

AN IDIOSYNCRATIC LOOK AT CONTEMPORARY JEWISH ARTS

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ABSTRACT

Artists have been major players in the sea change in mainstream Jewish living in the last 50 years. This paper examines several milestones which mark movement of the collective identity from passive and nostalgia-driven to active and creative. We see that shifts in Jewish identity track closely with political upheavals in American society, and that, specifically, in the early 70's, when shifting mores in American life produced new vocabularies in all the arts, the Jewish response was to declare a creative coup-d'etat, reclaiming ritual and embracing a do-it-yourself attitude towards *hiddur mitzvah*, the enhancement of ritual through beauty.

We're going to do some time-traveling today! I'd like you to settle back and create an image in your mind's eye of a Judaica shop – a Conservative movement synagogue gift shop, specifically, in the 1950's and early '60's. It's small and unpretentious, of course. Let's see ... we have:

Obligatory olive wood and metal objects from Israel

Eilat stone jewelry looking vaguely Yemenite

Chai necklaces – increasingly bulky and ostentatious as we move forward by years

Tiny star and mezuzah charms for girls

A few candlesticks and mezuzah covers

Prints of a pious khusid at the Wailing Wall and of a woman covered with a tikhl or scarf, bentching likht – pretty much the standard acceptable images of Jews, although out of touch with the people whom most of us were or aspired to be

Then there are a short stack of Bar and Bat Mitzvah cards – a VERY short stack of the latter!

There are wallet cards into which a \$10 bill could be slipped, and long, thin 'Hi-Brow' cards offering acceptable, if self-deprecating "humor." And there are useful but painfully trite 'hostess gifts' – aprons and towels.

But one-of-a-kind art? A range of crafted objects for ritual use at home? Meaningful art for children? Challenging objects or prints that would encourage thinking or wondering about tradition? Not many.

It's beyond the scope of my remarks today to look into the sociological factors that helped shape American Jewish culture of the period. There are several fine books on the subject, including Jenna Weisman Joselit's [The Wonders of America](#). Suffice it to say that for many American Jews in the 50's, the immigrant experience was at most 2 generations removed, and the process of acculturation and the recovery of collective self-identity can take that much time and more. Things Israeli along with familiar nostalgic images which did not invoke the pain of the Holocaust came to define – thinly – an entire aesthetic.

A jolt came in 1967 with the 6-Day War. We gained a new set of visual images and songs that reflected our pride. A popular poster that accompanied many a Jewish student to college that fall featured a scrawny man with a beard, peyes, and shtrayml emerging from a phone booth wearing a somewhat baggy Superman outfit emblazoned with the letter 'Shin.' No doubt about it: Super Jew had arrived!

Oh, he was ethnic. He was American. He was OK! But he was also superficial. In retrospect, many of the visible emblems of Jewish identity from the time of the 6-Day War were not unlike 'Kiss me! I'm Irish' buttons. Proud, but lacking depth.

Then came a major change: The counter culture. The late 60's. Back to the earth. Back to our roots. And when 'Black is Beautiful' became a common slogan, it didn't sound at all like 'Kiss me. I'm Irish.'

Rejection of the 'establishment' meant different things to young Jews. For some it led to a flight away from Jewish life and into Eastern religious traditions. For others, at times after forays into other traditions, it meant reclaiming Judaism in fresh new ways.

A woman named Alicia Bay Laurel – who lived with the prosaic Jewish appellation of Alice Kauffman prior to adopting a plant as her father – authored a large format, hand-lettered book called Living on the Earth. It taught many a young hippie how to build a yurt, forage for medicinal herbs, and bake whole grain breads. And then, on the heels of the Whole Earth Catalog, the Strassfelds and Richard Siegel published The First Jewish Catalog. It taught many a young Jew (hippies, some) how to build a sukkah, sew and embellish a tallis, and braid a challah. It also included sections on writing a ketubah, dancing in the new moon, hand-dipping havdalah candles, and building a Jewish library. With a light-hearted touch, the catalog made traditional observances accessible to people who earlier might have thought them to be relevant only to religious leaders and the very pious.

At a time when people questioned authority in every aspect of their lives, along came a guidebook that said, "Do it yourself, in community, and make it beautiful!" People grabbed handfuls of colored markers and made their own ketubot. (Since their makers were blissfully unaware of the lack of light-fastness of the ink, most of those documents have by now faded into oblivion.) Life cycle events came to be celebrated with new-age interpretations of traditional ritual objects like handmade huppot, tallitot, and experimental headcoverings for both men and women. And the same energy was going into the creation of dance, sign language interpretations of prayers, the inclusion of children's expressiveness in ritual observance, and the reclamation of Yiddish culture in all its variations.

Looking back over one's shoulder, we see mid-20th Century mainstream American (Conservative) Jewry as being dismissively observant by proxy. It was accepted that the Rabbi and Cantor would keep kosher and observe Shabbat, thereby covering the rest of the congregation. A Rabbinic Assembly Law Committee decision to allow Conservative Jews to drive to shul on Shabbat, in retrospect, may have facilitated the most far-reaching break from 'owning' observance among the laity, and American Jews, many the children of immigrants who already had a weakened Jewish religious literacy compared to their parents, came to accept a passive, proxy relationship to ritual.

This may be profoundly seen in synagogue architecture of the 50's, much of which is now being dismantled, as congregations across the country embark on capital campaigns to eliminate spatial separations between the shaliakh tsibur (prayer leader) and the congregation. Picture any mid- to large-size synagogue from the 1950's. It's rather similar to a theater space with the bimah high and apart, some even featuring raked theater seating.

The ownership of ritual observance that was kick-started in the early 70's has had a long-reaching effect of catalyzing change now reflected in the perceived need for total access – and the total involvement in owning a davenen space. Enter the artistically motivated!

