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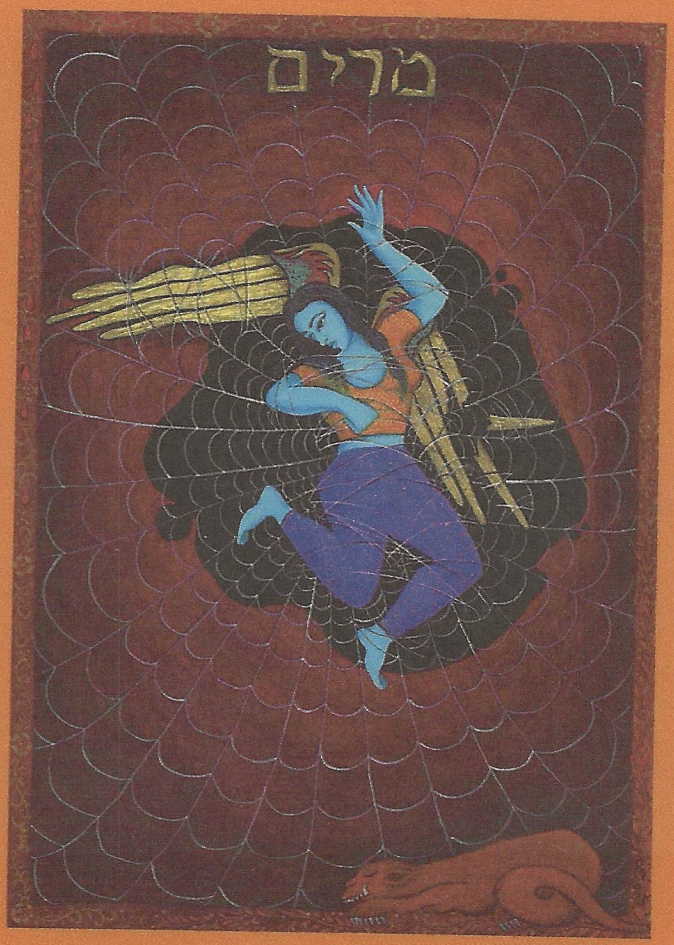

WOMEN IN THE VISUAL ARTS
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TORAH STUDY, FEMINISM AND SPIRITUAL QUEST IN THE WORK OF FIVE AMERICAN JEWISH WOMEN ARTISTS

Gloria Feman Orenstein

While most contemporary American Jewish women artists (of the "second wave") have expressed their Jewish identity in art by engaging with historical and social issues (anti-semitism, the Holocaust, assimilation, immigration, ethnicity, etc.) this article focuses on the works of two groups of Jewish women artists who have an advanced knowledge of Torah and Hebrew, and whose works engage profoundly with Jewish texts. Helene Aylon, Bruria Finkel and Gilah Yelin Hirsch have been immersed in Jewish studies since childhood whereas Ruth Weisberg and Cheselyn Amato pursued their learning somewhat later in life, as Jewish teachings became more available to women. All of these artists are feminist creators and activists and have been participating in various aspects of the feminist movement and the women's art movement in the U.S. This article explores the differences in their expressions of Jewish identity, and, primarily, the ways in which the teachings of Torah and knowledge of Hebrew (including the study of Kabbalah) have produced innovative Jewish insights in the work of feminist artists who are steeped in the Jewish canon.

We may approach the discussion of Jewish identity in many ways, but central to all of them is the importance of studying Torah (the Jewish canon), wrestling with the text, arguing with it and engaging in commentary upon it. Rabbi Hillel the Elder (first century bce), asked to summarize the essence of the Torah, said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now, go and study" (BT *Shabbat* 31a). Yet, for most of Jewish history, Torah study was reserved primarily for males.

