

Visual Expression and Jewish Memory

Rachel Elior

“You Heard the Sound of
Words but Perceived No
Shape, Nothing but a Voice”

(Deuteronomy 4:12)

In Memory of Adi

Recorded Jewish memory, which plots the reciprocal relationship between the abstract and the tangible and between holy and profane, stretches out over three thousand years. From the biblical corpus and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Ben Sirah and the Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal works, all written during the first millennium B.C.E.; the Mishnah, Toseptah, *aggadic* and *halakhic midrashim*, to prayers, the Talmud, the *Heikhalot* literature, liturgy, to the *genizah* and the Gaonic literature, all composed over the course of the first millennium C.E.; and ending with the Tosefot, the Responsa literature, *halakhic* studies, sacred and secular poetry, philosophy, Kabbalah, Sabbatianism, Hasidut and Haskalah, written during the second millennium C.E. Hundreds of thousands of written and printed pages testifying to Jewish written memory in every Jewish community, and to the immense wealth of Jewish creativity that is written in every new work of *halakhah* and *aggadah*, poetry and prose, or in every imaginative, ground- and law-breaking expression.

The Jewish world was created *b'sfar, besefer, vesipor*, “count,” “account,” and “recount,” [through numbers, through written words, and by speech] in the words of *Sefer Yetzirah*, from its earliest beginnings thousands of years ago until the modern period, during which the language of the Holy Scriptures, the Book of Books, established the foundations of the collective memory that rests at the base of historical developments. The mediation between the *Divine*

Rachel Elior, John and Golda Cohen Professor of Jewish Philosophy Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Chair, Department of Jewish Thought Prof. Elior is a senior research fellow at the Scholion Interdisciplinary Center of the Hebrew University and a senior research fellow at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem. Her research interests are focused on the history of Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah, on Early Jewish Mysticism in antiquity known as the *Merkavah* and *Heikhalot* Literatures, on Sabbatianism, Hasidism and Frankism in the modern era and on presence and absence of women in Jewish intellectual history. She has served as a judge for the Adi Prize for Jewish Expression in Art and Design.

– *abstract and unseen, creator and giver of life*, and which is found at the crux of our sanctified, literary memory ever since the story of the Creation and the Revelation at Sinai – and the *tangible world and its visible expressions that are accessible to humans*, is achieved by what is *heard* and read, and which finds expression in scrolls, books, and written texts.

In contrast, *visible* artistic expression in the ancient Jewish world was incomparably restricted and limited to only one realm because of the dialectical status of the visible in relation to the non-visible – the *sanctity* that is found at the heart of a written creation that is read and heard. The Holy was permitted in verbal expression (e.g. The Holy One, blessed be He), in ceremonial representation (e.g. the *Kedusha* prayer, *kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*), poetic-liturgical expression (e.g. *shirat hakodesh* that accompanies the sacrifice), and, unrestrictedly, in theoretical studies on the meaning of sacred, Divine speech in its written manifestations, in prophecy, law, narrative, and poetry. Alternately, the boundaries of visible artistic expression, which inherently belongs to the material world in all its *perceptible manifestations*, were severely constrained, due to the singularity of God.

Such was the state of events, ever since the well-known prohibition from the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods besides Me. *You shall not make* for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth” (Exodus 20:2-4). The infinite Divine, creator and giver of life, is eternal and recurring and is found outside of the universe and within it, signifying the unity of the contradictions that is called “Infinite” and “*sefirot*” or the countless and infinite. This exists alongside the determinately finite, which always is and gives life to the creation, transcends the grasp of the visible and is perceived audibly, existing, at one and the same time, beyond and within the created world. It is revealed in the immaterial, metaphysical world that exists in human consciousness where the divine spirit meets with the human spirit, and is revealed in the divinely-created world’s endless cycles: the cycles of light and dark, of seasons, of growth and harvest, cycles of fertility and blessing, and all of nature’s cyclical changes, which are pre-determined and preordained in heaven and earth and from which human beings benefit, and which is called, in ancient priestly literature, the “chariots of heaven” (*merkavot hashmayim*; 1 Enoch 75:3).

The only place where the representation of the Holy was allowed

into the visible realm was in the *unseen area* of the Temple, in the Holy of Holies that was hidden from all. That place, which the Bible calls “the gold for the figure of the chariot – the cherubs – those with outspread wings screening the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord” (1 Chronicles 28:18), was inaccessible except to the High Priest on Yom Kippur behind a smoky veil of incense that impeded glimpses of the Holy. It was made of gold, called *kapporet* and was the sanctuary where, according to the Bible, the cherubs were. The rabbinic sages called it *lifnai ulifanim*, “the inner Sanctuary” in order to express its remoteness from the view of people – only in that place was there room for expansive artistic expression, as we see from the biblical tradition in Exodus, Kings, and Chronicles.

The beginnings of Jewish art in the biblical world were coupled to this sacred, unseen space that is connected to the mythical-mystical cosmography of the place of God’s revelation and the place wherein his name dwells (the Garden of Eden, Mt. Sinai, Mt. Zion). It is the place whose description is tied to myth, mysticism, and a multi-faceted system of art that was hidden from all and known as the Holy of Holies, the place wherein was placed the chariot of cherubs or the *kapporet* [covering of the Holy Ark] behind veils and curtains, and where the holy guard watched over the cycles of sacred time. However, the continuation of Jewish art is tied to the Temple’s outer chambers, outside of the Holy of Holies. That is where both the menorah, the work of a craftsman, as well as the golden altar of incense, stood – two cultic instruments that were made according to Divine directive, though their measurements and appearance derive from their function. Access to these objects, which were sculpted, carved, or cast from gold, and which displayed obvious artistry, was, as said, limited exclusively to the pure priests, and thus entirely forbidden to anyone not of the priesthood, anyone that was excluded from purification and sanctification and from serving the Holy. Levites also served in the Temple’s courtyards, but there was strict demarcation between the priests and the Levites regarding accessible areas and those in which the Holy were served.

