

RICHARD McBEE

# Contemporary Jewish Art: The Challenge<sup>1</sup>

## *The Problem*

THE IDEA OF “JEWISH ART” is such a strange and troubled notion. Long denied even as a possibility because of the simplistic reading of the Second Commandment expressing the Torah’s abhorrence of idolatry,<sup>2</sup> since the eighteenth century, “Jewish aniconism finally emerged as an unmistakably modern idea.” Kalman Bland’s deconstruction of Jewish aniconism sees this notion as initially a non-Jewish invention with anti-Semitic undertones—so much so that, “If not for Kant and Hegel the denial of Jewish art would not have been invented.”<sup>3</sup> And, in spite of the fact that this notion flies in the face of the significant historical record of Jewish visual creativity dating from antiquity to the present,<sup>4</sup> the concept that Jews inherently do not and cannot produce a visual culture was frequently championed by the Jews themselves. Bland lists notable modern Jewish proponents of the aniconic theory, including Bernard Berenson, Harold Rosenberg, Max Dimont, Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>5</sup> Cynthia Ozick sums up this cultural prejudice with her declaration: “Where is the Jewish Michelangelo, the Jewish Rembrandt. . . ? He has never come into being. . . . Talented a bit, but nothing great. They never tried their hand at wood or stone or paint. ‘Thou shalt have no graven images’—the Second Commandment—prevented them.”<sup>6</sup>

This is patently untrue historically and theologically. With few exceptions, contemporary halachic understanding easily distinguishes between fashioning objects and images for idol worship and the creation of artworks for aesthetic edification. Unfortunately, the historical record of rabbinic

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opinion has been less than reassuring; vacillating between condemnation of the visual when the Jewish community was threatened as opposed to a more relaxed attitude towards the use and appropriation of visual culture when relations with non-Jews were peaceful. Indeed, the range of rabbinic understandings of the Second Commandment through the ages has in fact circumscribed Jewish visual creativity and has certainly served to hamper Jews' confidence in their abilities to develop a creative visual language.<sup>7</sup> That is, at least until the mid-twentieth century.

### *Definitions*

First, let us offer some definitions that can help us clarify what we mean by "Jewish Art." For purposes of this discussion, Jewish visual art does not include Judaica and synagogue architecture simply because there is no argument about their permissibility or their extensive use throughout history.

The most parochial definition codifies Jewish Art as limited to cultural production utilizing specific Jewish subject matter, drawn from Jewish sacred and secular texts that explore Jewish social life, history and ritual. Since content is the defining factor, this can and should include artwork created by non-Jews. On the other hand, the more catholic view would include any kind of art that Jews happen to create that reference universal concepts such as peace, spirituality, brotherhood, ethnic identity, and family. Generally, these subjects simply mirror contemporary pluralistic American culture. However defined, in all its permutations it is its Jewish content that denotes the work as Jewish Art. While both formulations are important to a vital Jewish Art, important distinctions must be made in order to understand better the consequences of each approach.

### *Golden Age*

Jewish Art since the 1970's has been slowly gaining a distinct identity as a dawning cultural consciousness greater than the sum of its creators and creations. This awareness has gained the most traction in the United States, even though hints of it are arising in other parts of the world. In particular, some Israeli artists are touched by this consciousness, although they are caught in a double cultural bind. For them, Jewishness is of course a given, since Jewish subjects typically form an integral part of the fabric of their upbringing. Nonetheless, for many years the Israeli art world has taken its cues from the New York art world that overtly rejects the notion of "Jewish Art." Therefore, significant resistance still exists in Israel to the very notion of the category

“Jewish Art.” Therefore, when historian Matthew Baigell declared in a lecture at the Jewish Museum in New York on March 7, 2011, “we are living in a golden age of Jewish American art,” part of the silence that greeted his thesis reflected a redoubling of institutional and international resistance to the appropriateness of “art” being qualified by the descriptor “Jewish.”<sup>8</sup>

