

What is Jewish Expression in Art and Design?

Micha Ullman

Jewish expression is something that is hard to define, perhaps even impossible, and perhaps also, unnecessary. It is the kind of question that is self-evident. The difficulty is especially great when talking about works that are non-verbal and do not contain Jewish symbols, as is often the case with the visual arts, music, or literature that does not deal with Jewish content. The definition: “Every creative work that is made by a Jew is Jewish,” is quite familiar, as is another version, “The number of ‘Judaisms’ is equal to the number of Jews.” These definitions say everything there is to say on the matter, and at the same time, say nothing. As someone who does not discount anything, I will at least try to expand upon the second definition, in other words, I will offer another opinion, or more precisely, some meditations. Are there not at least some characteristics of Jewish expression? If one looks at other cultures, it seems to me that one can point to characteristics of cultures and nations. The reasons for the differences lie in the sub-elements of a culture as it developed over hundreds or thousands of years under particular geographic, historic and other conditions.

An important characteristic is that the Jew, in his very essence, is the other. From the moment when they defined themselves as a hermetic group, from which there is no entry and no exit, when nationality and religion are one and the same, perhaps the only case in the entire world where this is so, the Jew is condemned to be the other, whether he wants to be or not. From this also stems responsibility.

Even before the spiritual issues, perhaps it would be wise to take a look at the food. Is there such a thing as Jewish food? Is there Israeli food? Apparently, there is not, as yet. There are a variety of influences and borrowings from all over the world. Perhaps in this there is a particular uniqueness, a multi-cultural cuisine.

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If we consider the arts the world over, it seems to me that one can find very clear characteristics for Italian art, for example, or Spanish, French, German, British, American, Japanese, Chinese, Russian, etc. As a minor example, one might consider the differences between Picasso and Braque, just at the period when they were working together. It is possible to discern that the former comes from Spanish culture and the latter from French culture. There are an infinite number of similar examples.

Judaism is a three-thousand-year-old culture. Its qualities, in my opinion, persist even to this day, even if perhaps it is not always so easy to isolate a singular phenomenon from the influences of the surroundings.

For practically two thousand years, Judaism was a language, and for the most part a text-based culture. There was a central, established text around which an infinite number of associations and interpretations were built. This was a people that made a covenant with the word. Would it be an exaggeration to say that a page of Talmud, featuring a text in the center surrounded by a number of interpretations, is a characteristic form, with these interpretations reopening the text, again and again, in order to carry the student or the interpreter even further in his analysis?

One finds there an imperceptible God, and hence, the question is always referred back to the reader. This is the tradition of the posing of questions, of learning, discussion, doubt, argument, speech, one thing, and then, another.

It is possible to test this phenomenon in a number of elemental events in the Bible. The word לָא [*El* meaning, God and deity, but also to, towards, into] already takes us from here to another place. There is already direction and intention.¹ לָךְ לָךְ (*Lech lecha* Genesis 12.1, meaning, “get thee out”), from here to there, a new beginning. At the start of the oratory *Jakobsleiter* (“Jacob’s Ladder”) by Arnold Schoenberg we find the words that relate his twelve-tone method to the ladder: “To the left or to the right, forward or backward, at mountain’s peak or at its slope, one must continue walking, without asking what lies ahead and what behind.” If we look at the first verses from the book of Genesis we will see the creation of the world in the phrase: “Let there be light.” A description of light in a similar vein,

¹ The Hebrew word – “*kavanah*” also has the meaning “devotion,” as in prayer.

from about three thousand years later attempts to explain the world through the formula: $E=mc^2$. The sacrifice of Isaac is a trial, seemingly the hardest that a man can ever face, and yet, what happens? Nothing. The story, perhaps the most important tale in the whole Bible, is in the end about something that does not take place, and this boy is called *Yitzhak* - laughter.

Here another Jew comes to mind, the writer Franz Kafka, whose works, at least as I understand them, deal with what, in the end, does not happen. What is there is: expectation, hope, aspiration, experimentation. It appears that this is not so far removed from the notion of the Messiah. Not right now, when we are ready, maybe. The Messiah doesn't even call.

Let us examine the Divine Name, יהוה. If the interpretation that the Tetragrammaton is the combination of the three words: יהיה, הוה, יהי (literally meaning, past, present, future), then the word הוה (present) is the middle. This would be something between past and future, in other words, something that, in and of itself, cannot be fathomed; another explanation for the invisible God. Here, one could also be reminded of the story of the Exodus, forty years of learning in the desert, the hard way.

Let us consider the central object in Judaism, the Tablets of the Law. What is interesting for me is the story of the breaking of the tablets. Of all the interpretations, I am particularly enamored of that of Edmond Jabès. He argues that actually, through the breaking of the tablets the Israelites taught Moses a lesson in how to read. How can one accept something without the original, something that is intangible? The breaking was something human, something tangible. This can be accepted. The world is created anew every day, by the tablets and what is written on them.

This act of breaking can be found even in the language. In order to build a new word, one must break apart the previous word and from the individual letters a new word can be built. The phenomenon is to be found in nature, in chemistry. In order to create new matter, the existing matter must be broken down to its elements. From the elements, in different ratios, new matter may be formed. Much before the development of modern chemistry, one finds in *Sefer Yetzirah*, dated to the second century, the story of the creation of the world in twenty-two letters: "Twenty-two letters are engraved in voice, hewn in spirit, implanted in the mouth" (Chapter 2.3). From this it is possible, every day, to compare Judaism to reading, speaking, and writing.

From the very beginnings of Zionism, the land took its place alongside the book. In addition to reading was digging. How does this fit in with Judaism? Is the air inside the hole Jewish in its essence?

Digging also appears in my own work, as a type of reading or writing; a continuing activity, each time from the beginning. I learned to work on the void that is between the elements, like the space that is between the letters and the words. The deeper I dig, the more I expand the void. The void between things and people connects to the general, universal void, and is also open to interpretation.

Thus indeed, what is Jewish expression? The question mark, for me, would suffice.