Thus, if Jewish women artists of the "second wave" of the feminist movement in the U.S.[1] have been struggling with the expression of Jewish identity

in their art, it is not surprising that the issues they have engaged with have had more to do with ethnicity, the Shoah, assimilation, anti-Semitism, hybrid identities and hidden Jews than with the Torah. As a rule, they have neither studied Torah in depth nor acquired the fluency in Hebrew that would enable them to engage in traditional Jewish study.[2] I have chosen to study some exceptions to this rule: women artists whose work engages profoundly with Jewish texts.

Women artists in both groups have confronted similar challenges to their Jewish identity. Contrary to some radical second-wave feminists with backgrounds in other religions, American Jewish feminists, while struggling with Judaism's androcentric biases, have not, by and large, rejected Judaism. Whether they call themselves secular, ethnic or observant Jews, they continue to identify with the heritage, ethics and values of Judaism and with the history of the Jewish people. Excluded from the *minyan* (prayer quorum), the rabbinate, reading from the Torah at the *bimah* (reader's podium) and other privileges accorded to men, Jewish women have insisted on their rightful place within Judaism and demanded equality and inclusion. Indeed, if Torah study is essential to Judaism, Jewish feminism may be understood as a form of activism on behalf of the religion's core values.

Jewish women artists have also faced many challenges to their participation in art-making, including the Second Commandment's injunction against the making of graven images, the Christian bias in Western art history, the androcentric construction of art history, and sexist values affecting women as artists, models, critics, curators, scholars, subjects of art works and so on. In the last century and a half, assimilation, internal and external anti-Semitism, persecutions, pogroms, exiles and wars have diverted the careers or even snuffed out the lives of many talented Jewish women artists.[3]

Many Jewish feminist artists who came of age in the post-Holocaust generation and attained visibility in the feminist era, beginning in the late 1960s and extending through the 1970s and beyond—such as Eleanor Antin, Judy Chicago, Martha Rosler, Deborah Kass, Hannah Wilke, Joan Semmel, Joyce Kozloff, Audrey Flack, Ida Applebroog, and Miriam Schapiro—have foregrounded gender issues in their works, prioritizing them over Jewish issues. When they do reference their Jewish heritage, it is usually alluded to in terms of a historical or social narrative rather than a religious affiliation. And when their works do engage with Jewish themes, they often do so via parody or irony. In *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity*, Lisa E. Bloom writes about this tendency as a reaction against the ways in which

anti-Semitic and assimilationist pressures have contributed to the erasure of Jewish identity from art history and affected gender representation in art.[4] Through the parody and deconstruction of Jewish feminine stereotypes, a new interpretation of Jewish feminine identity—feminist, secular, ethnic—has emerged.

The artists under study here diverge from this trend. They do not have a parodic or ironic relationship to their Jewish identity, and they resist the pressure to assimilate. Their Judaism retains its roots, inherited from their personal histories and lineages, and is foregrounded in their work. Their art, while not necessarily religious, explores the symbolism of the Hebrew language, the Kabbalah, and the Torah, revealing the depth and power of a tradition that they do not seek to silence or erase, hybridize or normalize.

Over the course of almost three decades, I have interviewed Jewish women artists and collected their slides, made studio visits, conducted open-ended interviews, attended exhibition openings, and followed the published criticism of their works. As I did so, I grew interested in the forms of Jewish identity that I encountered among those who *did* receive an education in Hebrew and Torah study. The ways some of them obtained access to the teachings of Judaism resemble those by which women throughout history have gained access to art training at times when women were not admitted to art academies. Several had fathers or husbands who were educated in the tradition and transmitted it to them; others, educated in Israel, were taught the Bible in Hebrew before immigrating to the U.S. Despite this education, they remained excluded from participation in the leadership and spiritual roles that were reserved for males. While one might have thought that their double "othering," in both Judaism and the art world, would have led them to define their identity outside of these traditions, the result was precisely the opposite: These artists have made the teachings of Judaism and the Hebrew language the primary focus of their artistic oeuvres.

