

BEN SCHACHTER

Artistic Engagement with Halakhah

JEWISH LEARNING AND TORAH directly influence the art I make. But unlike many other artists whose work interprets aggadah and biblical narratives, my work explores the creativity of rabbinic logic and halakhah. At first it may seem that there is very little room for creativity in regards to law and regulation. But anyone who takes the time to consider the implications of rabbinic decisions on individuals and community may quickly realize that in fact legal thought is replete with “what if’s?”

Artistic creation has a similar component. Artists are constantly exploring alternative solutions, arrangements and compositions. Even this exploration operates within limits. Avant-garde artists, as much as they forged new ground, settled into styles that produced what is known as their mature work. It was through creative trial and error that each of these artists developed a set of rules for themselves, though it is rare that modernist artworks are thought to be limited in this fashion. Likewise, the designer must address different restrictions. The architect and industrial designer integrate building codes, expense, client needs, and the laws of physics, all while maintaining their own personal vision. Many revel in the process; the more intricate the limitations of the site and the needs of the client, the greater the challenge.

Sukkah City 2010 is a recent example. The competition’s organizers invited individuals and teams of designers to create non-traditional sukkot. Several of them were constructed in Union Square, New York. The organizers required adherence to Talmudic rules on what makes a ‘kosher’ sukkah. Even with these restrictions, several of the designs bore very little similarity to the traditional three-walled booth.

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An even more complex set of building codes is for the eruv, a symbolic Jewish enclosure that unifies a community as if it were living in one extended domestic space. The regulations for the boundary are based on architecture during the period in which the Talmud, the oral law, was written. Much of it centers on the definition and variations of a doorway. These doorways, or gates, comprise the boundary that surrounds a neighborhood. Namely, each fence includes a horizontal beam resting on top of two supports. Even this simple composition can be abstracted so that a wire replaces the lintel. Moreover, the wire lintel does not need to connect to the posts, in some situations, as long as it passes directly over the post as *if* it were a lintel. While



TEL AVIV ERUV 2012

I've never been involved in the construction of an eruv, I imagine that the persons who have are rabbinic engineers working out how to apply Talmudic regulation to given urban situations.

I make paintings of eruv maps. The silhouette of an eruv is stitched with blue thread through the paper. The interior of the boundary is painted white so that attention remains on the line. I use thread to emulate the wire that is often used to complete an eruv. I've painted eruvim from cities all over the world, including: Venice, London, Manhattan, Los Angeles, and many others. Each one calls to mind the geography of the place. *Tel Aviv Eruv 2012*



WASHINGTON, DC ERUVIN 2012

shows a meandering line bounded by the ocean, highways and canals. The perimeter does not include the entire city but offers a different approach to understanding urban planning and history.

Recently, I have been using Google maps to integrate eruvim into one painting. If two eruvim share a boundary, one can usually carry across the boundary. But if they do not, each community is separated from its neighbor. In lived experience, one might know that there is another community nearby, but it does not matter; the boundary is set. Therefore, most websites and synagogue maps include only the eruv that matters to them. The paintings that I've made of Philadelphia and Johannesburg show how these communities either cluster or radiate out from major metropolitan centers. Of note is *Washington, DC Eruvin 2012*. Several eruvim cluster to the north of the city. One group of eruvim touch one another, while two constellate to the east and west. Often, when one looks into whether or not a community has an eruv, only one is illustrated. With the convenience of Google maps, some community maps do show if another eruv adjoins the first. My work is unique, as it shows all the eruvim in this suburban district.

I'm attracted to these maps because they represent a series of creative interpretations made manifest with materials. As a collage is composed of paper, cardboard, paint, and other materials, an eruv is an admixture of things: walls, fences, terrain, and wire. In artistic terms, a sculpture made out of mixed materials is called an assemblage. Looked at as art, an eruv is also like public art. More specifically, it is a sculptural assemblage that is constructed throughout an urban environment.

Yet it can also be seen as another kind of artwork: a non-traditional drawing. Made popular in the twentieth century by cubists and Dadaist artists, such drawings are not made with pencil or charcoal or even a paper surface. Marcel Duchamp, an artist connected with the Dada movement, famously ran hundreds of feet of yarn all over a gallery, thereby inhibiting visitors from viewing the other work. Pablo Picasso and Alexander Calder both made wire sculptures that sometimes appeared flat and at other times took on a three-dimensional form. Wire in this case is used like a calligraphic line that forms contours through space. Fred Sandback formed rectangles and other shapes by pulling yarn taut across the gallery. These minimal forms had the uncanny appearance of perfectly clean sheets of glass, yet only their edge was actually there! Looking at the eruv as an artwork helps to show the creative solutions required for its construction.

My paintings are based on community eruvim. But an eruv can be put up for a picnic, a shabbaton, or for other events. In these cases, its construction

is a bit more do-it-yourself. And this illustrates yet another comparison between contemporary art and Jewish tradition. Individuals in their homes and communities practice ritual and follow laws. Most decisions made throughout the day are made not in consultation with a rabbinic authority but through familiarity. There is a similar trend in the arts. The DIY movement has encouraged people to use colloquial processes like knitting and sewing to make artwork instead of relying on materials that require a professional to demonstrate how to carve marble, weld steel, or layer oil paint. *Instant Eruv 2007* draws upon the DIY aspect of both Judaism and contemporary art. What makes this piece of string different from any other? Nothing, really—just marketing.



INSTANT ERUV 2007

Recently, my work was part of two major exhibitions on the eruv – one at Yale University, and the other at the Yeshiva University Museum. These exhibitions explored different facets of how the eruv works, displayed contemporary expressions of the eruv, and touched upon artists' interpretations of the eruv. It was interesting to see how artists explored legal ideas. These artists engaged halakhah, an aspect not traditionally examined in the arts. More often than not, Jewish Art presents aggadah, such as Archie Rand's series of paintings based on biblical narrative. My artwork, and the work of some other artists, examines halakhah—not to posken or adjudicate on matters of law, but rather to elucidate, explore, and engage rabbinic thought.