### *Museums*

Remarkably, most American Jewish museums are resistant to exhibiting contemporary Jewish Art—that is, art created with a self-consciously explicit Jewish content. Generally the artists who are the most committed to Jewish subject matter have been ignored. With the exception of Hebrew Union College Museum under the direction of Laura Kruger that has consistently exhibited cutting edge contemporary Jewish art, as well as occasional efforts on the part of Yeshiva University Museum, the wall of silence has been complete. To be sure, American Jewish museums, large and small, are fully supportive of historical exhibitions of Jewish visual and material culture, and relish exploring a given Jewish individual’s involvement in mainstream culture. While most are publicly and even stridently committed to diversity, tolerance, interfaith dialogue and community involvement, they seem to have a blind spot regarding promoting and exhibiting contemporary art with explicit Jewish content. While it may be institutionally understandable that they have major concerns about vulnerable budgets—along with deep fears of seeming “too Jewish” within an assumed dominant, assimilationist culture—their stance is nonetheless deeply problematic. Turning such a blind eye to overtly Jewish-themed art is injurious to the education of its audience and devastating to the artists. In fact, such myopia evinces a pathological adherence to an anachronistic paradigm of the quietistic role that Jews should play in American culture. For at least 25 years, the mantra of social diversity was normative in encouraging explicit cultural expressions of black, ethnic, feminist, and gay culture. Somehow, only explicit Judaism is still an anathema.

Nonetheless, Baigell finds this rising tide of Jewish-themed visual art to be profoundly broad-based, wonderfully chaotic, and—above all—exhilarating. The artists who are leading the way take their themes from a wide range of sources. The Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah, Midrash, ritual and all aspects of American Jewish life are all fair game for contemporary Jewish artists. The only unifying feature that underpins this artistic eclecticism is the desire to depict an identifiably Jewish content.

## *Baggage*

Significantly, Baigell identifies the sociological foundations for this phenomenon. To broadly paraphrase his historical analysis, the generation of Jewish artists from the first third of the twentieth century tended to move away from their Jewish heritage and roots. For the vast majority of Jewish artists of that time, many of whom were European-born, the job at hand was to integrate into American culture, to be modern and successful and, above all, to fit in with the overwhelmingly non-Jewish cultural environment. For artists coming of age in the 1970's and later, though, none of that seemed necessary. As second or third generation Americans who happened to be Jewish, the entire cultural spectrum, including Jewish thought and subjects, was available with little or no negative connotations. The Six Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973 gave Jewish Americans a new sense of pride in their religion and culture, and allowed Jews to take their place alongside other minority groups such as blacks, Latinos, gays, and women in the march towards mainstream recognition.<sup>9</sup> In an age profoundly defined by identity politics, Jewishness became a publicly accepted option. Just as walking down the street with a yarmulke no longer prompted scorn or worse, so too, Jewish subject matter could be equally considered as legitimate artistic subject matter. To simplify Baigell's analysis, the crucial issue is cultural baggage. Baigell's Jews at the end of the twentieth century have little or no such cultural impediments that hamper their exploration of Jewish themes.

### *The Exception—Visual Art*

In the broader view, cutting-edge American Jewish culture has been flourishing ever since the 1960's. Major developments have been seen in the utilization of Jewish themes in literature, music, and performance. Until recently, though, the visual arts have lagged behind. The reasons are complex. In all other cultural expressions, the Jewish presence had been strong from the heyday of early Modernism, seemingly a natural outgrowth of Jewish assimilation into western secular culture. And while Jews' participation in American culture was characteristic of their own assimilation, they remained nonetheless deeply Jewish because literature, music, and performance had a long history in traditional Jewish culture as well. In a way, not much had changed for these artists. Therefore, once they were no longer marginalized, for a generation or two they could more easily explicitly examine Jewish subjects. However, this was not so for the majority of visual artists.

