every step: birth, circumcision, Bar Mitzvah, wedding (divorce), and funerary rituals all seem to have their exclusionary properties where women are concerned.⁸

There is no such gender ambiguity in New York-based Jenny Tango’s 1995 mixed-media work, *Finally, a Son!* On the contrary [fig. 5]. Tango plays overtly on the very birth-time ambiguity that is a part of what flows somewhat covertly beneath the surface of Snyder’s work. Tango has extracted her “characters” directly out of the world of Sholom Aleichem’s *shtetl*—the “traditional” Jewish Old World as romanticized by so many American Jews and echoed as far as Broadway’s *Fiddler on the Roof*. More specifically, this work is part of a series that focuses on the women of Chelm.⁹ But she has leaped between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, interwoven the question



Fig 5: Jenny Tango, “Finally, a Son!” 1992.
Mixed media on paper. From *Woman of Chelm* series.

of conversion out of Judaism and the long history of Jewish-Christian relations (culminating, almost offhandedly, with the Holocaust),¹⁰ played on the imperfection of the perfect number “seven” when one of the (absolutely identically faced) daughters converts to Catholicism, and when in any case, the seven are merely daughters: only the birth of the single son will bring perfect satisfaction to parents previously limited by a slew of female progeny.

The son's birth affects a rebirth of parental joy (and even at that, it is the mother who is ecstatic, while the father is nowhere to be seen—is he in the synagogue, the study house, drinking with his friends, busy handing out cigars?) after the “death” of the undutiful daughter who married out of the tradition. If life-cycle events are among the most obvious events in every culture (including Jewish culture) that help define where individuals fit into the world, then Tango's piece is part of a growing legion of works that ask who fits in where by way of reference to this most fundamental, incipient, of life-cycle moments.

At first glance, Leslie Starobin's 1996 *Jewish Daughter* appears to approach the same territory from the opposite angle [fig. 6]. After all, we are confronted with a stylized blonde daughter and therefore—in what by the early twenty-first century refers to an era that seems as distant as that of the *shtetl*—a Barbie-doll beautiful daughter. But the plot quickly thickens. A single Hebrew word tattoos the image across her upper-right thigh—within touching distance of her crotch—*tzenuah* [modest (female)].¹¹ Her lower legs are less legibly marked with part of a long quotation in English—certainly from a street sign in one of the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in Jerusalem: “Jewish Daughter, dress modestly! We do not tolerate people passing through our street immodestly dressed!”

We can piece together the entirety of the warning/announcement because parts of it are repeated vertically across her upper left torso and head and on several other parts of the image—most obviously between the figure of the Jewish daughter (and now we know where the title of the painting comes from) and a tree with beautiful, bright-red fruit among its branches, and a serpent slithering up its trunk. We look back at the daughter and see that the same bright-red fruit is held in her hands and that her body is covered with leaves, protecting it from our peering eyes. Everything falls into place: this Jewish daughter is a direct descendant of Eve, construed by all three patriarchal Abrahamic traditions as a temptress.

Eve (who is nobody's daughter, except God's) is the archetype; every Jewish daughter, in general and in walking through “our streets” wherever they are, “immodestly dressed” in whatever fashion we (whoever we are) regard as “immodest,” carries with her, from past to future, the burden of the crime

that got humanity thrown out of the Garden of Perfection. While the Jewish tradition does not view that act as an original sin so fundamental that all humans are automatically born into it—and so egregious that only an extraordinary act of divine self-sacrifice can overcome it, as Christianity teaches—the sense that the first life-cycle moment for females, birth, is marked by the inherent danger of becoming an ongoing accessory to the fundamental crime is richly reflected in the framing of the words that overrun Starobin’s image. But her clever Jewish daughter will prevail: like a figure by Modigliani,¹² she has one eye blue and one black—one looking outward and the other inward, where her communion with God need not depend on patriarchal parameters.

This initial series of images pertains to art forms—paintings, albeit with nontraditional mixed-media additives—not traditionally associated with rites of passage, for which traditional expectation would look toward various “craft” arts. But in New Yorker Tobi Kahn’s 1986-1987 *NATYH, Baby-Naming Chairs* we encounter a reversal of this principle [fig. 7]. Aside from the fact that the chairs were made not to welcome sons but to welcome daughters



Fig 6: Leslie Starobin. “Jewish Daughter.” 1996.
Acrylic and ink on paper.

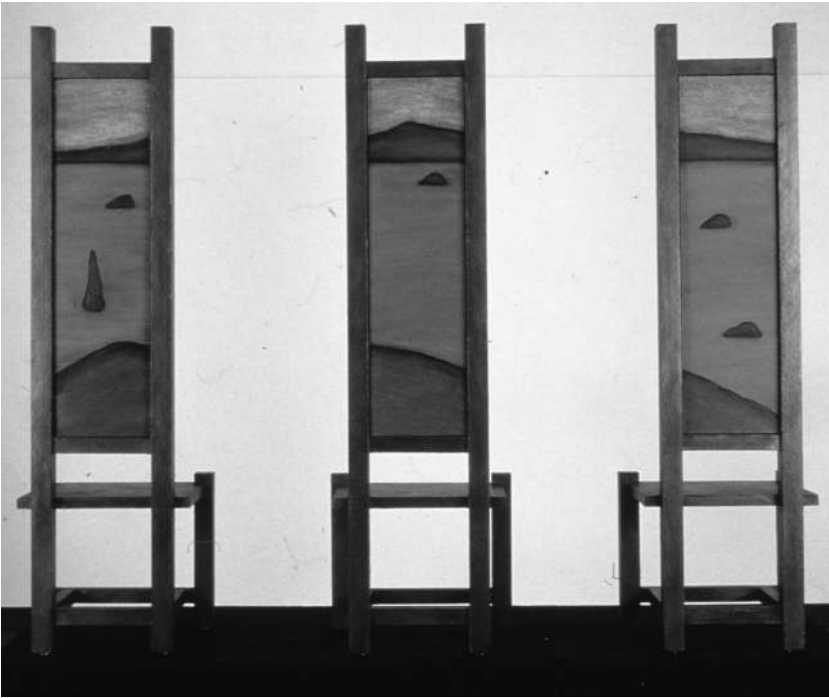


Fig 7: Tobi Kahn, “NATYH, Baby-Naming Chairs.” 1986-1987.
Acrylic on canvas and wood.

into the Community of Israel¹³—so that Kahn, a modern Orthodox, male artist, sees his art as an instrument to balance the traditionally imbalanced male-female life-cycle equation at its first stage—he has deliberately blurred the line between “craft” and “art.” These are indeed elegant high-backed chairs, constructed in a rigorous rectilinear Arts and Crafts style. Not only are they a far cry from the small Elijah’s chairs of the medieval and postmedieval tradition (used for male circumcision ceremonies) in their scale, but, more to the point, their backs are enhanced by exquisite semiabstract landscapes.

These are precisely the sort of landscapes that one sees in Kahn’s paintings, stretches of sea, shore and sky, rocks emerging from the waters, evoking peaceful, meditative times and places. There is more. Both in his paintings and here in these chairs, the artist uniquely mixes and thickens his pigments with plaster dust and slowly layers the image onto its backing, building it up in order to create textured, sculptural surfaces. Conversely, his sculptures are painted with this same plaster-and-pigment combination—which means that he constantly blurs the lines between painting and sculpture as well as between ritual objects and “fine art.”

We can see this in reverse by referring, for example, to three 1985 works

from his *Shrine Series*. Neither *ECCU* nor *BRUN* nor *EYKHAL* is a shrine of any definite sort [fig. 8]. They all somehow evoke a sense of shrineness, but they are all actually abstract sculptures, explorations of form, and also, as it turns out, color. Each has an arbitrary, contrived name—just as the group of baby-name chairs do—that reinforces the obligation placed by the artist onto the viewer's shoulders: to approach these works without name-based or medium-based preconception. So his media mix and meet at several verbal and visual points.

Where newborns are concerned, verbal and visual play are utilized by Israeli-born, New York-based Rachel Giladi, with regard not to the entrance of baby girls into the world but to babies of whichever gender for whom misfortune selected unmarried parents. Such babies, in the Hebrew language of the Jewish tradition, are called *mamzer* [a bastard]¹⁴—and there is an entire Talmudic discussion of what constitutes a *mamzer*, the centerpiece of which is the limitations imposed on someone so labeled with regard to his (or her) ceremonial and other rights and obligations as a member of the Jewish community.

Mamzer is the name of Giladi's found-object work [fig. 9]. The artist has taken a plastic baby doll and mounted it on the wall with a piece of paper wrapped around its wrist. Instead of the baby's name or that of his mother or his birth weight or any other information that might ordinarily be contained on that paper bracelet, she has inscribed the word "*mamzer*." This photo-realist toy, hanging there with its arms a bit up and out—can one avoid thinking of criminals hanging or even of the Christ who is central



Fig 8: Tobi Kahn "ECCU," "BRUN" and "EYKHAL."
Acrylic on wood and bronze. 1985. From the *Shrine Series*.



Fig 9: Rachel Giladi, “*Mamzer*.” 1995.
Plastic doll, paper and ink.

to the Christian tradition?—represents a baby with all of its plumpness and folds of soft skin. And are not all babies innocent and pure in the Jewish (as opposed to the Christian, original sin) tradition? So how can a *mamzer* be a semi-disenfranchised-from-the-community *mamzer*? What crime has she or he committed to justify that status?

The linguistics of the situation make it even more complicated, since not only can anyone be casually insulted by being called a *mamzer* just as anyone might be called a “bastard” in English, without literal reference to his parentage. But in one of those reversals of which language is fond,¹⁵ the term can also apply to someone who seems to have inordinate success or good luck. Such a reversal, in the case of this term and Giladi’s innocent hanging on the

wall, underscores the idea that however we humans choose to structure our social hierarchies and however we decide to classify each other may have little to do with how God looks upon us and favors or disfavors us.

God is the prescriber of all proper behavior, and every tradition wants its children to absorb the guidelines for proper behavior from babyhood. In every tradition there are overlaps between individual and communal roles and responsibilities and between life-cycle and festival-cycle events. If in some traditional Jewish communities a Jewish boy receives his first haircut in a formal ceremony at age two, all Jewish boys become Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen—when he will first read from the Torah publicly, before the congregation—then at what age should a Jewish child begin to participate in Jewish festivals? The answer—at least in Santa Fe artist Ted Egri’s circa-1985 *Succoth* [fig. 10]—is that it is never too early to begin the process of participation.



Fig 10: Ted Egri, “Succoth.” Ca 1985.
Cast bronze.