The three artists I have chosen to represent this group, Helene Aylon, Gilah Yelin Hirsch and Bruria Finkel, were educated in Hebrew and Torah studies as children and continued that study as adults. Helene Aylon, who attended Jewish schools in Boro Park, Brooklyn, lived the life of an Orthodox rebbetzin during her marriage, from 1949 to 1961. Bruria Finkel came from a hasidic family and was raised in Israel, so that the study of Torah in Hebrew was a part of her early education. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, descended from a long line of rabbis in Bialystok, Poland, attended the "parochial" Peretz Shule in Montreal,

where Hebrew and Yiddish studies shared the day's schedule with French and English. Interestingly, while the work of these artists is intensely involved with the teachings of the Torah and the mystical energies of the Hebrew alphabet, Finkel and Hirsch define themselves as atheists, while Aylon's work expresses a profoundly feminist "holy struggle" with Moses and the Torah's teachings.

The other two artists I will discuss were not steeped in Jewish learning from childhood but rather sought it out on their own spiritual journeys, representing a contemporary tendency that has emerged with the more ready accessibility of Torah study and Hebrew to women. I have selected Ruth Weisberg and Cheselyn Amato for the poignancy of their love of Judaism, though they come from less religious backgrounds, and for the importance of their artistic oeuvres. Weisberg, raised in a left-leaning, secular environment that stressed the moral values of Jewish culture, began studying Torah and Hebrew with Rabbi Laura Geller in the 1970s and has made them an important element of her life as an artist and a scholar. Amato, who attended Hebrew school after school and on Sundays for one year in the 1970s, was inspired to continue her studies independently and to dedicate herself to expressing, in her art, her understanding of what it means to bring holiness into daily life.

Thus, the first three artists, familiar with the Torah and the Hebrew language since childhood, have moved away from traditional belief and practice; while the second two, raised in more secular environments, have gone in the opposite direction to embrace Judaism as a result of their more recent, prolonged studies. Common to the creative work of all five is their constant questioning, seeking or struggling with the patriarchal texts. This freedom to struggle with the text, which lies at the very heart of Jewish learning, has given those raised in more observant homes the freedom to retain their Jewish identity even as they declare themselves atheist or agnostic, while at the same time attracting the minds of those raised in secular, intellectual environments who wish to search for meaning within their Jewish heritage. Just as the tradition of questioning and disputing the teachings has attracted the minds of seekers, artists, scholars and intellectuals to Jewish thought, it has liberated some feminist artists to confront and challenge the patriarchal premises embedded within Judaism without fear of ostracism or excommunication.

Yet even the three artists who have become atheist or are in struggle with their tradition do not define themselves as "secular" or "ethnic" Jews. Having penetrated the texts deeply, they identify as Jews without qualification. The freedom with which they engage with those texts has permitted them to expand

and enrich Judaism. Feminist calls for transformation have rendered Judaism more hospitable to women who seek to explore the areas from which they had previously been excluded. These artists' familiarity with Jewish tradition, along with their confidence that their questioning of many of its premises will not marginalize them within it, has given them the freedom to engage deeply with issues raised by the texts. An original body of work concerning Jewish women's identity thus emerges from the artistic perceptions of women who have had access to the teachings of the Torah in Hebrew. The revelations apprehended on their artistic quests, and their critiques on behalf of genuine inclusivity, constitute a *visual commentary* on the Torah.

I had always asked myself what the art of women who gained access to the study of Torah and Hebrew (which men took for granted) would look like. How would they express their interaction with a patriarchal, non-iconic tradition in art? How would they critique it, rebel, and seek entry, equality and reconciliation? How would they re-vision our human interconnectedness with the spirit and with non-human nature, with the Hebrew language, the Torah and Jewish history, with gender discrimination and with the many facets of Jewish identity? This is the first generation of Jewish feminist artists to grow up unimpeded by pogroms, war or severe discrimination to produce a complete oeuvre. As they mature into their wisdom years, we are now able to review the arc of their ongoing aesthetic evolution.