While Jews have always been well represented among twentieth century visual arts, the shift into explicit Jewish subject matter met with more resistance than in other mediums. As these artists learned their trade as visual artists, they were unaware of any Jewish visual tradition to inform their Jewish consciousness. Neither colleges nor art schools ever taught about the extensive history of Jewish art. (With rare exceptions that is still the case today, even in Jewish secondary and higher education schools.) The ghost of an alleged aniconic Jewish history combined with a modernist dismissal of traditional religion effectively shackled Jewish visual artists in a disproportionate manner. And while there were notable exceptions, they were almost always ignored—even if the artists managed to break through the conceptual wall, there was practically no audience prepared to appreciate their efforts. But things were about to change.

### *Modernism / Postmodernism*

In the early 1970's, the orthodoxies of High Modernism and Abstract Expressionism that celebrated purity of form, and the extravagances of Minimalism, slowly gave way to increasing consideration of textual content, first seen in Pop Art's ironic messages. The reintroduction of figurative painting and the advent of photography as a fully recognized artistic medium along with the integration of narration broadened the cultural possibilities for the visual artist. In the following twenty-five years, the collapse of cultural hegemonies made way for the relative chaos of Postmodernism. These years celebrated a return to texts, conceptual issues, idiosyncratic techniques, and multiplicities of meanings in one work. Postmodernism, according to H. H. Arnason's *History of Modern Art*, "encouraged overtly polemical practices and an ironic distance from conventions of the past." Additionally, it was "facilitated by the tools of Poststructuralism and deconstruction..."<sup>10</sup> In a very significant manner, this multiplicity of means in visual creation along with a complex and arm's length attitude to tradition seemed to echo the complexity of Jewish ideas that were publicly airing within organized American Judaism at the same time.

### *Judaism*

Organized Judaism experienced both maturation and fracturing in the second half of the twentieth century. The Reform and Conservative movements grew dramatically at mid-century, and because of the devastations of the Holocaust and the suburban flight of many nominally Orthodox Jews

into more liberal movements and secularism, traditional Orthodoxy seemed doomed. Unexpectedly, the rise of Modern Orthodoxy, the *Baal Teshuvah* movement, and the exponential growth of the Ultra-Orthodox have vastly complicated the demographics and content of organized Judaism. The liberal denominations of Judaism are increasingly faced with internal challenges, especially those linked to intermarriage and plummeting literacy with regard to Jewish religion and culture. In cultural terms, the shifting sands have resulted in increased cross-pollination between the Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Jewish Renewal movements. The ongoing expansion of the role of women in Jewish thought and practice as well as a cautious openness to gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered individuals has changed the face of all aspects of American Judaism, including various expressions of Orthodoxy. It is no longer simply made up of discrete movements, but rather the options within contemporary Judaism are arrayed in a hodge-podge of frequently overlapping ideas and practices. Additionally, for those who are not literate in Hebrew but who are nonetheless interested in exploring Jewish texts, the proliferation of English translations of many traditional texts has dramatically facilitated access to the vast body of Jewish lore and tradition, much of which until recently was the sole providence of the learned Orthodox.

Even more startling is the recent profusion of learning programs designed for visual artists called the Artist's Beit Midrash. First conceived and inaugurated by artist Tobi Kahn at the Skirball Center at Temple Emanu-El in New York, there are now at least eight in the United States and one operating in Tel Aviv. This is perhaps the first time in modern Jewish life that artists, mostly liberal and secular, are being exposed to classical Jewish texts for the purpose of creating visual art. All of this bodes well for artists who wish to explore the many aspects of Jewish thought and ideas in light of contemporary society. And increasingly, many are doing so.