Such traditions of restricted areas of elaborate beauty – which were tied to the source of life, to Divine revelation, to gold and crystal from the Garden of Eden, and that were built with reference to heavenly inspiration and a sanctified cosmography, and to which entrance was reserved only to an extraordinary few individuals from the tribe of Levi, the priests, sons of Zadok, or the priests who

numbered among the twenty-four divisions of priests that served the Sacred – coalesced during the first thousand years B.C.E. and secured this relationship between the Holy, which was hidden from sight, and its revealed and hidden representations in the Temple courtyards, in all their visual beauty.

However, the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 C.E. changed the nature of Jewish art entirely and, from invaluable art of heavenly character, access to which was limited to an elite few and contingent on Divine election, genealogy, sanctity, and purification, on myth and sanctified memory, it became human, exempted from sacred inspiration and from being bound by holy place, holy time, and holy cult, and from a whole range of limiting conditions and valuable materials, which were controlled exclusively by the priestly-Levitical monopoly.

Once the Temple was destroyed there were no longer sacred, cultic articles whose viewing was prohibited or limited. There was no longer the sanctified, hierocratic gradation of accessibility and separation, which comprised the base of the priestly system that mediated between the hidden and unseen and the seen and tangible. Instead, the reverse was now true: across the Jewish world, synagogues were established that retained the memory of the Temple in a variety of forms – artistic, symbolic, in visual representations, and in ceremony – while entrance to them was not regulated by ancestry, sanctity, or purity. A synagogue could be anywhere; it could be established by anyone, and there were no requirements regarding tribal affiliation, purity, or sanctity. A synagogue only required the sanctified presence of the holy language along with Jewish memory: it must have a Torah scroll. Anything beyond the written memory is a choice of aesthetics, decoration, or zeal in religious observance, and not something that is obligatory; rather, alongside the memory that is read and heard, which connects with the abstract realm that is anchored in the reading of the Torah, there developed also visual memory, which commemorates the written in the tangible world.

The accepted definition of relevant materials for research in Jewish thought includes everything that Jews, in every period, and in every land, viewed as Judaism, or anything that they thought or wrote in connection with Jewish sources, in its broadest definition. In the same way, we might say that Jewish art is every type of visual expression and artistic creation that was created by Jews in every community, in every period, and in every land, which enters into

any sort of dialogue with the written memory of the Jewish people. This memory, which is unique in that, on the one hand, it represents a reality that is connected to the Divine and the hidden, to the holy and the eternal, sublime, poetic, mythic and mystical, and to expressions that are written in a holy language, and, on the other, also represents the historical changes and fluctuating circumstances in which Jews have lived and created through a continuing dialogue with their surrounding cultures. This is a twofold dialogue with the written past, which represents an unseen reality, a holy reality that is in the realm of longing, and which connects with the recurring past that is interpreted in art. It even connects with an anticipated future that is often tied to an image of the written past, with its visual expressions (see images of Jerusalem and of the Temple throughout history, and compare images of the Temple Menorah with the State of Israel's symbol of a menorah), and is connected unavoidably with the contemporary time and place of the artist, in every period and place in which Jewish communities exist.

Jews never stopped painting biblical stories and their heroes, they never ceased to reinterpret the depths of their afflictions and the struggles of the biblical characters in their encounters with the Divine; they never ceased to paint, etch, sculpt, and carve, to embroider and weave the sacred ideas preserved in the biblical tradition connected with the tabernacle and the Temple, priesthood and cult, with the Sabbath and holiday calendar, with times of liberation and with heavenly chariots, with historical memory and the written law. There are no specific patterns of expression that transform a work of art into being Jewish; rather, any work that deals creatively with the ancient language and with the sanctified, written memory of the Jewish people, in all its endless developments across the expanse of history, may be defined as Jewish art. There is no subject that a Jewish artist cannot address, nor is there any subject that he or she must address; there is no sanctified area to which the Jewish artist is bound, nor any area of popular culture that is out-of-bounds. Jewish artists are liable to deal with any subject that relates to questions of the revealed and the hidden, the abstract and the tangible, the ancient and the renewing, the new and the sanctifying, and may address questions concerning the representation of the unlimited spirit, the spirit that has moved over the waters between the abstract and the sensible, and between the fleeting and the eternal ever since Genesis, and which creates a bridge between the spirit of God the Creator

and the human, creative spirit. Jewish art may also address issues concerning the holy language, its secularization, its desecration and sanctification, questions of the names of the Holy in their hidden and explicit manifestations, and to deal with the relations of the Creator with the created, or the relation between being and nothingness (*yesh ve-ein*), the finite and the infinite. It seems that Jewish art alone took upon itself the starting-point of the concealed and non-represented that stands at the heart of the Holy, which is imperceptible, and the eternal, human aspiration to make manifest the concealed in visual and verbal representations, which are born from the depths of language and float up from the wells of the past, from the great expanses of the imagination and from inspired vision, and plumb the wellsprings of written memory.

*Excerpted from a more extensive article that deals with the subject.