Egri's cast-bronze high-relief sculpture presents a babe in its mother's arms reaching for a bunch of grapes hanging from the open-air roof of the *sukkah*—the structure¹⁶ that, in its temporary and fragile construction, recalls the temporary booths in which the Israelites dwelled as they wandered for forty years through the wilderness, so that the old generation, born in slavery, could be succeeded by a new generation born in freedom. The fruits and vegetables with which the *sukkah* is traditionally decorated represent the richness of the fall harvest, the fecundity of nature, and the graciousness of God's blessings and generosity.

So this festival and this work are both about the cycle of life that interweaves the human microcosmic and natural macrocosmic realms. Egri's simplified sculpture is about the intertwining of the individual shifting into the community (in his or her babyhood) and the communal celebration (Sukkot) that marks both natural and historical cycles of continuity and memory. Moreover, the artist double puns with regard to art history—and thus addresses the abiding Jewish question of where his art fits into that history. For on the one hand we recognize the echo of endless representations of the Virgin Mary and Christ child—in many of which, the babe in arms, reaching for grapes, is symbolically reaching for his future martyrdom, since grapes and their wine are a symbol of blood and therefore, in the context of Christian art, of sacrifice.

But that association predates Christianity. Dionysius is the god of wine in the pagan Greek tradition—whose father is divine (none other than Zeus, king of the Olympian gods) and whose mother is human—who dies and is reborn. His constituents are promised rebirth after death. To assure this, they participate in the ceremony of symbolically consuming the god—in the form, earlier, of bull's blood and flesh and, later, of wine and bread—which ceremony will evolve, in Christianity, as eucharistic communion. A renowned mid-fourth century BCE sculpture by Praxiteles shows the infant Dionysius in the arms of the god Hermes, reaching for grapes. So on the other hand, Egri plays on this image, as well—except that, like the figures themselves, the grapes have been transformed: in his work they represent earthbound, not sacrificial, postmortem, joy. For in the Jewish tradition, wine commemorates the blood offerings in the Temple, connotes hope for a messianic-era restoration, and punctuates both life-cycle and festival-cycle celebrations with joy.

THREE: RITES OF PASSAGE BETWEEN LIFE AND FESTIVAL CYCLE

The ultimate Jewish festival that embeds past into present—most emphatically through myriad gastronomic symbols—and ties the individual to the community

is Passover. The act of turning the meal table into a symbolic altar—a space of sacred celebration, endemic to Judaism (we enter and exit every meal with formal blessings that connect us to God)—is expanded at the Passover meal, every detail of which is organized according to a prescribed order. And so the meal is called a Seder, meaning “order.” The extended service that precedes the act of eating is an extended narrative of the Israelite experience in and coming out of Egypt, punctuated by focus on symbolic foods. Stated otherwise, the Seder liturgy is an extended answer to a series of stylized formal questions posed at the outset by the youngest child at the table capable of asking them. Thus, for whoever that youngest child is, the Seder at which he or she asks the four questions constitutes a rite of passage into a raucous communal experience.

Moreover, any number of details are designed to accentuate the role and participation of children—from the colorfully illustrated *Haggadah* [the liturgical “book of telling”]¹⁷ that offers one of the important art historical exceptions to the more frequent tendency not to disfigure God’s words and words directed to God with human imagery, to the long tradition of hiding part of the central matzah and not concluding the Seder until the children have found it. Santa Fe artist J. Barry Zeiger’s 1999 installation, *Seder Table*, turns the Passover table into a historical narrative by means of a range of found objects, disfigurements, and reconfigurations [fig. 11]. Lights festoon the table. These may be seen as symbols of the divine presence—there are four of them, connoting both the four directions of earthbound reality and the four letters of the ineffable Name of God, and in the context of the Passover Seder, the four questions, the four sons, the four goblets of wine, and other Passover echoes of the importance of that number within the Jewish tradition. Moreover, the kindling of lights at the outset of every Jewish Sabbath and festival recalls the beginning of the divine process of creation—of shaping an order [*seder*] to the universe, when “God said: ‘let there be light!’ and there was light.”

But the table is otherwise laid with a range of objects, most obviously, beautiful blue and white crockery—most of it broken. We recognize the diasporic complications of breakage and scattering that have defined much of the history of the Jewish successors to the Israelites. And rather than passage from bondage to freedom, those successors have been pushed from one locale to another and have endured one destructive effort after another from many of their neighbors. Zeiger has, in fact, split his Seder table down the middle, but bursting up through that destructive seam is a series of birch trees: the ever-regenerating Jewish people rises from whatever ashes to which history has consigned it.



Fig 11: Jay Barry Zeiger, "Seder Table." 1997-2001.
Mixed media found objects installation.

Of course, the trees are shorn of every hint of leaf or fruit—but beyond their upper reaches the eye is drawn to large fluttering swaths of blue cloth—the color of the stripes and Star of David in the Israeli flag. Above the windows from which the cloth extends blunted Stars of David (made from tennis racquet presses) are centered by glowing lights. These last components form a compendium not only of hope but also of already-achieved fact: the rebirth of an independent Jewish state in the same space to which the

wandering Israelites eventually made their way—in the aftermath of the most destructive moment in Jewish history.

Zeiger's entire installation is an exploration of the layered paradoxes of destruction and regeneration, death and rebirth, mourning and joy that define the Jewish condition. At the same time, his table that is no table but a work of art—his work of art that is no work of art in traditional painting-and-sculpting terms but in terms of the aesthetics of reshaping flotsam and jetsam into a work that makes the viewer think, hard—partakes of a reality endemic to both art history and Jewish history: a reality fraught with a dynamic tension between conserving the familiar and reforming the familiar into something new. This is a work of memory, questions, and definitions that views all of Jewish history as an ongoing rite of passage.

Passover is the seminal statement of that ongoing experience, and as a celebration it has continued to evolve from the limited shape prescribed in the Torah to the growing specifics added in the late Second Temple and rabbinic periods to those additions that we recognize as part of the medieval period to recent innovations.¹⁸ One of the more important recent innovations, exploding in the 1990s, was the addition of a second goblet—an oblique balance for the Cup of Elijah—on the Seder table. Miriam's Goblet is filled with water, rather than the wine that fills the Cup of Elijah, for it recalls the important role of Moses' sister in providing water for the Israelites in the wilderness—the rabbinic tradition asserts that God provided her with a miraculous well that accompanied the Israelites through the wilderness but disappeared when Miriam died.¹⁹

The goblet symbolizes not only Miriam's rarely mentioned role (in the traditional Passover narrative) but also, by extension, all of the unmentioned women in the narrative and women as a whole in their essential role in birth and creativity—the very theme that centralizes the Passover story, from the birth of Moses (and it was Miriam, we recall, who watched over the basket that held him as it lay in the water in the rushes until the Pharaoh's daughter came along) to the birth of the Israelites as a covenantal people. Linda Gissen's 1997 *Miriam's Dance* is one among many such cups that now grace Seder tables. Her work both alludes to Miriam—most specifically in the painted figures dancing along the goblet walls, recalling Miriam's role in leading the Israelites in a song of thanksgiving and praise of God after their successful transit of the watery Sea of Reeds—and also hovers on that familiar border between useful object and work of art. For her painted glass goblet is “held” in the outstretched hands of a gold-painted sculpted bronze Giacometti-esque figure that could be Miriam herself [fig. 12]. In this case, we have, as it were, a double portrait



Fig 12: Linda Gissen, “Miriam’s Dance.”
1997. Acrylic on glass and gold
leaf on bronze.

of the heroine, as presenter of the goblet body and as leader of the dancers depicted along the goblet sides.

Nor is it the case that only women artists have added Miriam’s cup to the Seder table—with its emphasis on the rite of passage of the People Israel through the Sea of Reeds and through the wilderness to Sinai and beyond Sinai toward the Promised Land—and the prayer that accompanies it²⁰ to complete contemporary Jewish participation in that rite of passage. Among male artists, Tobi Kahn, not surprisingly, includes this cup in the array of ceremonial objects that he created in his 1998 work, *RKADH, Miriam’s Cup* [fig. 13]. Once again we cannot miss the blurred line between ritual object and

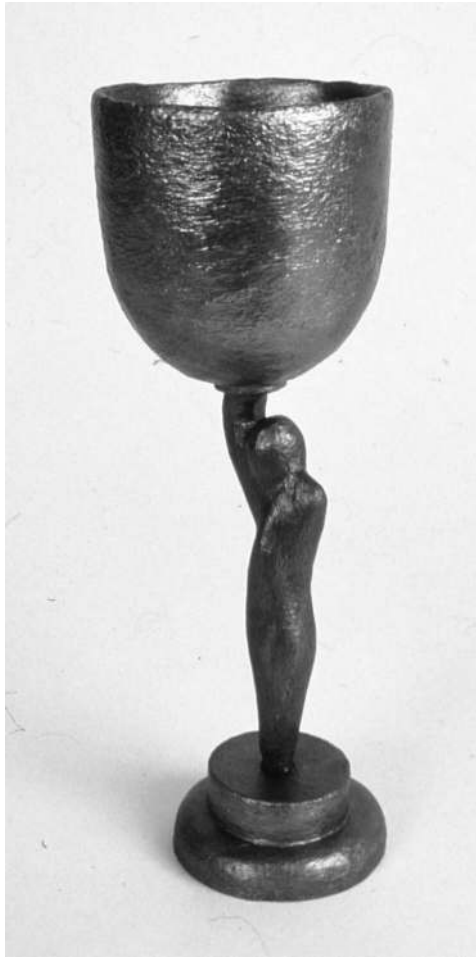


Fig 13: Tobi Kahn, “RKADH, Miriam’s Cup.” 1998. Acrylic on bronze.

sculpture, as the stem of his cup assumes the copper-colored, sculpted form of a female figure, standing on a gold-colored base, from whose upraised hand a gold-colored goblet rises.

Passover as the consummate expression of the interweave between individual and communal rites of passage, and between past and present and present and future (we end the Seder with the messianic recitation “next year in Jerusalem!”), has inspired an extraordinary range of kinds of art. Certainly none is more compelling than the series of fourteen enormous semiabstract acrylic-on-aluminum sculptures (and hundreds of drawings), focusing on the Exodus, created by Connecticut-based artist George Wardlaw in the 1980s and 1990s; the series was inspired by the Passover narrative—in particular the ten plagues. One of these, *Exodus II: Warning Signs*, is an 88” high, 106” wide, and

24" deep piece that suggests a cross between a black pyramid mounted on a massive platform and a stylized representation of the mountain ascended by Moses to receive the Torah [fig. 14]. The platform is made up of five layers, the number of books of the Torah, which is the foundation and platform for all of Jewish thought and history.

Wardlaw's work thus connects the experience of the Israelites as oppressed builders of Egyptian monuments and the moment of their painful reconfiguration at the foot of Sinai (painful because of Moses' extended forty-day sojourn on top of the mountain and the fear of abandonment that led to their construction of the golden calf). Its warning is reflected in the hundreds of subtly painted locust images swarming over its surface—alluding to one of the plagues that beset the Egyptians—and is directed to the Israelites and their descendants as well, who might too easily lose their faith or abandon the word and will of God.