### *Jewish Art Groups*

Within the last ten years we have seen the formation of two organizations of artists dedicated to Jewish visual art. The Jewish Artists Initiative, based in Los Angeles, was founded in 2004 by Ruth Weisberg and currently has close to 70 members. In New York, the Jewish Art Salon, created in 2008 by Yona Verwer, is much more loosely organized, and has 376 artists and over 500 individuals associated with it. The organizations, while very different in scope and focus, share a fundamental belief that Jewish art is a growing movement that needs a forum and organizational support to thrive. Both organizations, along with a

handful of other smaller groups, have utilized Internet websites and email to create something unheard of before: a national community of Jewish Artists. The existence of the web as well as almost universal email and social networking sites has greatly facilitated this profusion of artist groups. The very fact of their existence indicates a groundswell of interest and enthusiasm for the idea of Jewish Art. This in turn promotes a proliferation of interconnectivity via the web, which has led to increased cultural crossovers and hybridization—not to mention the growing sense of an actual movement of Jewish Art. When artists hear that a contemporary historian feels they are collectively creating a “Golden Age,” it is much more than a temporary ego boost. Rather, such an appreciation begins to validate and strengthen their commitment to continue to create artwork with serious Jewish content.

### *Golden Age—Almost*

The confluence of Postmodernism, theological diversity, and unprecedented social networking has led to a rare moment in Jewish cultural history: increased choice, clarity, and freedom in Jewish visual creativity. Hence Baigell’s “Golden Age.”

Just as any fledgling movement needs a history, so too does it need a vision of what will sustain its continued growth. A critical apparatus is essential for the creation of a nurturing environment of creativity. While I share Baigell’s enthusiasm for the profusion of recent serious Jewish art and the enormous range of subjects explored, I simultaneously note a disheartening hesitancy to tackle a whole host of difficult but enormously fruitful Jewish subjects.

The reality is that far too many contemporary Jewish artists are content with superficial versions of Jewish ideas combined with an uncritical appropriation of contemporary art styles. And while this is not crippling to a cultural movement and may even produce a healthy diversity, in order for Jewish art to become a serious cultural expression, it must engender a creative exegesis to confront the depth and seriousness that is inherent in our rich Jewish culture.

To be fair, many contemporary Jewish artists are not even aware of what they are missing. The aforementioned inadequacy of Jewish education, both in terms of Judaism’s texts and Jewish Art history, is appalling. Both can be remedied with sustained individual effort combined with a modern critical apparatus. I believe that it is essential to encourage Jewish artists to interrogate the very heart and soul of the *Tanakh* into their work boldly and without compunction. That is the challenge for contemporary Jewish Art.

### Paradigms of Challenge



FIG. 1. REMBRANDT, JACOB BLESSES JOSEPH'S SONS, 1656. OIL ON CANVAS, 69 x 83, COURTESY GEMALDEGALERIE, KASSEL, GERMANY

The need for a creative exegesis in Jewish visual art has never been greater, and one particularly generative visual tradition for us to learn from is non-Jewish Biblical art. Rembrandt's "Jacob Blessing Joseph's Sons" (1656 – Kassel, Germany) is but one example. At first glance, the painting seems to be a straightforward reflection of the text in Genesis 48:14-22 depicting Jacob's willful 'crossed blessing,' conferring primacy on Joseph's younger son over the elder Manasseh and simultaneously giving Joseph a 'double portion' over his brothers. In Rembrandt's hands, the animal skin draped on Jacob's shoulder echoes back to Jacob's own 'stolen blessing' and introduces a subtle tension to this otherwise calm familial scene, made especially so with the introduction of the woman, not featured in this biblical text, who is none other than Asenath, Joseph's wife. Two distinct midrashic traditions, one a tale of conversion and romance from the Apocrypha,<sup>11</sup> and the other linking her as the daughter of Dinah, Joseph's raped sister,<sup>12</sup> make Rembrandt's inclusion of Asenath here

especially provocative. One interpretation of her role may see her as creating a familial closure to Jacob's tumultuous narrative that began with his own mother's divisive schemes and their epochal consequences. Here Asenath acts as a confirmation of her grandfather's vision for the Jewish future.