It was part of the natural progression of “doing Jewish” that artists began to be valued for their ability to move beyond decoration and into a richer and more fundamental expression of hiddur mitzvah – the beautification of performing a ritual act. Art was being renewed as fundamental to religious experience, and artists were newly encouraged to create Jewish art objects.

It's significant in my own life and path, that at this juncture, I realized that my artistic impulses could be useful and appreciated in the Jewish world. It's true that creating Judaica is inherently satisfying. But far more satisfying are the symbiosis and natural growth that take place when an artist collaborates with a non-artist to make ideas tangible. With more and more people looking critically at Jewish art, both ritual and purely decorative, changes have begun to take place in the artist, the Jewish public, and the art itself.

Let me share a personal experience that illustrates the point. In 1985 I first considered creating calligraphic works in print. At a friend's suggestion, I sought out several artists and dealers in Jewish art to inquire about the marketability of Hebrew calligraphy. The response I received was the same from each one: “Hebrew words? Don't get any more complex than the word Shalom. It threatens people when they don't instantly comprehend what they see. Stick to recognizable nostalgic imagery or you will end up with piles of wallpaper.”

Well, you understand from our collective presence at the Conney Conference that that attitude is laughable today in the manner in which it demeans the public. What we are part of is a groundswell of learning in which the arts are pivotal. A Jewish art object may inspire some to use it and learn by doing. An object may be brought into an existing ritual observance and enhance the experience of living Jewishly. An object may be the focal point in a family or communal ceremony and therefore become a means for transmitting values.

There are more people crafting Jewish art today than anyone would have believed possible 25 years ago. It's happening now because of the support the Jewish community at large is offering to encourage artists to channel their energies in Jewish directions. A more knowledgeable community is expecting more and more challenging art, and artists are rising to meet the challenge. Guilds of Jewish artists have formed and provide channels for kindred spirits to grapple with questions of tradition and context as well as nuts and bolts of materials and production.

It's also noteworthy that so much contemporary Jewish art is useable and meaningful ritual art. This is not to imply a level of frumkayt or piety. A hand-made gragger may be used as energetically in a shul reading of the megilla as it could be in a Purim shpiel among friends, Even the display of such a functional object as decorative art still implies the story of its functionality in ritual.

Aesthetics alone are not sufficient to perpetuate the richness of Jewish life and traditions. There's a world of difference between a plaque in the den that proclaims, "L'Chayim!" and a painted version of a Yiddish poem written by an imprisoned poet in Siberia. Or between the tee shirt that perpetuates the degrading of Yiddish in Hebreized English characters and the huppah crafted by family members with fabrics culled from two families' histories. In that difference lies the impetus for learning and doing, for building on home and communal rituals and knowledge – knowledge that solders the links in our 'goldene keyt' (golden chain).

Even as we swim through a plethora of fine crafted Judaica – and an ever expanding sea of kitsch – that have crossed over into mainstream boutiques and mall kiosks, we note that the changes in gift shops' contents from the 1950's to the current time bode well. The acquisition of hand-crafted Judaica has a depth beyond the simple fact of ownership. Thoughtful Jewish art that stands on its own outside a ritual context encourages Jews to draw closer to personally compelling aspects of peoplehood. That art might inspire study of source material, geneology, or a far-removed tradition is a happy byproduct.

Like surprisingly good wine from a dusty old bottle, among the expanding catalog of Judaic art objects are objects into which new life is being breathed after a generation or more or near-total oblivion. The wimple (Torah binder) has a rich history in both Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions. In the former, a baby boy's swaddling cloth may have been cut into strips, sewn together and elaborately embroidered, to be presented to the synagogue to bind a Torah. Women in the Sephardi tradition were more likely to commission delicate needlework on wimples they donated to the synagogue independent of a specific life-cycle event. Recently, I have seen a wimple that was embroidered in 1982 following a bris used as edging for the top of the young man's huppah. Another family with deep roots in one community crafted an lengthy quilted wimple onto which names are embroidered for each family simcha prior to the wimple being utilized as part of the celebration.

The beyn gavra is another retrieved object hardly known in the American Jewish world. This is the cover placed on the Torah between readings. Participation in crafting such a useful and potentially beautiful piece of needle art may foster community-building as people can experience pride in ownership by researching, crafting, and ultimately using it.

Outside-the-box Judaica may include something now close to becoming traditional, like a Miriam's Cup for the seder table. Or the still edgy Esther/Vashti flag for Purim, an exploration begun with a call to artists from Ma'yan, The Jewish Women's Project of the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, to craft a useable 'flag' that makes a sound and encourages people to ponder the two women of the megilla.

Clearly, artists are making a significant contribution in guiding Jews to self-knowledge and in encouraging connections. As in the plastic arts, music (both liturgical and non-liturgical), movement, drama, film, and literature are experiencing a burgeoning of creativity. This is inclusive of all Jewish expression, whether the cultural language be English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Arabic or any of a number of Hebrew-inflected African tongues. We are in a period of perpetual re-creation as Jews. How history in another half century will characterize the American Jewish community of our time we cannot know, but in the face of a palpably decreasing Jewish literacy nation-wide, I believe it is the makers of art who stand in defiance, offering access points where there otherwise may be none.

At the very least, my hope is that each of us will leave the Conney conference with some vision of our great potential to energize a corner of our Jewish world with artistic expression.

‘So pour me a glass from that fine old bottle of wine, and I’ll drink a l’khayim to the hidden melody within:’

Gis mir on, mayn tayere
Dem same bestn yayin.
Lomir take far dem nign
Oystrinken l’khayim!

(from Shike Driz’ “Dem zeydns nigndl”)