This sculpture also recalls the synthesis of the ethnicity of Moses—the Israelite raised in the ultimate Egyptian household—and the spirituality of

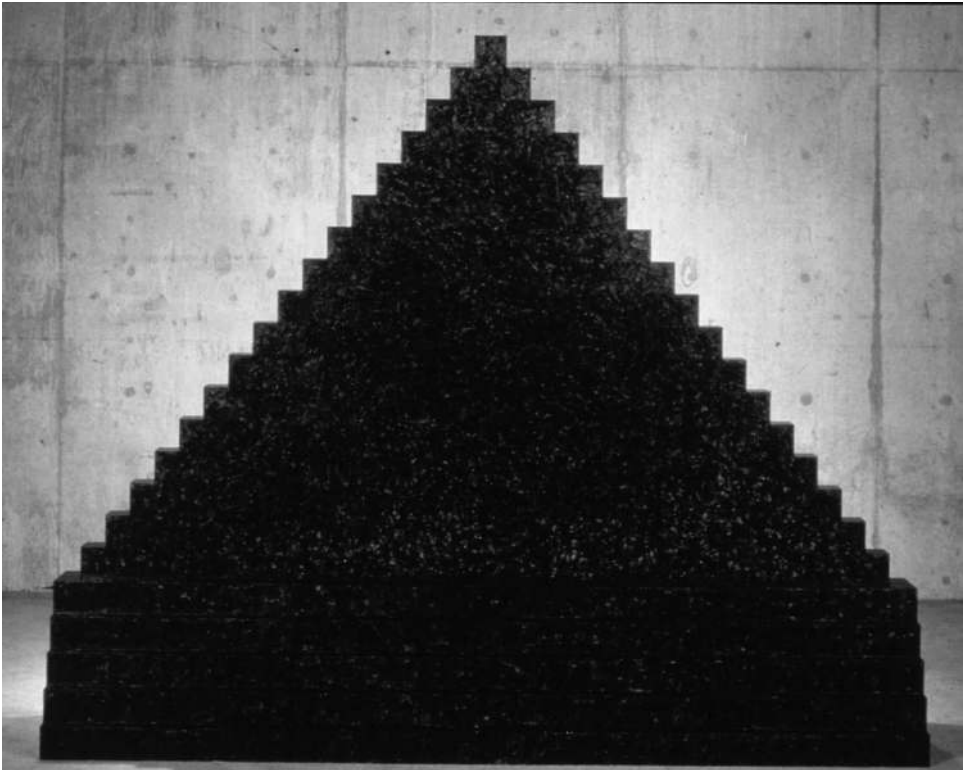


Fig 14: George Wardlaw, "Exodus II: Warning Signs." Ca 1988.
Acrylic on aluminum. From *Exodus* series.

Jethro, his father-in-law, who joined the covenantal community when he heard about “all the goodness that God had done to Israel” (Exod 18:1-12). Such an ethnic-spiritual perspective also reflects a particular, personal rite of passage for the artist. Raised as a Baptist in a small southern town he was eventually inspired, in part by contact with the Judaism of Jack Tworkow, one of Wardlaw’s key mentors when he was a young art student in New York City, to convert to Judaism years ago. We are reminded, then, not only of the blurred definitional line between artwork and ritual object but of the ambiguities ever-present in how we decide to label either of them as “Jewish” art or object, specifically with regard to the identity of the artist.

The passage from the Sea of Reeds to the other side of Sinai was as dangerous as the transit through the sea itself. The time until the arrival at the foot of the mountain is understood to have been seven weeks. That period is commemorated on the Jewish calendar by counting the time from the second day of Passover until the arrival at the day before the festival of Shavuot (which means “weeks”). In the era of the Temple, the period was marked²¹ by the bringing of a daily dry-measure offering [*omer*] of barley flour to the Temple. In the modern era, *omer* counters, as they are known, have occasionally marked the passage of those weeks. Perhaps—who knows?—this visual custom was inspired by Christian counters of the days leading up to Christmas. Or was it the other way around?²²

In any case, in the past generation, not only has the creation of *omer* counters become increasingly common, shaping them as interesting works of sculpture has yielded increasing diversity of *omer*-counter types. Among these is a harmonious 1996 work by Nashville artist Arnold Schwarzbart—not called “*omer* counter” but given a name, *The Time ‘Till Sinai*, thus underscoring its identity as a work of art even if it is a ceremonial object that serves a specific ceremonial purpose [fig. 15]. Schwarzbart’s work offers seven rows of triangular pyramid-shaped enamel on copper flaps that can be slid along dowels (a kind of Sinai abacus), the ends of which are embedded in the beautifully fired clay frame. Behind these, implanted within that frame, are forty-nine square lozenges of gold leaf, imprinted with Hebrew letters used as symbols for the numbers being counted down.

The Jewish calendar is rife with the importance of numbers and counting with precision. The most distinctively “Jewish” commandment among the ten²³ offered at Sinai pertains to the keeping of the seventh day of every week as a day of rest—it is what (explicitly in the reading of Exodus 20:8) links our behavior directly to God’s since God rested [the Hebrew verb is *shavvat*] on the seventh day after completing the creation of the physical universe. Every

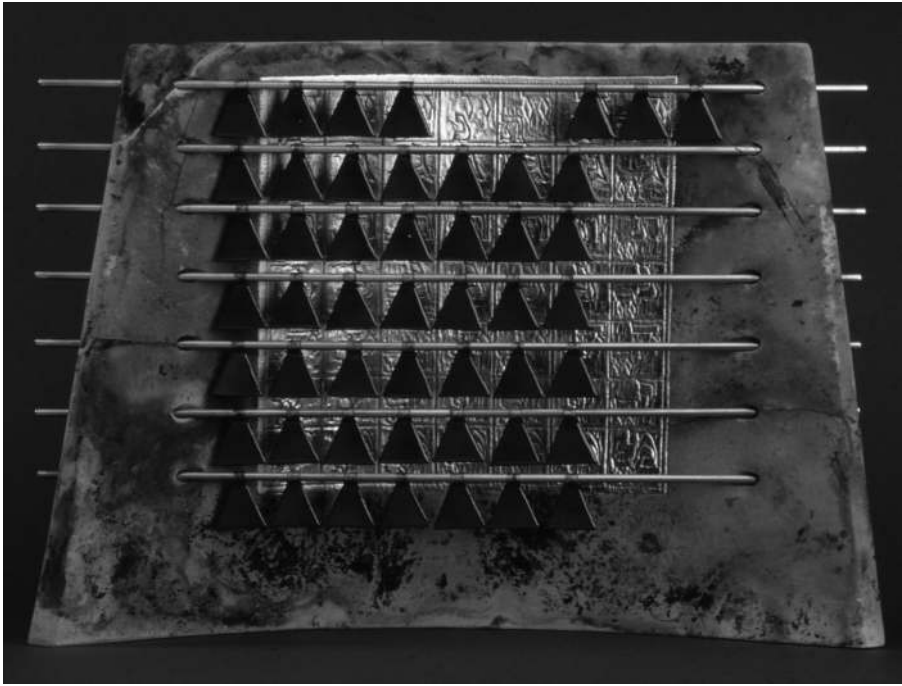


Fig 15: Arnold Schwarzbart, “The Time ‘Til Sinai.” 1997.
Clay, gold leaf, enamel on copper.

Sabbath begins precisely at sundown, and every traditional Jew wants to mark that moment of passage from the weekdays into that pre-paradise time-space with absolute precision. The Sabbath candles, lit exactly at that moment of transition from one conceptual reality to another, recall the divine act of initiating the ordering process of the universe that culminated with the divine rest that we emulate every week by celebrating the Sabbath.²⁴

The odd, yet not so strange, thing is that the one time when the Jewish tradition becomes calendrically imprecise—even though it articulates itself in a precise manner—is at the end of the Sabbath. The ceremony of *Havdalah* that marks the transition back to the work week²⁵ does not take place at sundown, but rather—as if to prolong the pleasure of the Sabbath to the last possible moment—only when three stars have appeared in the sky. The thing is that one can fairly easily discern the moment when the first star appears,²⁶ and perhaps even the second, but by the time three are visible, many more than three are discernible. So the notion of waiting for that moment is a recipe for a delightful vagueness. The point is to make sure that, if one errs, that error extends the Sabbath beyond its theoretical endpoint, rather than abbreviating it.

As new visual directions have marked not only Torah-mandated annual festivals but also weekly Torah and post-Torah-mandated celebrations, the last generation has seen an explosion in the production of Sabbath- and *Havdalah*-related objects that operate on the line between “craft” and “art.” So, for instance, Jennifer Karotkin’s 1995 *Havdalah Set* places a trio of delicately sculpted objects, made of sterling silver, pearl, and fourteen-karat gold on a steel and silver plate that could just as easily be read as a platform for three small abstract sculptures [fig. 16]. How many of these would the uninitiated recognize as ritual objects? Certainly the tallest piece would be recognized as a wine goblet. Perhaps the medium-height “figure,” tilting in to the others, might be identified as a holder for the *Havdalah* candle, with its sharp culminating spit intended to hold the candle in place.

But the most distinctive artifact in the arsenal of *Havdalah* celebration, the *badas liv’samim*—the spice box, in which sweet-smelling herbs and seeds are placed as a symbol of the sweetness of the Sabbath and which is passed from person to person in the reluctant farewell to the Day of Rest—is its own oyster-like entity, without precedent in the traditional vocabulary of *Havdalah* spice boxes. Karotkin has allowed stylized vines to wrap their way up the stems



Fig 16: Jennifer Karotkin. “Havdalah Set.” 1995.
Sterling, steel, pearl, 14k gold.

of the cup and the candleholder, and a gold leaf flutters from the candleholder spit—thus underscoring the nature of the Sabbath as a moment of Garden of Paradise calm within the turbulent week and between Eden and the messianic era, for which these objects are the instrumentation of farewell.

The light that is such a constant across the spectrum of Jewish celebration takes a particular place at the center of the ceremonial stage with Hanukkah. On the one hand, Hanukkah [the word means “dedication”] marks the defeat of the Seleucids by the Maccabee-led Judeans and the cleansing and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 165 BCE. On the other hand, the account of those events is found outside the Hebrew Bible—the first two books of Maccabees are read as canon by Orthodox and Catholic Christians, but neither by Protestants nor by Jews—and thus the holiday itself is a decidedly minor one throughout most of Jewish history. Nonetheless, for various reasons beyond this discussion, the holiday has grown, particularly in the modern era, in popularity (mostly, no doubt, related to the perceived need for a balance to Christmas in the annual cycle of the sun, at least in the past century or two).

