

Midrash: Jewish Expression in Visual Art

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Jewish culture is a text-centered culture that springs from the written word, fulfilling the command to “consider [the Torah] day and night” (Joshua 1:8). Every generation sees the Bible through its own eyes, “and all the people saw the voices” (Exodus 20:18), with every reader finding in the text what he/she desires and interpreting it, creating a new midrash that answers the reader’s own needs and reflects his or her particular world view.

My tentative reflections on Jewish expression in visual art (which I will illustrate with a few random examples) will show the firm connection that exists between text and seeing. I unashamedly confess that this emphasis stems from my being a word-based person, someone who comes from the world of texts and the study of them.

A vivid expression of the relationship of Jewish art with texts is found in the art-work/transcriptions of Michael Sgan-Cohen. He recreates the texts as he transcribes them, a fulfillment, in a way, of the king’s requirement that “when he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Teaching written for him on a scroll ... let it remain with him and let him read in it all his life ... ” (Deut 17:18-19). Sgan-Cohen’s *Psalms 72* (1979) presents the psalm in a shape that resembles both a seven-fingered hand (*yad*, for reading the Torah?), and the seven-branched candelabra that was placed in Solomon’s Temple, to whom the psalm is dedicated: “to Solomon” (v. 1). Sgan-Cohen’s erasures reinforce the illusion that what we have is not a mechanical transcription but a re-creation by the artist-copyist.

Many works of visual art present a type of embodied metaphor, verbal expressions made concrete. The beginning of this tradition can be seen already in the *tefillin*, a creative act that represents the actualization of the written verse: “bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead” (Deut 6: 8). In a similar way, the Florsheim Haggadah (Germany, fifteenth

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century) contains an illustration of the saying, “in every generation, one must see oneself as having come out of Egypt.” In the picture we see a father and son, with the father looking into a mirror; the illustration is entitled, “To See Oneself.”

Bronze Hanukkah lamps from the late Middle Ages were etched with half a verse: “For the lamp is a commandment and the Law (Torah) is light” (Proverbs 6:23), as though the proverb referred to the command to light the Hanukkah candles. In his work *Ner Mitzvah* Dov Abramson focuses, too, on the verse in Proverbs and makes an effort to visualize it; the work comprises six hundred and thirteen *Yahrzeit* [memorial] candles, one for each of the six hundred and thirteen commandments, each with a label that identifies the specific commandment as well as for whom it applies, when it applies, and the punishment for neglecting it. This cold, industrial, programmed work contains no light; the candles remain unlit, perhaps evidence of the artist’s own relationship with the commandments, commandments that are observed mechanically, commandments that are lifeless, and without light.

These last words lead us to question the relationship between the religious and the secular – actually, to admit that the distinction between religious and non-religious is blurred, and that a secular expression, even one meant to irritate or provoke, is no less Jewish than a religious one. An example of how easy the transition can be between secular and religious, and back again, comes from the textual word, from Song of Songs. At a very early stage, even before being finalized in a collection, these erotic love poems (in which we find no mention of God) were interpreted by Israel’s prophets as referring to the relationship between God and the congregation of Israel; it was in this way that they were later interpreted in rabbinic and post-rabbinic literature. Zionists in the land of Israel returned Song of Songs to the secular realm, in a multitude of popular songs and in the *haggadot* that were compiled on *kibbutzim* for the Spring holiday, in which strict care was taken to avoid the name of God.

Even an open revolt against Judaism can take on Jewish character. Yitzhak Danziger’s famous sculpture *Nimrod* (1939) (who is uncircumcised), which seemingly returns us to the Canaanite, pre-Israelite – and pre-Jewish – ideal, nonetheless carries the name Nimrod (Genesis 10:8-9), with all the associations that the name evokes in rabbinic literature: Nimrod who rebels against

God (Sifra Behukkotai b), Nimrod who initiates the building of the tower of Babel (BT Hullin 89a), Nimrod who is identified also as the one who threw Abraham into the fiery furnace (BT Eruvin 53a). Danziger's rebellion thus comes from a sense of pain, from within, from home.

From the secular rebellion, even the Canaanite rebellion, let us turn to the question of the relationship between us and them, which I'll illustrate with the relationship between Jewish art and its Christian counterpart. Again, we begin in the textual world: most of the New Testament, the foundation text of Christianity, was created as a series of Jewish compositions that aimed to draw the people of Israel closer to the new belief, which sought to become the mainstream in Judaism. Yet even a secular Jewish artist who engages in a dialogue with distinctly Christian art may broaden the boundaries of Jewish art. Adi Nes (*Untitled*, 1999), directed fourteen Israeli soldiers in a photograph that imitates Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, a painting that is based on a story from the New Testament (Matthew 26:20-29). The photograph contains one extra individual, a fourteenth figure who stands apart at the left edge of the frame, the only figure who is standing. On that soldier's shirt, and only on his shirt, appear the three Hebrew letters, *tzaddik, he, lamed (tzahal*, the acronym for the Israeli Defense Forces): Is this figure a personification of the army? Does Nes's photograph express criticism at the army that sends its soldiers to their deaths? The Israeli soldiers are seen relaxing at an informal, every-day meal, filling themselves, eating and drinking from plastic dishes, unaware (except for the central figure, the new Jesus – the new sacrifice) of the danger that awaits them at the battle after the Last Supper. In this way, the circle has been completed: from a Jewish-Christian literary text, to Christian art, and then back to Jewish art.

My view on a separate issue, that of an artist's identity, an artist whose expression is Jewish, becomes clarified by way of these attempts to define Jewish expression in art: Jewish expression in art is the creative product of an artist who sees him/her self as Jewish or who identifies with any aspect of Judaism's spiritual-cultural world. The work of art will articulate a notion of Jewish identity or the search for that identity, or will offer Jewish symbols and an interpretation of them. The work of art will express a viewpoint about the Jewish world (or one aspect of it), either identifying with that view or being critical of it or rebelling against it.

Jewish expression is midrash, an interpretation of previous works – either literary or visual, and whether of distinctly Jewish materials or of work from outside the Jewish world – as long as the newly created interpretation answers the conditions that I have outlined, above.