

The Meaning of Beauty

TO CREATE ART is natural, an act in the image of the Creator, whose materials are light and darkness, generative and reflecting luminosities, and their attendant color and shadow. Art begins in the capacity to see, a mode of knowing the world and its Maker that is indispensable to the religious and cultural expression of a people.

The sacred spaces and their constituent works in this exhibition have been made for celebration and remembrance in loving community, for the marking of boundaries between holy and daily time, for the beginning of life and its end. They embody a passion for seeing. (Fig. 1) The Torah, from which our expanding tradition of text and interpretation descends, is replete with the word *re'eh*, with the glory of sight as a unique medium for exalting the Creator. Extended passages are devoted to the visual elements of the portable Sanctuary in the desert—to crimson, silver and gold, and the Jewish color *t'khelet*, to bells and pomegranates. The lush portrayal of the Tabernacle's exquisite detail, in a text that privileges brevity, teaches us how inextricable beauty is from holiness.

The centrality of beauty to holiness is not only authentic but essential to Jewish tradition. All those whose civilization bears a relationship to the Hebrew Bible share this bequest, but the making of art offers the provenance and vocabulary to exemplify it.

In the Jewish way, the divine presence is abstract, incorporeal, without beginning or end. How, then, can God be made manifest in the material world? The infinite and mortal can meet in spaces designated as liminal, dwelling places that invite our spirit, made in the Image, to encounter the ineffable God

TOBI KAHN is a painter and sculptor whose work has been shown in over 50 solo exhibitions and over 60 museum and group shows since he was selected as one of nine artists to be included in the 1985 Guggenheim Museum exhibition, *New Horizons in American Art*. Works by Kahn are in major museum, corporate, and private collections. For over twenty-five years, he has taught fine arts workshops at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. He co-founded and facilitates the Artists' Beit Midrash at the Skirball Center of Temple Emanu-El. Kahn lectures extensively at universities and public forums internationally on the importance of visual language and on art as healing.



FIG. 1. EMET, MEDITATIVE SPACE, HEALTHCARE CHAPLAINCY, NEW YORK CITY, 2001

in both splendor and intimacy. The media for the engagement between transcendence and immanence are the same as those with which the world itself was created: Light, horizon, breath, pattern, the holiness of distinctions.

For me, the life of the spirit is integrally bound to the beauty of the world. Rather than being forbidden, beauty in praise of the Creator is given an honored place. The name of the Tabernacle's chief artist, Betzalel, means "in the shadow of God," for his work is understood to be divinely inspired.

Judaism is not an exclusively textual tradition, nor is the making of art prohibited because of the Second Commandment's injunction against the worship of graven images. The commandments by which Jews express their awe and love of God are *performed*; their fulfillment is often tactile. When the soul of the Sabbath departs, we breathe in the fragrance of cinnamon, of cloves. On the festival of Succot, we shake the frond of a palm tree and utter a blessing upon smelling the unique perfume of the *etrog*, the citron. Intrinsic to every commandment is the prospect of *hiddur mitzvah*, of amplifying the commandment's sacredness with beauty.

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By the time I was six, I knew I would be an artist. Born into a Jewish life saturated with both richness and tragedy, I could not in those early years distinguish between my vision and my Judaism. For hours, I stood at the window of my room in Washington Heights, riveted by the passing world. At my grandfather's side in the Breuer Synagogue, I was transfixed by the living green of Shavuot leaves and the pattern cast by their shadow, mesmerized by the transformation of the room into a pure white space for Yom Kippur. I thought all Jews lived in the same visual enchantment.

My parents and grandparents, refugees from Germany, encouraged my artistic pursuits. They took my sister and me to museums, concerts, and walks in all seasons in Fort Tryon Park. My sister was named after our murdered aunt, and I was named after our uncle, a medical student and artist who, in 1933, was one of the first three Jews killed by the Nazis. The annihilation of European Jewry is a reality that continues to shape my being.

As an artist, I am obsessed by memory and its imperatives. The tribute that the dead ask of us is not only to mourn their irreplaceable existence, but to live with joy and fruitfulness. I am always aware of time's passing, of the possibility of loss, of an abrupt reversal of safety. In the face of the world's instability, I want to reveal not the evident reality but its essence, the inherent vitality that is possible. (Fig. 2)



**FIG. 2. LAHAV, SEVEN MEMORIAL LIGHTS, 9-11 IN 2011,
EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE, NEW YORK CITY, 2011**



FIGURE 3. INSTALLATION CONSISTING OF PAINTINGS, ARK DOORS, ETERNAL LIGHT AND MENORAHS FOR TEMPLE EMANU-EL, B'NE JESHURUN, MILWAUKEE, WI, 2009

Holiness in Practice

The life of a community within the sacred space of a synagogue encompasses ardor and despair, turbulence and tranquility, sorrow and elation. When a community gathers, its members celebrate and grieve, rejoice in the birth of a child—a new presence—and lament the death of a beloved—newly absent.