For visual artists, there is possibly nothing as rich as the parallel textual traditions of the *Tanakh* and the various midrashic and talmudic texts. The extremely terse nature of the biblical narrative cries out for the kind of textual deconstruction that the rabbis in midrashic literature pursued. In the course of explaining, elaborating, or exploding the thorny theological, moral, or practical issues the biblical texts present at practically every turn, the ancient rabbinic minds have provided a plethora of diverse strategies for contemporizing these stories. Every textual opening or a long-standing tradition of something gone awry allows them to provide a creative explanation. Understanding two contradictory thoughts at the same time is central to their methodology, since the Torah, according to midrashic tradition, is understood to be able to accommodate "70 different facets," i.e., valid interpretations. The seeming violence the rabbis do to the original is no less than a ruthless determination to possess the ancient text for themselves as an inheritance that carries enormous responsibility. Rabbinic interpretations, as evocative and disturbing as they may be, are almost never simply personal. While for some Jewish artists there is a lingering hesitancy about actually depicting the patriarchs, matriarchs, holy prophets and kings, this misplaced piety must be resisted. The Rabbis themselves were never so circumspect.

### *Eden Morris*

Eden Morris's painting, *Sarah's Nightmare* (2010), has internalized Sarah's horrified reaction upon hearing of the near slaughter of her son Isaac in the Akeidah. In the face of the biblical silence and the proximity to Sarah's death in the text (Gen. 23), Rashi comments:

Genesis: 23:2; *And Abraham came*: From Beersheba; *To eulogize Sarah and to bewail her*: Sarah's death is juxtaposed with the Binding of Isaac because through hearing the news of the Binding, that her son was readied for slaughter and was nearly slaughtered, her soul flew from her and she died.

In this radical painting about unintended consequences, the biblical narrative itself is barely seen in the background, while the artist's unique take on the midrash is prioritized in the foreground. As Isaac simultaneously becomes the sacrificial ram and Sarah's haunted son, the artist has appropriated both



FIG. 2. EDEN MORRIS, SARAH'S NIGHTMARE, 2010. OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 30  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

biblical and midrashic texts to place the horror she perceives at the center of the narrative.

Precisely because of the undeniably patriarchal nature of so many biblical narratives—all of which tend to attract extensive criticism in Jewish feminist literature—a fresh appraisal of the pivotal role of women and sexuality in nearly all these narratives continues to be compelling and relevant to visual artists of both sexes.

### *Janet Shafner*

In the Genesis narrative of the three angels who come to visit Abraham, Sarah plays a passive and meek role. Standing in the shadows of the doorway, she laughs incredulously at the news of her impending miraculous pregnancy at the age of 90 and then clumsily lies to God about the incident. Janet



FIG. 3. JANET SHAFNER, *SARAH*, 1998. OIL ON CANVAS, 58 X 50  
COURTESY THE ESTATE OF JANET SHAFNER

Shafner's *Sarah* (1998) totally reassesses the matriarch's role. Now sitting in the foreground, patiently waiting, her husband Abraham is nowhere to be seen, and the three angels/strangers are likewise waiting, presumably for lunch (Gen. 18:1-15). Rising up behind them is a bright but curious landscape dominated by two enormous breast-like mountains. The rivulets that spill down the mountainsides are at first puzzling until one recalls a curious midrash that speaks of a miraculous validation of Sarah in her generative role. The Talmud (Baba Metzia 87a) reports:

How many children then did Sarah suckle? — R. Levi said: "On the day that Abraham weaned his son Isaac, he made a great banquet, and all the peoples of the world derided him, saying, 'Have you seen that old man and woman, who brought a foundling from the street, and now claim him as their son! And what is more, they make a great banquet to

establish their claim!' What did our father Abraham do? — He went and invited all the great men of the age, and our mother Sarah invited their wives. Each one brought her child with her, but not the wet nurse, and a miracle happened unto our mother Sarah, her breasts opened like two fountains, and she suckled them all.”