Helene Aylon

Helene Aylon has created works that make visually clear and emotionally poignant the most important feminist critiques of and commentary upon the patriarchal treatment of women in the Five Books of Moses. Her early immersion in the Orthodox world made her profoundly aware of the absence of women's thought from Jewish scholarship, their unequal treatment in Jewish courts of law, the absence of their voices and visions in Jewish tradition, and the regulation of women's lives by strict laws regarding the menstrual cycle, the days of purity and impurity. These and many other hurtful exclusions became the material for her art, and, ultimately, they drove her to create *The Liberation of G-d*, her commentary on the Five Books of Moses. She has used her art to make these injustices exquisitely visible and to raise public awareness about the absence of female voices throughout Jewish history.

Raised in the Orthodox community of Boro Park, Brooklyn, Aylon's Jewish education began in grade school at the Shulamith School for Girls and continued through high school at the Midrasha. She was married in 1949 to an Orthodox rabbi and for many years led the life of a rebbetzin in Montreal. A mother of two (and now a grandmother of five), she told me in a 2006 interview that she enjoyed aspects of her life as the wife of a communal rabbi, such as visiting the sick. Even before her husband died in 1961, she began to study art at Brooklyn College with the artist Ad Reinhardt. An early piece was *Ruach* (Wind, Spirit, Breath, 1966), a mural hung in the chapel at Kennedy Airport in which she tried to glean the kabbalistic essence of Judaism. She wanted to make art that would look at Judaism through a woman's lens, to see what a woman's contribution could be and to identify what beautiful things had not been written in the Torah because of the exclusion of women.

The theme of rescue dominates all of Aylon's work. As she informs us on her website, she was concerned in the 1970s with rescuing the body; in the 1980s, with rescuing the earth; and in the 1990s, with the rescue of God. Rescue is a form of *tikkun 'olam*, repairing the world, and another early piece, an ecofeminist work entitled *Earth Ambulance* (1982), shows how she relates Jewish concepts to the concerns of ecofeminists in the women's movement. Aylon was thinking of the ambulances operated by Hatzolah, an emergency service run by hasidic Jews, and also of the biblical designation of "cities of refuge (*miklat*)," where those who have inadvertently taken a life can be safe from revenge. With the participation of other women, she "rescued" earth near twelve Strategic Air Command weapons bases. They placed the earth in pillowcases, upon which they wrote their dreams and nightmares about nuclear war. The pillowcases were transported in an "Earth Ambulance" to the United Nations, where they were carried out on stretchers and hung on clotheslines along Hammerskjold Plaza, and a fourteen-day sleep-out was held for the Earth. By extension, Mother Earth has been of deep concern to feminists, who see an analogy between the rape/exploitation of the earth and that of women. The *Earth Ambulance '82–'92–'02* is now located at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Arts in Peekskill, New York.

More recently, moved by the desire to rescue her beloved Judaism from the misogyny and violence expressed in the Torah, Aylon has taken on the monumental art project of rescuing –or, as she puts it, liberating—God, from the patriarchal words of Moses, author of the Five Books known collectively as the Torah. Over an eight-year period, this project of feminist rescue took

the form of a trilogy and epilogue: *The Liberation of G-d* (1990–1996), *The Women's Section* (1997), *My Notebooks* (1998), and *Epilogue: Alone with my Mother* (1999).