In any case, the *hanukkiyah* [Chanukah menorah] has long been an object of visual passion—whether in all those times and places when non-Jews were necessarily its makers, or (the more so) in the last century when Jews have been freer to direct themselves to the production of Judaica. In some traditional circles, the tree-style *hanukkiyah*—with nine “branches” (one for each of the eight nights of the festival and a ninth with which to kindle all the others) rising from a “trunk”—is considered unkosher because its form “competes” with the tree form of the seven-branched Temple menorah. Since the advent of Reform Judaism in early nineteenth century Germany, that inhibition has diminished, and in the last generation, as in other areas that we have observed, the line between *hanukkiyah* as ritual object and as work of art is often stunningly blurred.

We are by now familiar with the underlying aesthetic principle of Tobi Kahn’s mid-1990s *QUYA, Hanukkah Lamp*: a sculpture—on three legs, rather than one—inundated with plaster-suffused pigment [fig. 17]. The golden candleholders rise like the central buds from a series of petals opening up—not in response to the light of the sun but in order to present the candles that will offer light in the long dark night of December. Cynthia Schlemlein’s 1997 sterling silver work is called *Zoe: Hanukkah Lamp*—so that, like Kahn, she has “named” her creation (“*zoe*” means “life” in Greek, so we might understand this work as an address of the concept of life as it relates to light and heat in the wintertime as much as to the stunning survival of the Jewish people symbolized by the Hanukkah story), thereby translating it away from the



Fig 17: Tobi Kahn, “QUYA, Hanukkah Lamp.” 1996. Acrylic on bronze.

normative ground of unnamed ceremonial objects. And, in fact, her work is far from “normative.” Two vertically soaring and beautifully rendered wing forms hold up the delicate bowl around the periphery of which the candle flames burn [fig. 18].

The most enduring traditional rabbinical prescription for *hanukkiyot* is that the eight candles signifying the eight days of the festival be absolutely level, and in transgressing the line between ritual object and objet d’art Schlemlein has chosen—as many artists have in the past few decades—to ignore that prescription. Cleveland artist Bea Mitchell crosses that line even more radically in her 1994 bronze sculpture, *The Burning Bush* [fig. 19]. This intricate and exquisite work may be seen to offer a double visual pun. The bronze itself rises and twists and turns in a manner that recalls the gnarly extrusions of some extraordinary thicket—the sort one might imagine obscuring the path to Sleeping Beauty’s palace for a hundred years. Yet the tips of all of these “branches” arrive at delicate pointed tips that suggest flames. So the bush that Moses turned aside to see, that “burned with fire but was not consumed” (Exod 3:2)—the bush that proved to be the moment defining his rite of passage from anonymous middle-aged shepherd of his father-in-law’s flocks to his stentorian senior adult years of staring down the Pharaoh and leading the recalcitrant Israelites through the wilderness, all the while communing with God—as well as the flame that could not consume that bush are both contained within the bronze.



Fig 18: Cynthia Schlemlein. “Zoe: Hanukkah Lamp.” Sterling silver. 1997.

But in fact the bronze sculpture bears nine candles—so it is at the same time a (“nonkosher”)²⁷ *hanukkiyah*, a holder for the flames that pertain to the Hanukkah story. This is to say that the beginning of the narrative that will lead to Sinai, the eventual reshaping of the Israelites from desert tribes to a kingdom that will spiritually center itself in a Temple that will be destroyed as that kingdom self-destructs and that will be rebuilt, and in the many centuries’ aftermath of that destruction and rebuilding, the remnant of those tribes-become-kingdom will throw off a religious oppressor and rededicate the



Fig 19: Bea Mitchell, “The Burning Bush.” 1994. Bronze.

Temple menorah—this entire narrative, over a millennium long, is contained within the bronze of Mitchell’s work. And the memory of that defining narrative is carried by her into the present day within this metal meeting point between art and ritual object.

FOUR: THE LIFE CYCLE BETWEEN ART AND OBJECT

In one sense we come full circle back to the specifics of the life cycle and in another revise the ongoing conversation regarding “fine art” versus “ritual object” in turning to Malcah Zeldis’s 1984 oil-on-board painting, *Jewish Wedding (Me and Leonard)* [fig. 20]. The self-taught artist—her work would be



Fig 20: Malcah Zeldis, “Jewish Wedding (Me and Leonard).” 1984.
Oil on board.

labeled “primitive” or “naïve,” if one were seeking to define her style within the standard canons of art historical discussion—has embraced a kind of God’s-eye view. The couple hovers, dreamlike, iconlike, large—larger than any one else in the tableau, for this is pre-Renaissance significance perspective, in which importance to the theme and not distance from the viewer generates comparative sizes of figures within the image. Dancing couples swirl around them, punctuating the expanse of Barbie-doll pink floor. Celebrants dine around a bright sky-blue table. Across the upper background register, the artist extends basic Jewish wedding elements, from the *huppah* [wedding canopy] to the band to the cake. This is not a ceremonial object but the image of an idealized ceremony.

Indeed, within its idealized imagery there is something stiffly and formally odd about the bride and groom, beyond their eye-catching size: they are there but not there as others raucously celebrate on their behalf. The work offers a range of diverse and real elements, but it turns out that it is less a record of a real event than a visual wish for it: dream, memory (Zeldis was married, but

that marriage ended years ago), and reality converge within that wish: “I get my boyfriend to marry me in my paintings,” she has commented.²⁸ So, as with life in general and as with the Jewish experience across history and geography in particular, the further that we follow into life-cycle rites of passage, the stronger seems the possibility for shadows to appear within the celebratory light.

One gains a particularly poignant sense of the mixture of shadow and light in considering that most fundamental and traditional of customs associated with the Jewish bride as she prepares for her wedding: the *mikvah* [ritual bath]. While the intention of the *mikvah* is to purify her before her wedding night and to underscore the purity with which she enters her marriage (and the groom, too, might immerse himself in a *mikvah*), there is more to the ritual of immersion than this, both in its premarital significance and in its other-than-premarital use. Shari Rothfarb addresses this in a moving 1999 video installation—thus incidentally offering an example of the expanding range of media encompassed by contemporary “Jewish art” both in general and as it encounters rites of passage—called *Water Rites* [fig. 21]. From a ceiling-installed video projector, the artist projects twenty-seven comments regarding the significance of the *mikvah*—the pool of ritual purification into which Jewish women have immersed themselves for endless generations, not



Fig 21: Shari Rothfarb. “Water Rites.” 1999. Video projection on water.

only before getting married, but most often before the Sabbath and also after menses—into a tiled, *mikvah*-like pool of water.

This last, postmenstrual immersion, precisely because it is a ritual immersion [called *niddah*] and not merely a physical act of bathing, reflects in part on the supposition that menstrual blood is unclean—thereby offering a shadow component to the bright light of Jewish marriage. For traditional laws govern the times when a Jewish man and wife may and may not indulge in sexual relations, based around this supposition of ritual uncleanliness that afflicts the wife every month but does not afflict the husband—even though that same blood is associated with the bringing forth of life that is made possible by those sexual relations, which are commanded by God in the renowned biblical imperative to “be fruitful and multiply.”

But Rothfarb does not allow this particular shadow to consume the complex mottling of her work. Shimmering within the shallow waters of the pool into which they are projected is a time- and spacewide array of images of *mikvaot*, including footage of ancient and modern *mikvaot* from Massada, Jerusalem, and the Galilee. And the quotations are not just commentaries but narratives, including one, for example, that speaks of a group of women who insisted to their Nazi executioners that they be allowed to immerse themselves properly, cleansing themselves before crossing the border from life—that is, before being shot to death. Here the *mikvah* becomes a symbol of a spiritual light that would not be dimmed by the most intense of darkneses. Landscapes of lush and provocative imagery form a backdrop for the speakers of the artist's words that summarize her project of “transgressing the boundaries of time and space to reflect the many different experiences and points of view about Mikvah.”²⁹

In a unique combination of word and image, stasis and motion, stillness and dynamism, Rothfarb's work suggests a range of understandings, from onerous to uplifting, of this rite of passage within the Jewish tradition.³⁰

On the other hand, Canadian artist Devorah Neumark's 2000 work, *Harrei At Mutteret . . . Harrei At Mikoodeshet. . .*, adds a new conceptual and visual twist to the dark edges of the beginning and potential end of Jewish married life—wedding and divorce—but with irony and wit. *Harrei At Mutteret* [Behold you are released] are words of divorce, echoing the words spoken by the groom, as he places a ring around the bride's finger: *Harrei At Mikoodeshet [lee]* [Behold you are sanctified (unto me)]. Neumark's installation follows women through the passage between marriage and nonmarriage, a metaphor for the passage between entitlement and nonentitlement [fig. 22]. Framed transparencies of historic illustrations by unknown (presumably Jewish)

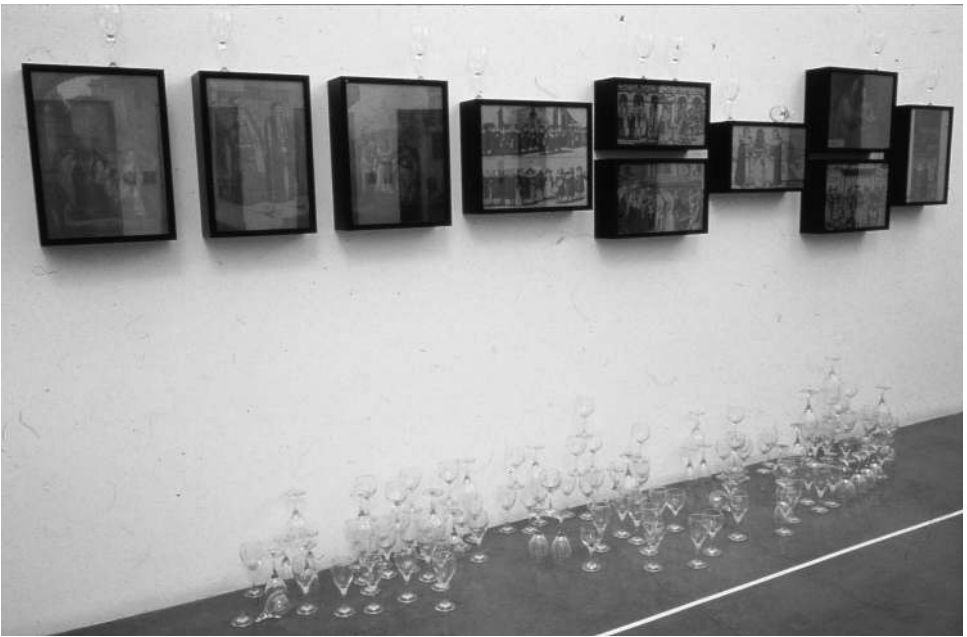


Fig 22: Deborah Neumark, “Harrei At Muteret.” 2000.
Mixed media installation.

and well-known artists (not Jewish, like Rembrandt; and Jewish, like Moritz Oppenheim) depict the joy of the Jewish wedding. There are ten of these photo boxes, as if we are observing a women’s *minyan*, each is surmounted by a wine goblet. The breaking of the wine glass at the culmination of the Jewish wedding ceremony (wine being the most traditional of Jewish symbols of joy) is intended to recall, even in the midst of happiness, the destruction of the Temple.

