

# Light Embodied

Nessa Rapoport

Before the intoxication of language, I was ravished by light, enchanted by dappled, pooling day, mesmerized by windows and water, by lucent summer.

In the beginning, light was uttered into being by a Creator, who beheld it and saw that it was good. Within the mind of the celestial artist, we are sanctioned to see. The longing for light, firmament first, distinguished from the descent of darkness, is the impulse to pure abstraction, innate to a Creator who has no body, no before or after, only being. Abstraction is a natural Jewish idiom.

No human sign can contain divinity. Rather, the singularity of One without precedent or descendant allows an infinity of renderings. We, male and female, made in the image of the artist, are the crown of creation.

Eve, break of day, the first story.

The second story is intimate with earth, bound to it, fashioned of bone and breath. This vector, birth to death, is sorrow and solitude, limitless desire, the revelation of nakedness. Paradise refuted, mutability, exile: The seer, the one who knows by seeing, shapes from the inchoate future a portent urgent and immediate, clay in the hand of the potter.

Humankind, texture, arc and line, fingered, wrought hand to hand, imagined into being. It is not good to be alone.

Eve, break of day, the second story.

Rabbi Bunim of P'shiskha says: Every person should have two pockets, each containing a slip of paper. On one is written: I am dust and ashes. On the other: For me the world was created.

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From the beginning, I knew the beauty of the world to be girded by darkness, radiance eclipsed, an underworld of mute, thwarted gray. And yet, from the lightless deep, the world was spoken and seen.

Sound, syllables tongued, opiate of the page, library of oblivion: For decades, I was lost to the sublime accelerant of reading, surrendered to its sway. I delighted in cadence, not color but its dazzling appellation – alizarin crimson, burnt umber, cerulean blue, raw sienna, viridian hue.

An ambassador from the world of words, I came to understand that to see and to make are essential modes of knowing, indispensable to praise, petition, and thanksgiving. Stewards of the given world, its glory and degradation, we are cast in the image of the imageless Creator, spanning the purity of One and the multiplicity of our bodies, billions, each incomparable, unlike any other.

In the century of my birth, the Jewish people returned from immateriality to earth. Israel, this geography, is the corporate body of the Jews. Our diaspora minds, our nimble culture, adapting, gleaning gifts, inventing, crossing borders, in translation, have been restored to formal physicality, rooted, inhabiting a place we named.

Jewish visual expression is a project of return, of insatiable looking, voraciously learning to see, making and knowing. We will never abandon words, but to rely on them solely is idolatry. Sovereignty mediates between earth and heaven, mortal exaltation.

A sovereign art encompasses the world, not provincial but particular, with the Jewish capacity to ask a great question, to distinguish among kinds, to separate dross from holy, to exemplify justice and revile iniquity, to laugh ruefully, to privilege and pursue peace above all qualities. Its idiom is juxtaposition and incongruity, association, harmony and dissonance, tension and symmetry, elegance and ambiguity – for the sake of interpretation, or for itself, without commentary.

Rapt by translucence, we begin. From darkness to light is our trajectory, chaos leering, persistent, splendor beckoning, faint in some eras, in others blazing.