

JILL NATHANSON

Visual Art and Judaism

Literature, Painting and Sculpture aim to bring to realization all the spiritual concepts impressed deep within the human soul.

—RAV AVRAHAM YITZCHAK KOOK¹

VISUAL ARTISTS WORKING IN ABSTRACTION, representation, mixed media and photography have been seeking a place at the table—or “on the walls”—of serious Jewish life in recent decades. Working largely against the grain of the international Art World, which often has an anti-religious or anti-‘moralistic’ ethos, this Jewish Art is often shown in Jewish cultural spaces outside the commercial galleries. The international Art World is a roiling, molten arena of contradictions and intentions based in museums, auction houses and galleries large and small. There is spirituality to be found in some Contemporary Art in the galleries and museums if you know where to look, but much current art and theory negates the very idea of spirituality that Rav Kook wrote of one hundred years ago. Jewish artists working now are consciously re-asserting the spiritual life through specific Jewish ideas in the work; in the best cases, this content determines the form of the work. Making Jewish art in the context of Post-Modernism is not a matter of naïvely adding Jewish flavor or subjects to ambient styles.

As an artist, I work in both cultural spaces: specific Jewish Art and abstract painting within the general Art World. I have an intuition that abstract art and Jewish thought have, with intention, areas of overlap and for some thrilling periods I have devoted myself and my studio to exploring this terrain. One of these times was in 2004-5. During that time, I worked with Professor Arnold Eisen (now Chancellor Eisen of JTS) on a project: four large paintings and three commentaries by Eisen which came to be called “Seeing Sinai.” Based on close reading of Exodus 33-34 and discussions in the studio,

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the Torah study was to be the basis of both form and content in the paintings. The paintings are exhibited with the section of the Torah text and Eisen's writing. Near the reproductions below I've very roughly indicated the ideas in the paintings.

Abstract art can be a way to make visible that which we cannot or can barely see. It can allow us to see and understand relationships between objects, and it provides a way to see beyond the objects-with-names that form our day-to-day visual life. It is really a language of relationship: all language is relationships between signs or sounds. Abstract art takes the world we see and sets it (back) into primary visual relationships. Most artists agree that all great art, even if representational, is strongly abstract.

Having painted some abstract Judaic works in the 1990's, I felt that the connections and overlaps between abstract art and Jewish ideas needed expansion and a learned guide would help me to ask the right questions. I contacted Eisen, with whom I had studied, and asked him to work with me. Of the questions I wanted to explore, one that was easy to explain was this: the language of Torah, the very letters, are viewed, in Jewish sources as creating Creation. How can language underlie nature and the seen world, and what does that mean for visual experience and for an artist for whom the visual world is primary? More personally, I felt that vision was somewhat denigrated in Judaism: is this so in the Torah?

We worked without a clear plan: we spoke in my studio, looked at my abstract paintings, and Eisen listened as I spoke about color, light, unity, and dynamics. He understood that my paintings were anti-image paintings; a viewer was meant to experience a visual process, to apprehend the "becoming" of abstract unity, not to see an image.

We decided to work with Exodus 33-34, the central Torah text in which Moses asks to see the Glory of Hashem on Sinai. My speech about painting influenced Eisen's reading of this text he had read so many times. Reading Torah in the studio brought the subject of vision in this text into a new context—it was like reading Song of the Sea at the beach.

I was hoping to create a hybrid form of Torah study and art; I wanted the sense of insight that one can feel when looking at art to join with Torah insight. After we met, I painted for about a month, showed Eisen the paintings, and then he commenced to write commentaries on the text, considering the paintings. The four paintings and the writings were done over the course of a year.

The subject matter of the paintings was the verbal text: mostly Hashem's words in response to Moses' request, "please Grant me a vision of Your Glory"

(Exodus 33:18). What happens to nature, to the seen world, when the Creator of all is present, speaking: the same act that was and is Creation? In these minutes of Revelation, what was the air like? The light? The wind? Even though Hashem could not be seen, how could Presence not leave traces? Hashem made His Goodness pass before Moses, not His image, but still, might there have been something to see?