Shafner's painting recasts the biblical Sarah's passive role by portraying her as a source of enormous sustenance and blessing by alluding to the midrashic tale.

Such a lens that bends gender tensions and conflicts in the biblical narrative can become a powerful tool for visual creation. And yet all too many artists, curiously including many women, seem to be oblivious to the dynamic and crucial role of women in biblical narratives.

### *Archie Rand*

Sadly, many biblical strategies finely suited to uncover hosts of alternative meanings such as juxtaposition, repetition, serial narratives, and textual contrasts, are underutilized by contemporary artists. In contrast, Archie Rand's work is dominated by serial narratives that reflect the sequential nature of many Jewish texts. *The Chapter Paintings* (1989) explore 53 discreet sections of the Torah; *The Nineteen Diaspora Paintings* (2002) spell out the individual petitions and praises of the *Amidah*, the central Jewish prayer, interpreted through biblical texts envisioned as illustrated pulp fiction; *The Seven Days of Creation* (2004) speak for themselves in a semi-abstract play of free association as well. And *The 613* (2008), perhaps his most ambitious work, measures in at 1600 square feet and gives each and every commandment in the Torah its own canvas for Rand to personalize. Many of his works initially puzzle the viewer with a bewildering complexity of images, fittingly echoing many primary biblical strategies. As in all Torah study, understanding takes concentrated effort.

### *Robert Kirschbaum*

Another artist who uses juxtaposition and textual contrasts is Robert Kirschbaum, especially in his recent small paintings “The Akeida Series” (2008-2009). Kirschbaum narrates the Akeidah story in ten abstract images that employ three registers to represent heaven and the earth below—the world of action. In a field of frantic gestures, squares arise to form a symbolic altar until there appears to be a violent clash of abstract forces. As the confrontation subsides, other square and rectangular forms coalesce into the final



FIG. 4. ARCHIE RAND, *THE 613*, 2008. OIL ON 613 CANVASES, 22' x 100'.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

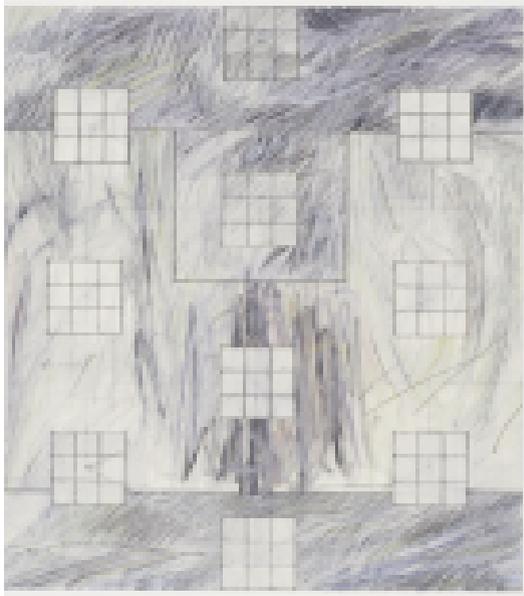


FIG. 5. ROBERT KIRSCHBAUM, *AKEIDA 45*, 2008-2009. MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER 9 x 8.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

image of a doorway that appears to enter a sanctuary. Since this “scene” is in some sense the climax of the Akeidah, it would seem that Kirschbaum has taken us to a portal of the Divine. The appearance of this portal is found in the fifth image, *Akeida* 45. In this image all of the agitated marks have assembled, each register defined by its own calligraphy, and, floating over them all, is the immediately recognizable pattern of the Zoharic chart of the ten *Sefirot*, each represented by a nine square grid cube, reflecting 10 perfect self-contained universes. In Kirschbaum’s depiction, it is the fulcrum of the Akeidah narrative—the Divine meeting with Abraham and Isaac at the moment of the aborted sacrifice. Blind faith and unquestioning obedience are rewarded by the revelation of the Divine Presence. Kirschbaum has imposed a Kabbalistic synthesis on one of the most disturbing narratives in the Torah and has, as a result, found a remarkable Divine Portal beckoning us.