Seven of the goblets (the number of blessings recited at the wedding and the number of times the bride traditionally walks around the groom) are inscribed with the Hebrew words of release. Scores of goblets complete the installation, stacked and pulling from the wall in a semicircle. The shattered forms of some recall simultaneously the relative ease of divorce (when compared to the Christian tradition) in Judaism and its difficulty, indeed impossibility, if the husband should not desire it. While a wife can, under defined conditions, demand a divorce, the husband may refuse. If Judaism is a historically marginalized minority within Christendom, women are a historically limited majority within Judaism, particularly as defined by the beginning and even more so the ending of a marriage.

Differently, within the ever-widening circle of modes both of addressing the rituals of Jewish life and festival cycles and of expressing that address

artistically, one might consider the “postmodern wedding” that took place in Toronto, Canada, on October 12, 2003, between Canadian media artist Melissa Shiff and Louis Kaplan. The wedding took place during Sukkot and was planned as a complexly choreographed work of art—part video, part performance piece; thus the ceremony was embedded in art and art was embedded in the ceremony. In naming the ceremony *Louis and Melissa's Chuppah in the Succah*,³¹ Shiff and Kaplan also interwove the individual, life-cycle rite of passage with the communal, festival-cycle rite of passage.

In 2006 an exhibition of the project of the wedding was on view in the Jewish Museum in Prague—thus what began as a video, wedding ceremony, and performance piece became a video and installation of the wedding ceremony as performance piece, installed on the bimah of the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue that is part of the museum complex.³² The title of the “exhibition” was in fact “Reframing Ritual: Postmodern Jewish Wedding. *Featuring Melissa Schiff as the Bride and Louis Kaplan as the Groom.*” As Shiff wrote in the catalogue of the exhibition, “It was a blurring of the lines between the intimacy of the contemporary wedding as a life-cycle ritual that is normally designed for family and friends alone and the acknowledgment that what we were doing in terms of reinventing the rite and mediating ritual would have a larger audience outside of the private and personal domains. This moved the ceremony away from the intimate and into spaces of self-reflexivity and meta-commentary about Jewish ritual in general.”³³

The wedding couple reconceived the *huppah* in terms of both form and function.³⁴ They tilted it at a forty-five-degree angle; from the perspective of the audience/congregation, it became a large movie screen onto which a range of images was projected at strategic moments during the ceremony. These included intersplittings, for example, of two classic Yiddish films,³⁵ for which Shiff rewrote the intertitles from one. The scene from the second shows men marching around the pulpit on Sukkot carrying the *lulav* and *etrog*—the four species of the fall harvest festival.³⁶ They then reshaped that processional, asking four close friends to march down the aisle with the same four fruits and to tie them to the four posts of the *huppah*, thus making explicit an equation between *huppah* and *sukkah*.

As the bride and groom marched down the aisle, video visuals of passages each had selected from the Torah were projected onto their bodies; arriving at the bimah, they turned to face their family and friends as “the Hebrew text washed over us as we faced the projection,”³⁷ while non-Torah texts, also chosen by the bride and groom, were projected onto the *huppah*. The projections onto themselves literalized the idea of taking the Torah onto and into themselves in this celebration of joining themselves together and to the “House of

Israel”—thus transforming the idea traditionally conveyed through the words recited as the centerpiece of the ring ceremony. This may also be seen as yet another oblique response to the question of where the Jewish artist fits into the history of Western, Christian art: as some denominations of Christians (and once upon a time, all of them) take Christ—the ultimate intermediary between divinity and humanity—into themselves through the Eucharist, Shiff and Kaplan imprinted the word of the ultimate Jewish intermediary between God and ourselves onto and thus into themselves [fig. 23].

The traditional seven circlings of bride around groom became 3.5 circles around each other, as passages from the Song of Songs that they selected circled around each other on the video screen/*huppah* beyond them—against a rich background of *sukkah* imagery, thus further merging the *huppah* and the *sukkah*. Moreover, the idea that consistently pervades Jewish celebration—that the past and present/future become blurred; that our memory is a constant means of connecting the living and the dead—that is conveyed in the Sukkot notion of *ushpizim*,³⁸ and that can have a personalized echo in the modernist idea of welcoming the souls of the dead to the wedding ceremony,³⁹ was expressed by a series of projections of images and names of deceased family members onto the *huppah*/screen. Thus, the past in the form of family members watched over the present and the future as these images hovered over the bride and groom [fig. 24].

On that screen, too, passages from the Torah that offer a patriarchal and arguably misogynistic image of how to be in the world⁴⁰ were transformed through the use of the After Effects software program into free-floating poetry, through the elimination and reorganization of words. For “[i]f we do not rewrite Biblical scriptures and invent new rituals with the help of the tools of the Electric Age, then we will still be stuck in the Stone Age.”⁴¹ Thus the Shiff-Kaplan wedding project, aside from crossing the various separating lines between art and not craft, but the ritual that craft has traditionally served, and also between different “categories” of celebration and passage in the Jewish tradition, sought to examine some of the shadows endemic to this central life-cycle celebration and to turn them to light.

FIVE: THE ONGOING BLURRING OF DEFINITIONAL LINES

One might argue that the traditional sense of imbalance explored by Rothfarb and Neumark and addressed by Shiff extends from birth to the birth and the death of a marriage to the Jewish ceremonies pertaining to death in general. The centerpiece of such ceremonies is the recitation of the *Kaddish* [sanctification].⁴² What originated as a statement of affirmation—of one’s



Fig 23: Melissa Shiff, “Reframing Ritual: Post- Modern Jewish wedding” (detail). 2003. Video projection onto body.



Fig 24: Melissa Shiff, “Reframing Ritual: Post- Modern Jewish wedding” (detail). 2003. Video projection onto *huppah/sukkah*.

faith in the greatness and goodness of God—evolved as a “mourner’s prayer” precisely because it is at a time of mourning for a loved one that we might be inclined to feel anger against God and therefore are required to affirm our faith. But only sons are expected—or permitted—within the Orthodox tradition to recite the *Kaddish* as part of a formal *minyan* of mourners for his father. Hence, an imbalance.

It is perhaps less this issue than her fascination with writing in general and Hebrew calligraphy in particular—and her interest in focusing on writing in a rhythmic and repetitive manner—that led New York artist Jane Logemann to do her ink, oil, and varnish-on-muslin *Kaddish* series in 1995. The series offers a subset of Logemann’s work wherein rows of letters and words are washed over with subtle pigments. These may be viewed as abstractions (particularly if one does not read the Hebrew—or Arabic, Japanese, Russian, and other writing systems that she sometimes uses), while at the same time they may be read (literally) in terms of their content and message.⁴³ The word has become the image: the ongoing repetition of a word runs together so that its beginning and end points are not apparent, and so the visual result is simply as if the letters and not the words are repeated endlessly. This suggests the patterns of sound-and-syllable repetition prescribed for the mystic in some kabbalistic systems,⁴⁴ and it also recalls contemporary music (Philip Glass,

for instance), ancient Byzantine mosaics, Islamic art, and some of the wall paintings of Sol Lewitt.

In each work within Logemann's ten-part *Kaddish* series, the text of the *Kaddish* is repeated, in Aramaic letters that sandwich a Latin-letter transliteration, all within a circular frame [fig. 25]. The circle, without beginning or end, bespeaks the notion of continuum that is essential to the idea of the *Kaddish* both as a mourner's prayer and as the affirmation of faith, which was its inception. Logemann's rendition is in turn framed by a repeating Hebrew alphabet—each line a letter—from beginning [*aleph*] to end [*taf*] and then beginning again and continuing until the rectilinear space that frames the circular frame of the *Kaddish* runs out. The sense, then, that it continues—not only that the letters repeat themselves, but that the lines of letters and the entire alphabet repeat ad infinitum, beyond the picture frame—is paramount.

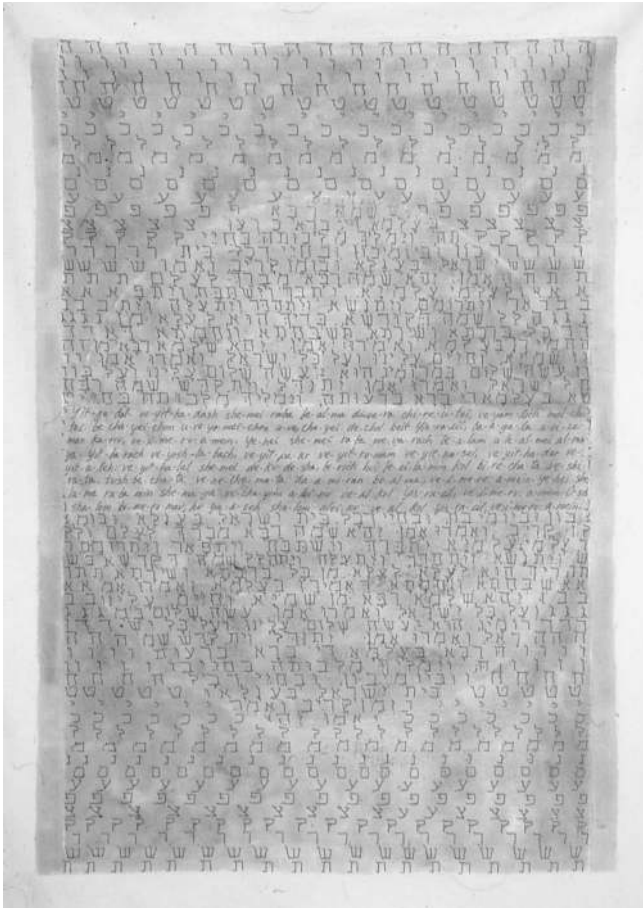


Fig 25: Jane Logemann, “Kaddish 5.” 1995. Ink, oil, varnish on muslin. From *Kaddish* series.

Moreover, across the ten-image series, the circle within the rectangle shifts upward and downward within the picture plane, as the color—whitish to grey, which is almost white toward grey and then grey, which is almost black to blackish—modulates in harmony with the shifting of the circular form within the series frames.

