

Jewish Expression in Art and Design

Renana Raz

In order to answer the question “What is Jewish expression in art and design?” it would seem that two questions of greater import must precede the first: “What is Jewish?” And “What is art?”

Throughout history many answers to these questions have been given, many disagreements have arisen, differences of opinion emerged, and perhaps all these factors are what make these two fields (Judaism and Art) so alive, active, alert, and renewing. The fact is that anyone coming in contact with these fields requires a certain amount of curiosity, discernment, knowledge, and personal interpretation.

Just as we can read the biblical text and interpret it with the aid of “*Pardes*” (Hebrew acronym for “*Pshat*” [literal interpretation], “*Remez*” [allegorical meaning], “*Drash*” [homiletic meaning], and “*Sod*” [mystical meaning]), from the literal to the mystical interpretation, and as much as we move away from the literal meaning to a place where deep thought and interrelations are revealed, such is also true with regard to the connections between Judaism and art.

It would appear that the literal aspect of Jewish expression in art and design is achieved by the presentation of Jewish symbols and words from the scriptures. In my opinion, this kind of connection does a great injustice to the two worlds and restricts them, because the point of correlation is for the most part in the formal aspects and not in the essence. However, in my coming to write about this connection, I am searching for a deeper relation that perhaps is not visible at first, but does indeed exist and is waiting to be revealed, like a sweet secret.

In order to expand on this association, it is imperative that I

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reveal how I perceive the deepest essence of Judaism. Judaism as a way of life requires of us to take part in repairing the world [*tikun olam*] by strengthening values like benevolence, love, justice, and morality. It asks us to remember that we are the crown of creation, and as such within each of us may be found the spark of the divine. This same divine element is what gives us the capacity to feel the other (“Love thy neighbor as thyself”) and to pursue the good. There is much portent to the prayer, *Shema Yisrael*, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One,” that generations upon generations have carried on their lips. In my opinion it, expresses the very core of the concept of Jewishness.

The phrase “God is One,” tells us that no matter how great the diversity in the material world, whether among flora, fauna or even human beings, God is one for each and all.

God represents oneness, the unity of opposites, not uniformity. God represents wholeness, which is made up of many different parts, and not completeness, which is made up of identical parts.

We, as the Jewish people, must be committed to advancing the idea of unity, and to do much for this cause so that other nations follow in our footsteps. This is the true meaning of “Chosen People.”

In light of this premise, it is easy to find points of contact with the world of art. Art is a language that has the power to overcome “barriers of separation,” such as language, culture, nationality, and age. It reminds us that basically we are all the same, despite the difference and variety in forms of artistic expression. Therefore, when I look for Jewish expression in art and design I look for works of art in which at their core one can find the idea of “The One.”

What is beautiful, in my opinion, is the fact that many of the works that I think about in this connection are works that are considered to be “secular” and even “atheistic.”

For example, the song, *Imagine* by John Lennon is a song in which a real Jewish core is hidden. This is a song that glorifies the “One” and the unity of opposites.

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one

The final line of Lennon's song is the articulation of the vision of the End of Days: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2.4).

It seems to me that when looking for this kind of Jewish expression in a work of art, both fields open up and expand. It is not dependent solely upon form, cuts across borders and continents, enabling us to sense clearly the presence of "The One."