### *Jacqueline Nicholls*

“Draw Yomi - Drawing the Talmud,” by Jacqueline Nicholls, sums up an entire daily page of Talmud with one drawing and a short and pithy commentary. “Brochot 13 (14 August 2012)” features a stark rendition of a human heart with her terse commentary: “How long can the heart be bound up? how long can the heart concentrate? – a paragraph? 2 paragraphs? . . . 3? or just a sentence?” The Mishnah and following Gemara explore the few permitted interruptions in the recitation of the Shema, as depicted in her drawing by the letter shin and its extension that binds the frail human heart. Additionally, her drawing and text echoes the paradigmatic opinion on the page that “mitzvot must be performed with intent,” asking ‘how long can the heart be bound up?’ This effectively cements together the concept of concentration (bound straps) with intent (the heart). Nicholls’ contemporary text raises the critical question as to exactly how long we can realistically maintain both concentration on the content of a mitzvah and the larger issue of intent. Halakhah becomes inquiry.

### *Richard McBee*

Over the last thirty years, my own artwork has plumbed the Torah for contemporary meaning and expression. Recently, “Hagar The Stranger (2010 – 2013),” a series of sixteen large paintings, explored the role of Hagar in Sarah and Abraham’s household and beyond. Initially, my interest was aroused by the Rashi that states that Abraham’s second wife, Keturah, was none other



FIG. 6. JACQUELINE NICHOLLS, BROCHOS 13, 2012. PENCIL ON PAPER, COURTESY THE ARTIST

than Hagar, the Egyptian handmaid Sarah had forced upon him. During my research, I learned that Black American Christian women celebrated Hagar as a heroine, and therefore depicted her as a woman of color. This literally transformed my understanding of all the relationships in the narrative.<sup>13</sup> Adding race to the dynamic propelled the biblical story firmly into a contemporary and, surprisingly, American landscape. Clearly, issues of race and gender dominate contemporary American dialogues for Jews and non-Jews alike.

These examples of possible “paradigms” that arise out of classic Jewish texts as they collide with some aspects of Postmodernist sensibility are, of course, not exclusive prescriptions for Jewish artists. I offer them only to demonstrate what is possible if our Golden Age artists would consider the many options that the rich traditions of Jewish biblical and rabbinic texts make available to them.



**FIG. 7. RICHARD MCBEE, HAGAR AND HER CHILDREN BURY ABRAHAM, 2013.**  
OIL ON CANVAS 72 X 60. COURTESY THE ARTIST

## Prospects

It should be obvious that the current revival of Jewish Art can only bloom into a true Golden Age if it has broad public support, especially from the Jewish community in America. Just as there is now a sustained readership for Jewish-oriented literature and ideas (and even occasionally some visual art) in such venues as the *Jewish Review of Books*, *Tablet*, *Jewcy*, and *The Forward*, so likewise must we develop the potentiality of a literate visual Jewish culture and audience.

Jewish institutions across the board, including synagogues, community centers, museums and media, must raise the bar and demand textual literacy. A constant daily outpouring of Jewish texts, in English and Hebrew, must inundate our communities. Our writers must not dumb down complex Jewish concepts; rather, we must have confidence that our people will always be curious to find out more about their precious heritage. Equally important is community education in visual literacy; our community should insist upon being visually literate in the two-thousand years of Jewish Art in both the Jewish and Western visual canon.

Critics and journalists must be encouraged to analyze, thoughtfully comment on, and explain these artists' works to a Jewish audience so that both the Judaic and aesthetic elements are treated with equal respect. The public must listen and become engaged. The Jewish museums must overcome their reluctance and open their doors. In order to thrive, the Golden Age must be recognized.