The Liberation of G-d (1996) was exhibited in the Too Jewish exhibition at the New York Jewish Museum and is now in the museum's permanent collection. This multi-media installation is a scholarly, feminist critique of and commentary on the Torah. Aylon placed 54 books—the 54 weekly portions of the Torah—on glass shelves along a wall. On stands in front are the five books of the Torah, each accompanied by a magnifying glass and a lamp to facilitate study. The pages are covered in a transparent parchment, on which the misogynistic passages are highlighted in pink. Aylon's role is like that of the Torah scribe and rabbi (teacher) combined, both pointing to the text and commenting upon it. A video of her hand highlighting the passages on the parchment emphasizes the crackling noises made by the motion, showing how precise and yet delicate the work of the female Torah scribe/critic is. The installation is accompanied by a scroll that reads: "and I highlight over words of / vengeance, deception, cruelty and misogyny, / words attributed to / G-d . . . I do not change the text / but merely look at this dilemma."[5]

The installation has both rigor and sensual beauty, with its pink markings on the crackling parchment contrasting with the severe rigidity of the Orthodox patriarchal institutions of learning in which the Torah is studied. I see this work and the following parts in the series, *The Women's Section*, *My Notebooks*, and *Epilogue*, as being aligned with the positions taken by such feminist scholars and writers as Judith Plaskow, Rachel Adler, Marcia Falk, Adrienne Rich, Gerda Lerner, Evelyn Torton Beck, Cynthia Ozick and Laura Levitt. Aylon engages deeply with the Torah from a place that is primarily not of anger, but of disappointment and personal hurt. These works represent an intellectual and artistic expression of the wounds experienced on multiple levels by generations of women in Judaism.

The poignancy of these wounds is felt even more acutely in *The Women's Section* (1997), which is dedicated to the foremothers—Aylon's grandmothers—and the *agunot*, women whose estranged husbands do not grant them a religious divorce, so that they can never remarry. Here, once more, the texts of the Torah are illuminated, but they are those that speak of women's "impurity" and "virginity," and of the killing of women who do not remain virginal because of incest. She wonders whether her grandmothers might have held her cheeks and said she should never reveal these things, or whether they would

have thought that the time had come to make them known. In *My Notebooks* (1998), 54 notebooks, their pages blank, form columns. This is Aylon's commentary on women's lack of education and participation in scholarship. There is no recording of the words of the women who might have become scholars in the Jewish tradition. The plaque on the work reads: "Dedicated to Mrs. Rashi and to Mrs. Maimonides, for surely they had something to say."

Epilogue: Alone with My Mother consists of a pew with a stand holding two books, each called "The Book That Will Not Close." In one book are the blessings recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy (28:3–13); in the other, the curses (chaps. 27–28). A taped conversation is played between Aylon and her then 92–year-old mother, taking place, as it were, at the Ne'ila (closing) service on Yom Kippur, the two meditating on who will live and who will die, and who will be inscribed in The Book of Life. Here, at last, are the voices of women—those of the Orthodox mother and her rebellious daughter, two female voices that are now being rescued, since in Judaism women hitherto were spoken for only by men. Finally mother and daughter, a pair symbolic of all women and lying at the heart of the legal definition of Jewish identity, whose words have never before been heard publicly, experience a *tikkun* (repairing), as their conversation, a precious aspect of Jewish family life for centuries, is preserved, as if inscribed in their own Book of Life.

In *The Digital Liberation of God* (2004), a permanent installation commissioned by the Swig Foundation for the San Francisco Jewish Community Center, Aylon asks: "Do you think that the Torah was given by God? Write what you think." The Torah, with the negative passages again highlighted in pink, is projected onto drapery cascading down a wall like a waterfall. Aylon collaborated with Peter Samis, Curator of Educational Technologies of SFMOMA, to create a computer station where viewers can enter their responses into a database. As I contemplate this project, I think of the digital streaming aligned metaphorically with the symbolism of the waterfall, the irrigation of the world via the sacred word, now rescued by women to enable a new growth to spring forth. Once God has been liberated from the words of violence recorded in the Books of Moses, those very words can be transmuted into the rainfall of blessing so needed to rescue the earth. In the New York Jewish Museum installation, viewers could write their comments in a book, and thousands of comments were gathered. Now, in the digital version, viewers can correspond with each other and put their thoughts into the database connected with this work.