The ten parts of the series, circles ascending and descending, correspond to the ten ascents and descents of the *hekkhalot* that define the relationship between heaven and earth in pre-kabbalistic *merkavah* mysticism.⁴⁵ They correspond to the Ten Commandments that are the heart of the Torah received at Sinai. The concentrated, repetitive focus on the ultimate statement of prayerful connection to God corresponds to the devotional ethos of Jewish mysticism, and the rhythmic, graduated color and form shifts point to contemporary minimalism in visual art—but also to music and dance, as within Logemann’s larger body of work.

The notion of art and artifact that pertains to the cycle of mourning is very differently reflected in the small bronze sculptures of Soviet-born Seattle artist Simon Kogan. His 1993 eight-inch-high *Yahrzeit Lamp* offers an oil wick within a small bowl (into which he has inscribed the word “Amen” in Hebrew letters), from which a flat backstop slab arises that culminates in—the flat, bronze wall simply metamorphoses as—the head of a bearded figure, bent over, inclined toward the flame in the bowl below. The figure is hooded, his brow furrowed in prayer. His hands protrude directly from the wall, pressed together, palm to palm, finger to finger. The latter are configured with the two central digits of each hand held together, the index and pinky finger separated from the others, the thumbs pressed up into the beard, against the chin, yielding the familiar configuration of the Hebrew letter *shin* [fig. 26].

That letter, standing for the power-protective Name of God, *shaddai*, is used on *mezuzot*, both those worn around the neck and even more commonly on those attached to the doorposts of Jewish homes. Its form is the one assumed by the hand configuration of those who administer the threefold priestly benediction that God instructed Aaron and his sons to offer to the Israelites in the wilderness, which is repeated at the conclusion of services by leaders in many contemporary congregations.⁴⁶ Thus, Kogan’s memorial lamp bears within its sculpted form the notion of a divine, protective blessing accorded to the soul of the deceased to complement—in a kind of conceptual chiasm—the affirmation of faith in God’s protective and loving power being articulated by the mourner as he or she recites the *Kaddish* on the anniversary of his or her loved one’s death.

In the same year, Kogan sculpted another small bronze sculpture, in which from a small base rises an irregular and rough-hewn slice of torn and



Fig 26: Simon Kogan, “Yahrzeit Lamp.” 1993. Bronze.

twisted geometrically shaped material. At its uppermost reaches, an old man’s head, reminiscent of but not identical to that on the *Yahrzeit* lamp, protrudes. The face is long, the eyes beads of fierce focus, the beard lush and matted, its thick tangles bulging and then dripping downward in an increasingly narrow configuration. That lower, whispier part of the beard seems almost to fall through the square, windowlike opening in the bronze slab from which the head extrudes—and at the same time suggests not a beard falling but both a tangle of human bodies falling and a flame rising up from the bottom of the opening to envelop both the bodies and ultimately the face. The windowlike

opening itself suggests a passage between worlds—that of the living and that of the dead [fig. 27].

This twelve-inch-tall work is entitled *Don't Forget*, and it is intended as a memorial for the six million Jews who perished during the Holocaust. For our purposes we may recognize three issues engaged by it—and by both Kogan works. Once more an artist has blurred the line between creating an object for ceremonial use and creating a work of art for display. Once more an artist has blurred the line between an individual, life-cycle event and its visual concomitants and a communal, festival-cycle event. And thirdly, the principle of constant expansion and reshaping to which the Jewish festival calendar has been subject throughout history (expanding the articulation of a given festival or expanding the number of festivals that Jews celebrate), a principle that has



Fig 27: Simon Kogan, “Don’t Forget.”
1993. Bronze.

never been more accelerated than in the last few generations, is demonstrated. For *Yom HaShoah*—Holocaust Memorial Day—became part of the calendar in Israel six years after that horrific event, in 1951. It was formally and programmatically embraced in the Diaspora only thirty years later.⁴⁷

Yom HaShoah was originally keyed to coincide with *Yom Ha'Atzma'ut* [Israeli Independence Day]—preceding it by eight days. Not only was *Yom Ha'Atzma'ut* obviously itself a new addition to the Jewish calendar in the second half of the twentieth century, but the timing of the two holidays, eight days apart, recalls the eight-day-long celebration of Hanukkah—and the idea of cleansing and rededicating the Temple after a disaster—on the one hand, and the idea of welcoming a new child into the community in a formally way, through *Brit Milah* [circumcision] or, more recently, baby-naming, on the eighth day after birth, on the other. In tandem, the two holidays offer symbolic statements of death and rebirth.

This sort of interpenetration of celebrations and commemorations is expressed if we backtrack for a moment to J. Barry Zeiger's *Seder Table*. The details of his non-ritual-object installation, with its trees bursting through the table overrun with broken crockery, and his Israeli-flag-reminiscent windows, coalesce for us as not merely Passover-related but intended, in part, as a post-Holocaust statement of paradoxical unremediable destruction and yet rebirth. The trees have been shorn of leaves that cannot come back, but they soar nonetheless toward those windows and their color and shape symbolism.

Moreover, Zeiger's *Seder Table* is typically accompanied as an installation by a second, related piece, *Resistance*, in which he has filled an entire light-ringed, broken-paned window in its frame with bleached bones and colorful beads [fig. 28]. On the right corner of the sill sits a blood-red pomegranate, a symbol of fertility, of physical continuity. Because of the pomegranate's myriad seeds, and in the Jewish tradition offering a particular association with spiritual and intellectual continuity, the rows of seeds have for centuries been likened to rows of Torah-studying students. In juxtaposition with his *Seder Table*, the artist underscores his intention of encompassing Passover, Shoah commemoration, and the fact of the rebirth of an independent Jewish state in one overarching art installation.

One may turn the matter of the Holocaust in a number of directions as it pertains to the making of art. Thus, for example, Iowa-born Robert Lipnick, in growing up as the son of a rabbi and learning about the Shoah, determined not only that he would become an artist—specifically, a crafter of ceramic art—but also that he would devote himself largely to ceremonial objects in order to help fill in the large hole in Jewish material culture left by the destructions and deprivations effected by the Nazis and their associates.



Fig 28: Jay Barry Zeiger, "Resistance." 1997-2001. Mixed media found objects installation.

Thus, for example, his early 1990s *Hanukkiyah* (one of many) is both a ritual object to be used for that holiday and, in effect, a Holocaust memorial sculpture [fig. 29]. The latter role is most obviously conveyed by the sort of brightly colored visual vocabulary with which this work, like most of Lipnick's work, is decorated. Thus, against a black background that is glowing rather



Fig 29: Robert Lipnick, "Hanukkiyah." Ca 1992.
Glazed ceramic.

than mournful are symbols recalling the sweep of biblical and Israelite-Judaean-Jewish history.

Torah scrolls encompass the entirety of Jewish history. The forms of ancient clay containers suggest the biblical past, as pyramids allude to the experience of the Israelites in and coming out of Egypt, and an ark alludes to the story of Noah as well as to that of the Shoah—those who were drowned by it and those who managed somehow to survive it. The dove swoops toward the center of the bulging composition. This is the symbol of peace and of

Noah's search and discovery of dry land—but that moment recounted in Genesis 8:8-12 may be seen to intersect the post-Holocaust return and rebirth of the People Israel in *Eretz Yisrael* [the Land of Israel]. Scattered leaves, still robust and green, are strewn from top to bottom of the piece: like the Jews attacked by the Nazis and their allies, they have been torn from the tree but refuse to go brown and die. And in the midst of it all, a little white house with a red roof stands there, silent yet eloquent: it symbolizes the home in which the artist grew up and heard the narrative that helped drive him to create just this sort of object in just this style. It weds the personal to the communal.

Thus in different ways Kogan, Zeiger, and Lipnick have addressed the culminating traumatic rite of Jewish passage, each intersecting it with different other passages, communal (Passover, Hanukkah), individual (*Yahrzeit*), and personal (red-roofed childhood). One might argue that Sarah Belchetz-Swenson's early 1970s *Revisions* series served as one of the starting points for this growing range of ways of addressing the Holocaust—and of the idea of that experience as a rite that, however horrifying, in the end became another passage for the Jewish people and not a terminus. Her work also offers a beginning of the act of commemoration by thinking simultaneously about past and future, in an artistic analogy to the shaping of *Yom HaShoah* in relationship to *Yom Ha'Atzma'ut*. For in her series, the Egyptian-born Connecticut artist inserted the images of her own two young children⁴⁸ playing, resting, sleeping, flourishing onto, into, and around details, floor plans, or elevations of timber synagogues of which, before the Holocaust, there were hundreds scattered among the *shtetls* of Poland, Ukraine, Russia, and, above all, Lithuania—and of which only a handful remain today.

Thus, for example, the image of her kids playing hide-and-seek—the older (Zoe), leaning, hiding, against a tree trunk; the younger (Saskia), running, searching—is framed within the floor plan of the Wolpa synagogue [fig. 30]. The past contained within the rich architectural history of these structures, intermediated by the powerful idea of a well-rooted, heaven-reaching tree, interweaves with the healthy future of healthy Jewish children in a new land, playing the children's games that every American kids plays on a summer evening. The past, largely obliterated by the Holocaust, nonetheless survives to meet the future. Moreover, for the purposes of our discussion, the timber synagogues with their unique yet individualized styles raise the definitional question of what the criteria are for defining synagogue architecture as "Jewish"—style, symbols, identity of the architect, purpose of the edifice?