We have made a good start. From out of the wilderness of our own doubts, we have found our way through a troubled past and, thanks to America's loving embrace, we have emerged into a new artistic landscape full of promise. More artists, self-consciously drawing upon Jewish Tradition as a springboard for inspiration, have produced more explicitly Jewish Art. If we can muster the courage to stand apart as proud Jews in contemporary America, while fully embracing three-thousand years of our history and close to two-thousand years of visual creativity, contemporary Jewish Art has more than a fair chance to find its rightful day in the sun.

## NOTES

1. This is a revised and expanded version previously published in *Jewish Cultural Aspirations: The Jewish Role in American Life*; Annual Review: USC Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life, vol. 10 (Purdue University Press, 2013), 33-48.
2. Cf. Exodus 20:4-5; Deuteronomy 5:8-10. The long and tortuous controversy over Jews creating visual art is perhaps best summed up by Cecil Roth: "In all Jewish history, attitudes and interpretations varied from land to land and from generation to generation. Sometimes the application of the prohibition was absolute...even in relatively 'liberal' Jewish circles. . . . Sometimes men went to the other extreme, and great latitude was shown, human figures being incorporated freely even in objects associated with Divine worship." Cf. *Jewish Art*, Cecil Roth, ed. (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, Ltd, 1971), 11.
3. Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew* (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 2000), 8.
4. See Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, *Jewish Art* (New York: Abrams, 1997). This excellent survey is simply an introduction to the extensive literature on Jewish art that dates from the third century C.E. Dura Europos synagogue murals, the many dozens of illuminated manuscripts in fourteenth and fifteenth century Spain and central Europe, the extensive illustrated Haggadot and Jewish books, seventeenth and eighteenth century illuminated Jewish manuscripts, nineteenth century Jewish genre painters and extensive artwork from the Bezalel School in pre-state Palestine, and twentieth century modernist masters. Additionally, [www.richardmcbec.com](http://www.richardmcbec.com) features over 250 critical reviews of Jewish visual art.
5. Bland, 40-44.
6. Cynthia Ozick, "Previsions of the Demise of the Dancing Dog," in *Art and Ardor* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 278.
7. See Vivian B. Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2000). The diversity of rabbinic opinion on the permissibility of Jewish image-making is breathtaking. What becomes clear is that in many cases over the millennia, visual art was permitted by the rabbis and that, as the threat of idolatry faded, the issue became more academic. My own inquiries, addressed to a number of orthodox rabbinic authorities (including Rabbi David Feinstein) have yielded the opinion that, other than a three-dimensional highly finished and realistic statues, almost all artworks created as artworks are permissible.
8. Matthew Baigell, unpublished lecture (published 2013; see *infra*, n. 9); summary appeared "The Arty Semite" (*The Jewish Daily Forward* Blog), March 4, 2011.
9. Baigell, "We are Living in a Golden Age of Jewish American Art and We Really Don't Know It," *Jewish Cultural Aspirations: The Jewish Role in American Life*, *supra* n. 1, 1 – 31.
10. H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2004), 685.
11. "Joseph and Asenath" (written in the Hellenistic age), in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture*; (Patricia Ahearne-Kroll, trans.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 2525; see also [www.markgoodacre.org](http://www.markgoodacre.org), translation by H.FD Sparks, ed., *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1984).
12. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer (ca. 6th century C.E.) (Gerald Friedlander, trans.; North Stratford, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, 2004) 287-88. See also [www.books.google.com/books...pirke de rabbi eliezer](http://www.books.google.com/books...pirke%20de%20rabbi%20eliezer) english online.
13. Delores S. Williams, *Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation*, Hagar, Sarah and Their Children, Phyllis Tribble & Letty M. Russell, ed.s (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 171–184.