The titles of her other recent works illuminate additional aspects of Jewish discrimination against women that Aylon has brought to our attention visually: *My Wailing Wall* (2004); *My Marriage Bed and My Clean Days* (Figure 1, 2001; p. 128); *The Partition is in Place but the Service Can't Begin* (2002; the title refers to the fact that women's presence can never complete the prayer quorum); and *My Bridal Chamber* (Figure 2, 2000; p. 128), an installation that gives an accounting of the days on which, according to Leviticus 12:5 and 15:19–28, a woman is not allowed to have physical contact with a man because she is considered menstrually impure. *My Marriage Contract* (Figure 2; 2001) displays four pillars bearing photographs of the artist as a bride. Aylon's marriage contract, on display, does not contain the name of her mother, even though having a Jewish mother is what establishes a person's Jewish identity.

Aylon's God Project continues with the Beit Midrash, or House of Study, the first in a projected series of nine houses without women, critiquing women's absence in the spaces where patriarchy has reigned. When I interviewed her in the summer of 2006, Aylon told me that her plans for this extended work include the Beit Knesset (House of Gathering, the synagogue), the Beit Sefer (House of the Book, the school) and the Beit Din (House of Law, the court), which will be the finale of the God Project. In the patriarchal Beit Din, no women are allowed to judge, but Aylon's—inscribed with the slogan "In G-d We Trust," the dash in pink neon—will be a feminized House of Law,. There will be scrolls on the walls from every country, and because, until recently, there had never been a commentary by a woman, Aylon will pose two questions for the rabbis of the world to answer: (1) Two men are lying together. Shall they be killed? Yes, No, Unsure/No Response; (2) The rapist has to marry the girl he raped. Yes, No, Unsure/No Response.[6]

Helene Aylon's works identify areas of discrimination against women in Judaism and rescue these spaces, so that the omission and contributions of women are made visible. In rescuing historic and contemporary women's voices, and in rescuing God from misrepresentation by Moses, Aylon also rescues women's artistic identity. She, the contemporary feminist artist, struggles with tradition, wrestles with the text, and creates commentary in talmudic fashion, taking on the roles of teacher, critic, and above all that of the Artist as Healer, whose work is an act of *tikkun 'olam*.[7]

Gloria Feman Orenstein

Gilah Yelin Hirsch

Gilah Yelin Hirsch's paternal great-grandfather, Arye Loeb Jellin of Bialystok, Poland, was one of the last commentators on the Babylonian Talmud to have his commentary, *Yefeh 'einayim*, included in the famous Vilna Edition. Her grandfather, Benjamin Yelin, was the Chief Rabbi of Bialystok and later of Montreal. Although he remained Orthodox, he questioned everything. Her father, Ezra Yelin, was learned in the Talmud but atheistic. Her mother, Shulamith Yelin, an acclaimed Canadian Jewish author/poet and the founder of the first kindergarten in the Peretz Shule, was also among the founders of Montreal's first Reconstructionist synagogue.

Hirsch thus came from a non-observant yet ethno-culturally Jewish home. At the Peretz Shule in Montreal, where studies were conducted in Yiddish and Hebrew as well as in French and English, she learned Torah in Yiddish. As an eight-year-old, she discovered that the Hebrew names and pronouns for God are both male and female. When she asked her Orthodox teacher about this, she was expelled from the *Chumash* (Pentateuch) class. In summers she attended the Orthodox Hebrew-speaking Camp Massad. At the age of ten, she, too, questioned everything. She wrote to Albert Einstein, asking him how he could believe in God, particularly the wrathful and vengeful God of the Old Testament who allowed so much suffering in the world. Einstein wrote back to her suggesting that she follow her own judgment in all things, and Hirsch has done just that.

Although she, too, considers herself an atheist, Hirsch's creative work is imbued with a profound knowledge of the Hebrew language and its letters, including their kabbalistic numerological valences. In several personal interviews conducted in 2006, Hirsch told me that the fertile knowledge of Hebrew and the revelations afforded by the study of its root system is essential to her definition of being Jewish. This quest for the multiple meanings inscribed in the Hebrew language has led her to a worldwide search for the original forms of what later became the Hebrew alphabet, and to the recovery of Hebrew letters that she sees inscribed upon the earth.