Abstraction in imagery and form summons that most Jewish mode: interpretation. The paintings created for this sacred space are an invitation to discover the grandeur of the world we were given, to contemplate the beginning—its first shapes and forms—and to taste a return to the paradise of creation in a world that only our deeds can redeem. These works suggest the continual flowering of life: its radiance and darkening, its elemental particles of being, and its earthbound and celestial vantage points.

In living relationship to a Creator, awe and intimacy are in nourishing exchange. Throughout our lives, the microscopic corresponds to the cosmic. We praise and protect the natural world while acting to repair the brokenness—in ourselves and in the global community.

These paintings and ceremonial objects are not static; they are in communion with those who sit in their midst, awakening new and renewed ways of seeing, deepening ways of doing, and revealing beauty in light dazzling and evanescent. In this sacred space, we are porous to each other and to God. (Fig. 3)

The work created for the memorial chapel recognizes the severance of humankind from those in grief at the times when they are most in need of the solace of community. It reflects our longing in the face of the irrevocability of death to resume our place in an infinite, benign universe composed only of the most enduring elements—the vast sky, the healing bestowed by light, and the golden desert in which we were forged as a chosen community. The painting, wall sculpture, and memorial light are designed to offer this stark consolation: anguish can be contained in a larger, embracing world.

In the beginning, chaos became luminous, newborn. The chairs for the naming of a daughter are new ritual architecture; Jewish life does not yet have a communal, time-hallowed tradition for the covenantal naming of a daughter. These four chairs—on which mothers, grandmothers, and other wise women who transmit the power of the tradition are seated before the welcoming community—invoke the vision of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, our wise ancestral women seers who were able to discern which of their children should be blessed as leaders. Art confers on newest life the hallmark characteristics of the biblical mothers: the laughter, strength, tenderness, and fertility we seek to bequeath to our daughters. (Fig. 4)



FIG. 4. AHMA, FOUR BABY NAMING CHAIRS, 2008. COMMISSIONED BY THE SHAYKIN FAMILY FOUNDATION FOR THE ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL SCHOOL, NEW YORK CITY



FIG. 5. SAPHYR III, OMER COUNTER, 2011

Jews are commanded in the Torah to count the forty-nine days of the *omer* from the second day of Passover until the first day of Shavuot. The *omer* commemorates the journey from exodus to peoplehood, from subjugation to the giving of the Torah. I was born in the middle of the *omer*, the seven-week period between the season of our liberation and the festival that celebrates the giving and receiving of the Torah at Sinai. Traditionally, Jews count each of the forty-nine days by reciting a *brakhah* [blessing], and then naming the day's number and its place within the week. In Jewish mysticism, each day and week are linked to a unique attribute of the Creator. (Fig. 5)

To me, the counting of the *omer* represents the relationship between a person and his or her community. Each day is distinct, but the sequence of days and weeks is set in a larger framework. Beginning with one, we become an ordered multitude—accruing the dimensions of peoplehood in our journey from slavery to redemption.

For decades, I thought about how to embody this paradox in a work of art. The *omer* counter that resulted consists of forty-nine sculpted forms in a grid; each one can be set in its place in only a single way. By a daily act, the viewer becomes a participant in the changing work, a celebration of measured time. One by one, the gold-lined spaces of our inner lives are inhabited, each miniature structure refracting the other's light until the work is complete—and we have counted our way once more to revelation.



These works of sacred space and ceremony are not a rupture from the past; they express the past's living possibilities in the idiom of abstraction. They make visible a preoccupation with art and holiness, a quest to distill what we remember into essential images. They are archetypes that allow the past to be transformed by imagination into a capacious future, a resonant sanctuary in a still struggling world. (Fig. 6)

Excerpted from the book accompanying the exhibition
Tobi Kahn: Sacred Space for the 21st Century, ed. Ena Giurescu Heller
(MOBIA and D Giles Ltd: London, 2009)



FIG. 6. DREAMING OF SINAI, NINE PAINTINGS, 2010