Conversely, the work of Israeli photographer Margalit Mannor overlaps the other historical shoe dropping—the creation of the State of Israel—with the historical, conceptual, and definitional debate about what the State should

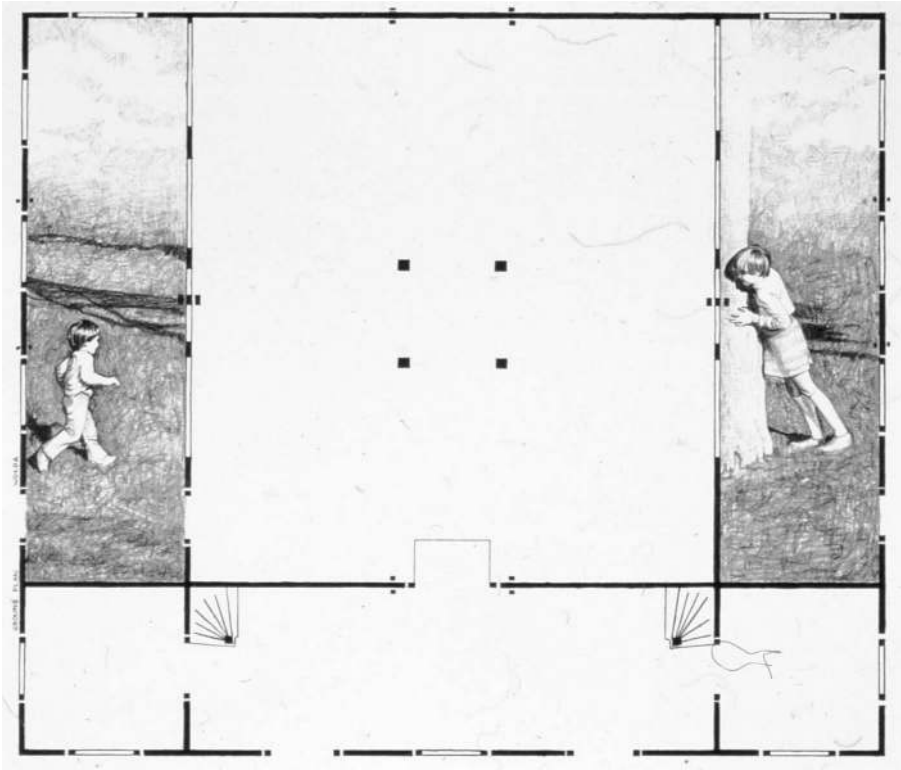


Fig 30: Sara Belchetz-Swenson. "Wolpa Synagogue/Hide-and-Seek." 1971. Pencil on paper. From *Revisions* series.

be. This was a debate that began over a century ago, when in the incipient Zionist movement, the Theodore Herzl, and Ahad Ha'Am views clashed regarding whether the Zionist goal should be political or cultural/spiritual, whether what was needed was an independent Jewish state—anywhere—or nothing geographically less than a return to the Jewish homeland, regardless of under whose governance, the Ottoman Turks, the British, or the Jews themselves.

One can see that issue as continuing through the rite of passage that created the State by 1948-1949, and the transformation of the issue, in part, into the question of whether and in precisely what manner Israel is "The Jewish State," given its governmental complexity. Israel is a secular democracy in which Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Bahais, and others are citizens, which at the same time operates along specifically Jewish lines with regard to the automatic citizenship accorded Jews through the "Law of Return" and with regard to the keeping of the Sabbath and the holidays according to the Jewish calendar, to name two obvious instances.⁴⁹ Moreover, the continuation of the question of the state's identity is also expressed by those Israelis who ask

whether or not the state as it currently operates is fulfilling the Zionist dream of a century ago—and if so, which version of the dream—and to what extent the state does or does not operate according to traditional Jewish principles.

Mannor's visual address of this issue is woven of various issues—her celebration of *Yom Ha'Atzma'ut*, as it were, by both rejoicing and questioning (and is not questioning the preeminent Jewish art?)—and is reflected in a series of works from 1997-1998. A few years earlier, she had stumbled upon a series of several dozen old black-and-white postcards from the 1920s—with images of the Zionist dream in evolution, intended to be sent to friends and family throughout the Diaspora regarding what was developing there. She has taken one or more of these postcards and superimposes it/them as an insert onto and into a large, color image that she has photographed, usually of the same site depicted in the postcard(s).

Thus, for example, an old image of a busy corner in Tel Aviv, marked by the typical Bauhaus-style architecture of that time—three or four-story-high rectilinear buildings rising from rounded pillar “stilts” and busy traffic—rests against and within the 30” x 40” image of a tall, elegant building beyond which there soars a virtual skyscraper, only part of which can even fit into the image [fig. 31]. With some of these double images, the intention seems to be to express pride in what has grown out of the seeds of eighty years ago and the Fourth and early Fifth *Aliyah* periods.⁵⁰ In others the intention is clearly to question or even perhaps to bemoan developments that have transformed a certain cultural innocence into a cynically sophisticated reality—and for some (perhaps this one) the message seems deliberately ambiguous: one can cheer or lament the implications of the skyscraper, depending upon one's perspective.

Israel is, in the Jewish world of today, one of the two primary pillars of Jewish life, culture, and thought, and the United States is the other. And if we twist the subject of *Yom Ha'Atzma'ut* one turn further in returning to the United States, we can come full circle to where we began with issues of definition, identity, and memory within the question of how today's Jews celebrate, commemorate, and commiserate. New York artist Marilyn Cohen's unique work—she tears, stains, and layers pieces of paper to create stunningly nuanced collage works that address any number of issues—has offered, among other things, portraits of fifty-two American Jewish families who arrived at various times to each of the fifty states and portraits of extraordinary Jewish women of valor—or a triptych of a “posed and seated” range of historical and mythical women, from Amelia Earhart to Wonder Woman, who share with women artists across history a tendency to be insufficiently recognized for their accomplishments.



Fig 31: Margalit Mannor, "H.G. No. 990." 1997-1998.
Color print.

Cohen's torn papers, reconstituted as images in layers, serve as a metaphor for the artistic art of re-visioning and for the historiographic act of remembering, as well as for the historical experience for families and peoples of piling experience onto experience. One of her emphatically American pieces is her 1995 *Independence Day* [fig. 32]. For our purposes, this work combines these standard elements of Cohen's work with the issue of an



Fig 32: Marilyn Cohen, “Independence Day.” 1995.
Watercolor-soaked torn paper collage.

expanding Jewish calendar of celebration and, in the case of Jews in America, identity. Thus, her image of this particular American Jewish family is a not atypical visual narrative of having once been immigrants but having become “American” in part by the experience remembered in the words inscribed around the periphery of the beach blanket/towel—“life was once a day at the beach”—and in part by the embrace of American Independence Day on the calendar of annual celebrations.

Thus, the secular *Yom Ha’Atzma’ut* and even the secular national *Yom*

HaShoah that define Israeli Jews both as Israelis and as Jews-by-nationality is echoed by the secular Independence Day that is part of the identity of American Jews who feel themselves Jews by religion or custom and tradition and who feel themselves no different from their American Christian (or Muslim, or Hindu, or Bahai) neighbors. The calendar of celebration—and in Marilyn Cohen's case, the visual address of this piece of that calendar—can include Independence Day and Memorial Day, Labor Day and Thanksgiving Day—and for some, even Christmas Day—as distinctly as and as discretely separate from Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

* * * * *

Let us complete the coming full circle of our discussion by reference to an incomplete circle of stone, for that is the material basis for Maryland artist Sy Gresser's 1998 *Menorah (Tribal Faces)* [fig. 33]. Gresser's work is an incomplete circle of steatite into which he has carved a stylized seven-branched menorah—no actual candles, no actual candelabrum, just the distinct and formalized low-relief impression of the centerpiece of Temple ritual. It is that image, in various iterations, that one finds most ubiquitous in the two millennia since the time of the Second Temple's destruction and the history



Fig 33: Sy Gresser. "Menorah (Tribal Faces)." 1998. Carved steatite.

of what one might call “Jewish” art. As a symbol, it not only recalls the Temple, traditionally suggesting the hope for its restoration in the messianic future, but its seven-ness also recalls the commandment to keep the seventh day holy—that most “Jewish” among the Ten Commandments⁵¹—enunciated by God through Moses at that people-forming rite of passage at the foot of Mt. Sinai, as the Israelites moved from Egypt toward the Promised Land and from slavery to freedom. It thus connotes both the promise of redemption and the responsibilities of the Covenant.

Around the menorah image crowds a series of faces that ask who and what we are, extending from the personal to the universal by way of certain Jewish qua tribal specifics. The faces represent different races and ethnic types (Jews offer no specific racial or ethnic typology, in spite of those who would assert otherwise, but at least one of those depicted here represents the artist’s grandfather), held together by the most consistent symbol in two millennia of Jewish art. The faces—one eye open, the other closed—have both outer and inner vision as they are literally connected to each other in a circle (universal symbol of perfection and completeness) that, in its incompleteness, suggests that there remains work for us to do to in fulfilling the responsibility of *tikkun olam*—“repairing a[n imperfect] world,” in partnership with the God to whom all of these ever-constant, ever-evolving ceremonies of celebration, commemoration, and commiseration have been directed for millennia, and to whom there has been such an explosively varied visual response in the contemporary Jewish world.

NOTES

¹ As a convenience, I am using Kaplan’s *Judaism as a Civilization*, first published in 1934, as the starting point for this category assertion.

² There was even a sense of hierarchy among the fine arts: Michelangelo is said to have understood architecture to be the loftiest of the arts, followed by sculpture and then by painting.

³ It is certainly arguable for that matter that Schatz and Bezalel did create “Jewish national art.” Certainly Early Bezalel made use of particular symbols, such as the seven-branched candelabrum, the Star of David, the rising sun (the dawning of the new Jewish nationalist era); focused on particular subjects, such as heroic biblical and contemporary Jewish figures (e.g., Abraham, Moses, Theodore Herzl, Herzl as Moses); focused on both natural landscape and architectural imagery that was endemic to Eretz Yisrael; used a distinctive, art nouveau-reminiscent style; and emphasized particular materials for both arts and crafts, such as copper (evocative of Solomon’s legendary mines), olivewood from the Galilee, stone quarried from the Negev desert, and so on. But whether these aspects of “Jewish national art” add up to “Jewish art” is a slightly different question.

⁴ Interestingly, at least two aspects of style with regard to both secular and sacred objects produced at Bezalel reflect the fact that, in the Muslim world, Jews were almost exclusively the craftspeople in metals—the opposite of the condition throughout Christendom. Thus, so-called Damascene work that embedded brass with copper and sometime silver or even, rarely, gold in dynamic, low-relief interweave patterns, whether for sword blades or *Megillat Esther* cases, was exclusively the product of Jewish craftsmen in Damascus. Schatz sent a handful of his master craftsmen there to learn this technique, and a substantial influx of already-skilled Yemenite silversmiths was trained in the (for them) new technique of metal beading.

⁵ Moreover, in the context of the post-Holocaust world and the theological question asked by many Jews (and non-Jews)—where was the all-powerful, all-good God while more than a million Jewish children were being destroyed?—Newman may be seen to be providing an answer: God was absent (for those for whom God was absent, who lost their faith in the face of the Nazi atrocities) and yet present (for those who survived because of their conviction that God was watching over them).

⁶ This information was derived from a conversation with the artist in spring 2009.

⁷ Snyder has done an entire series called *Life Cycle*. In the interests of space I am discussing only one work, but the general sense of all of them points in a similar direction, albeit with interestingly varied details, with respect to colors, texture, and dominant female figure (for the central figure is usually less ambiguous than in the work under discussion).