Nothing about this project came easy. And it was frankly terrifying to muck around with paint while thinking about this Torah. I was grateful for Eisen's investment of time and presence, and his interpretations informed my choices in the paintings. He was grateful for a chance to do something "outside of the box." It helped that I had previously engaged in Jewish text study and that my art practice tends to be an experiment in form and human meaning.

Art is a vast cultural space around the world right now, and the artists devoting their lives to Jewish Art reflects just one aspect of it. In our time, looking at art offers a shared space of openness that's very powerful; perhaps we don't have the right words for many aspects of experience now, but art may strike the right chords. Jews share the space and time of prayer; that's central. But we don't really experience nature in common these days, and the built world can set an unnatural tone. Jewish architectural spaces, though beloved, may be old, and to renew them involves vast sums of money and organization. Works of art can bring us together in shared time and space. In a moment when so much is digital and solitary, art makes a space of common presence in the present. (Works of art can also disappoint and annoy, but that's another story.)

I've now exhibited the Sinai paintings a number of times, and it's always been a surprise to see how they are experienced. Viewers' reactions to the paintings have not always been exactly what I intended, but the reactions have been successful in ways I had not anticipated. The exhibitions seem to offer a space of light and shared experience that is connected to Torah.

My next project, "New Translations," was not a collaboration, and was based on Genesis 1. It used abstraction and text in a very different way: one image is included below. There are other experimental works done by other artists and many more are possible. Such work gives the makers, participants, and viewers a chance to stand in a place of thought and vision, and to share new songs of praise.

When people say my Judaic paintings are beautiful, I feel an element of discomfort. When I learned to pray the Amidah and encountered the

Kedushah, I was an adult. As a visual person, my mind's eye would fill with visual somethings; forces, movements, and qualities which found their way into the Sinai paintings. I didn't make up the majesty: I was responding to what is in the siddur. What I find interesting is that when I have spoken of this visualization in public, other people have said, "Yes! The Kedushah sometimes does something like that to me." It is well-documented that color visualization was a common practice in Kabbalistic prayer of the seventeenth and eighteenth Centuries. Though specific colors were connected to specific Sefirot, this was clearly an inner experience of visualization. I suggest that this inner aspect of prayer has "come out" now that abstract art is an established art practice. Here's what I've made of it so far.

NOTES

1. *Olat Hare-ayah* II,3, "Hamizrach" (1903), 352.

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FIRST DAY. FROM NEW TRANSLATIONS: GENESIS 1 (2010). (MIXED MEDIA)



**SEEING SINAI (2004-5): PAINTING 1: "PLEASE GRANT ME A VISION OF YOUR GLORY,
BEHOLD THERE IS A PLACE WITH ME", EXODUS 33: 18, 21**

The dialogue begins: Moses makes his request. After telling Moses that He cannot be seen, Hashem says there is a place where Moses can experience His Presence.



**SEEING SINAI PAINTING 2: "WHEN MY GLORY PASSES
I WILL PLACE YOU . . . COVER . . . PASS . . . UNCOVER"**

Hashem describes what He will now do, which the painting shows through the words of God's speech. The painting includes only the verbs.



SEEING SINAI PAINTING 3: "AND I WILL WRITE ON THESE TABLETS." EXODUS 34:1
Hashem declares that He will write the second tablets
while with Moses on the rock.



**SEEING SINAI PAINTING 4: "THEY WERE AFRAID TO COME CLOSE TO HIM;
HE PUT A VEIL OVER HIS FACE." EXODUS 34:30, 33**

After Moses has descended from the mountain, the people are afraid and can only listen to the revealed words when they see the light flowing from Moses' face. This light is a visual aspect of Revelation.