⁸ In case this is not inherently clear, I mean the following: untrammelled rejoicing over the birth of a boy, an heir, with a more compromised joy over the birth of a girl; the official bringing into the Community of Israel for a boy (circumcision) but not for a girl; the formal assumption of moral adulthood for a boy (Bar Mitzvah) but not for a girl—and the studying that he undertakes but she does not, together with the prayers that he recites (including thanking God for having been made a man and not a woman) but she does not; the primary ceremonial focus on the groom, rather than the bride—he recites the words of consummation when he places the ring on her finger and she does not; should there be (God forbid!) a divorce, only he may initiate and articulate it with a *get* [bill of divorce], not she; at death, both will be formally mourned by their sons through the recitation of the *Kaddish*, during *shiva*, at *shloshbeem*, and year by year at *yartzeit*—and not by their daughters. While it should certainly be noted both that other Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic traditions are as gender-imbalanced or often even more so in their traditional forms; and also that there is nonetheless a distinct and not unhappy role for women within traditional Judaism; nonetheless, from a nontraditional perspective, these life-cycle imbalances can only be seen as profound and, for a woman, spell out a distinct ambiguity with regard to where she fits into the House of Israel.

⁹ Chelm is, in fact, a fictional *shtetl*, the tales about which inevitably focus on the “wisdom” of its lame-brained leaders. Those leaders, of course, are male—we rarely hear about the *women* of Chelm—so Tango’s overall subversion in the first place is that her comic-book-like series is all about the women and the issues and concerns of their lives.

¹⁰ The reference to “sainthood” is marvelously tongue-in-cheek. Fraydl, the daughter who converted and is therefore “dead,” will still be regarded as Jewish by Nazi racial

ideology and therefore capable of being sent to the gas chamber to physically and not just metaphorically die. But as a Catholic, she can achieve sainthood, which as a Jew she cannot: Jews do not have saints as Catholics do, only *tzadiks*—but are not *tzadikeem* virtually the same as saints?—all of which alludes to the question engaged by the Catholic Church in the 1980s as to whether Edith Stein, a converted Jew who died at Auschwitz, should be canonized.

¹¹ The Hebrew form is ambiguously a noun or an adjective, but unambiguously given in the feminine form, thus referring to female modesty, not to male or to male and female modesty.

¹² Modigliani (1884-1920) was an early twentieth century Italian Jewish artist who was one of the leading figures of the so-called *Ecole de Paris* [Paris School].

¹³ To be absolutely precise, at the time the first chair was being made, Kahn and his wife did not yet know whether their first child would be male or female. They ended up with two girls and one boy. But the point is that all three chairs were made identically, without gender-prejudiced variations.

¹⁴ *Mamzer* is the singular; *mamzereem* would be the plural.

¹⁵ This is the same process, but the nuanatial opposite, of a euphemism, a benign term used in lieu of a term found offensive: our sensitive ears prefer “John” to “toilet” or even “bathroom,” and in the “John” we prefer to refer to going “#1” or “#2” to—well, the reader knows. . . .

¹⁶ Strictly speaking, a “booth”—which is what *sukkah* means; thus Sukkot is the “[Feast of] Booths.”

¹⁷ The Hebrew verbal root *H-G-D* means “tell,” so the liturgy and narrative text that guides the Seder is a book of “telling.”

¹⁸ For example, the notion of combining the matzah [unleavened bread] with the *maror* [bitter herbs] later begets the inclusion into that sandwich of the *haroset* [sweet herbs] in the early rabbinic period. The opening of the door for Elijah was introduced in the medieval period. In the 1970s, a fourth matzah was added to the traditional three to assure that Jews in free countries would not forget their co-religionists experiencing oppression in the Soviet Union.

¹⁹ One might say that, whereas Elijah is traditionally viewed as the forerunner of the messiah, Miriam is the symbol of sustaining the entire people of Israel in life until the messianic moment arrives.

²⁰ Thus one recites, “You abound in blessings, oh Lord, creator of the universe, who sustains us with living water. May we, like the Children of Israel leaving Egypt, be protected and nurtured and kept alive in the wilderness, and may you give us the wisdom to understand that the journey itself holds the promise of redemption.”

²¹ Based on Leviticus 23:15-16.

²² The counting down of the twenty-four days leading to Christmas seems to have begun with the German Lutherans in the nineteenth century. The earliest known handmade Advent calendar dates from 1851; the earliest printed one was produced either in Hamburg in 1902 or 1903 or by a Swabian named Gerhard Lang, in 1908. But that controversy is beyond our discussion. The first *omer* counters appear to date from the twentieth century.

²³ By this I mean that Christians and Muslims would certainly embrace the importance of the other nine, but where the Sabbath is concerned, Christians shifted away from the seventh day to Sunday, and Muslims came to treat Friday as the most important day of the week. So, with the exception of the occasional anomaly, like the Seventh Day Adventists, Judaism is the only Abrahamic tradition that observes that commandment as articulated in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

²⁴ Any American Jewish community large enough to produce a Jewish weekly will deliver that paper on Thursday and indicate, on its front page, what precisely is the candle-lighting time that Friday.

²⁵ *Handalah* means separation—so this is the most emphatic of Jewish celebrations that distinguishes one given time from another.

²⁶ And for that matter, the first “star” is as often as not a planet, usually, but not always, Venus.

²⁷ Because the candles are not all on the same level.

²⁸ This was expressed in a conversation with the author during the summer of 1991.

²⁹ From the artist’s statement for the 2000-2001 exhibition *Jewish Artists: On the Edge*, which showed at The Marion Center and the College of Santa Fe, Santa Fe, and Yeshiva University Museum, New York, curated by Ori Z. Soltes and by J. Barry Zeiger, and quoted in the catalogue of the same name (Santa Fe: Sherman Asher, 2005), 77.

³⁰ In fact, there have been several interesting turns with regard to the *mikvah* in the last decade or so, particularly in the Reform movement. First of all, there has simply been a trend back to using the *mikvah*, which had been largely abandoned because of its perceived sexist connotations. Second, that return has been facilitated by the wider range of ways in which *mikvaot* are being used to mark both life-cycle and other kinds of events, both joyful and grief-related—from immersions before a Bar or Bat Mitzvah to marking a divorce or the death of a loved one to expressing gratitude for recovery from a serious illness. Thirdly, not only are both genders marking occasions with *mikvah* immersions, in some cases *mikvaot* are being used by groups made up of both genders to mark some event. See, Sue Fishkoff, “Reimagining the Mikveh,” *Reform Judaism* (Online, Fall 2008).

³¹ I am using their chosen transliteration spellings for *huppah* and *sukkah* here.

³² With apologies for my pedantry, the Sephardic term is *tevah*, but I am using *bimah* as the more familiar term for the likely readership of this article.

³³ Melissa Shiff, *Reframing Ritual: Postmodern Jewish Wedding* (Prague: Jewish Museum of Prague—Spanish Synagogue, 2006), 1.

³⁴ There are no precise rabbinic requirements regarding the size, configuration, or disposition of the *huppah*.

³⁵ Sidney Goldin’s 1923 *Ost/West* and Michal Waszynski’s 1937 *The Dybbuk*.

³⁶ The lulav consists of three elements: palm fronds flanked by myrtle and willow branches.

³⁷ Shiff, *Reframing Ritual*, 3.

³⁸ This is when one invites the spirits, as it were, of the patriarchs and matriarchs into the *sukkah*.

³⁹ As discussed in chapter 7 of Rabbi Arthur Waskow and Rabbi Phyllis Berman, *A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven: The Jewish Life-Spiral as a Spiritual Path* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2002).

⁴⁰ Specifically, Deuteronomy 22:12, 20-21

⁴¹ Shiff, *Reframing Ritual*, 7.

⁴² The word is an Aramaic sibling—and the *Kaddish* is recited in Aramaic—of the Hebrew words *Kiddush* [referring to the blessing over the wine] and *Kedushah* [referring to a series of prayers before the Holy Ark that focus on God and the relationship between God and ourselves mediated by the Torah].

⁴³ For instance, she did a *Ten Plagues* series in which each of the colors tries to suggest the particular plague (red for blood, green for frogs, etc.) and the Hebrew word for that plague repeats and repeats across the picture plane.

⁴⁴ In which the sense of the words is lost within the abstract mental and aural patterns that carry the mystic toward union with the hiddenness of God.

⁴⁵ According to *merkavah* [Throne-chariot] mysticism, there are ten *bekhalot* [chambers, houses] through which one must ascend/descend in order to achieve intimate contact with God's most hidden recesses. *Merkavah* mysticism flourished between the first and tenth centuries; its concept of the *bekhalot* may be seen to lead into the idea of ten *sephiroth* so essential to Kabbalah.

⁴⁶ The blessing is articulated in Numbers 6:23-27 and reads in part, "May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make His face to shine up you and be gracious unto you; may the Lord lift up His face upon you and grant you peace."

⁴⁷ The Israeli Knesset [Parliament], led by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and President Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi, officially created *Yom HaShoah*—or properly speaking, *Yom haZikaron laShoah velaG'vurah* [Day of Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance]—as a day both to mourn for and memorialize the fallen and to remember with pride the resistance against the Nazis. It was intended to be a national, secular commemoration, as opposed per se, to the religious celebration that the Orthodox Israeli rabbinate had established two years earlier. The rabbinate had designated the already-extant winter fast of the tenth of Tevet as the day; the Israeli Knesset decreed the 27th of Nisan as the day. The rabbinate observed that the month of Nisan (during which Passover occurs) is traditionally a month of joy, during which fasting and other traditional acts of mourning are forbidden by rabbinic law. Many ultra-Orthodox Israelis ignore *Yom HaShoah* completely, including their prayers for those killed during the Holocaust in traditional days of mourning, such as the midsummer Ninth of Av [*Tisha b'Av*], during which the destruction of the Temple has been mourned for centuries, or such as the Tenth of Tevet. Parts of the American Conservative Jewish movement formally defined a program for *Yom HaShoah* in 1981 and further articulated it in 1984—but not all Conservative Jews abide by the fast that others undertake, agreeing with the Orthodox view that no fasts should be held during the month of Nisan. Others, like their Orthodox co-religionists in Israel, observe the traditional *Tisha b'Av* and Tenth of Tevet fasts as inclusive of Holocaust memorial mourning.

⁴⁸ At that time, of course! (Zoe was then ten and Saskia was three.) They are by now both grown up: the future has become the present.

⁴⁹ This is, by the way, not particularly different from how the United States operates as a secular democracy that nonetheless operates in certain respects according to the Christian calendar—Sunday as the rest day where, in some states, one cannot, for example, purchase alcoholic beverages, to say nothing of the ubiquity of the Christmas celebration. Much of this has changed in the past two generations, but some of it remains in place in many locations.

⁵⁰ The periods of immigration [*aliyah*; “going up”] to *Eretz Yisrael* are schematized as the First *Aliyah*, 1882-1903; the Second; 1904-1914; the Third (after World War I), 1919-1923; the Fourth, 1924-1929; and the Fifth, 1929-1939. These last two coincided with the virtual closing of the doors of immigration to the United States and the rise of Nazism in Germany, respectively. They yielded largely middle-class families and, in the case of the Fifth *Aliyah*, a good number of artists, notably those associated with the Bauhaus School in Germany.

⁵¹ See above, section three.