Hirsch's first group of art works dealing with Hebrew letters was *The Round Series* (Figure 3, p. 125), which was painted on circular canvases. An early work in that series, *Reconciliation* (1976), deals with the "Mother Letters," Alef, Mem and Shin, the first letters of the words for Air, Fire, and Water in Hebrew (*avir*, *mayim*, *serefa*), weaving these elements with the letters in a

vision of visceral, fundamental connectedness both to earth and to the energies of the Hebrew letters embedded in creation. This interweaving of the elements of all of human and non-human creation appears in her work like an x-ray vision of the alchemy of organic and energetic/vibrational life, in which the interconnectedness of all things natural and cosmic is revealed.

All the works in *The Round Series* deal with the Hebrew letters. Her painting *'Ein Sof* (Figure 3a, 1976) refers to the tenth and outermost ring of Enlightenment according to the states of consciousness described in the Kabbalah. The literal meaning of *'ein sof* is "no end," suggesting that the expansion of consciousness is infinite. The central circle in the painting is seen as the DNA helix, which is also an infinitely expanding progression of codified information. In this painting I also see the suggestion of breasts, which relates both to women and procreation and to one of the names for God, Shaddai, which has been interpreted as alluding to the Hebrew word for breasts, *shadayim*.

While still working in the round format, Hirsch began to work, as well, with the triangle (*Toward the Source of Triangulation Where Being and Balance are One*, 1978). Her analysis of this work is narrated in her film *Cosmography: The Writing of the Universe*. She explains that the third point of the triangle bears witness to the duality of the other two points. The triangle is the first stable pattern, representing the cave, the arch, the vulva—a form of biomorphic imagery representing the mother. As Hirsch tells us, the sung sound of the first Hebrew letter, Alef, is *aaaah*, the sound of life after birth—but it is also *oooooo*, a sound of sorrow and pain. Her organic, floral forms resemble Hebrew letters. In painting the Alef as an endlessly spiraling, ribbon-like form within the circle, she weds mysticism to science, again conjuring the image of the DNA helix (*Reflections of Events in Time*, 1978). Through *The Tree of Life and Death* (1979), we see into the organic materials—the tissue, marrow, and bone—of the human body.

From 1979 to 1980, Hirsch was paralyzed on one side of her body. She had two tall, vertical canvases built to her size, had her body traced onto them, and then worked within her body form, painting over the felt physical problems with whole, healthy images. *Through Generation* (1980) resurrected the body, and *Surge* (1980), painted over a full-scale self-portrait, regenerated the spirit. Within one year her healing was complete, and the final works in this series symbolize the surge of new life force and spirit that was renewed within her.

Before that, in the early 1980s, Hirsch had spent time alone at an artists' retreat. She lived for three years with a certain pond that has reappeared in her

work, revealing to her the patterns in nature. 75 paintings emerged from this prolonged meditation. She began to notice how sticks and branches formed angles that were like ideograms and hieroglyphs, often creating what seemed to be an alphabet in nature. This led to the understanding that there is no randomness in nature. By 1981, she was reading Hebrew letters and words in the natural patterns of the landscape (Figure 4a, b). She then studied the origin of the Hebrew alphabet, looking for the various permutations that its forms have undergone. She noticed that they follow five natural patterns that are consistently recognized by humankind, because they reflect the shapes of neurons and neural patterns of perception and cognition. These forms, according to Hirsch, are universally affective, because "form evokes feeling; feeling conjures metaphor; and metaphor demands expression."[8] In her film *Cosmography*, the entire Hebrew alphabet is analyzed according to the metaphors conjured by its forms. Reading formations of sticks or branches from right to left, as Hebrew is read, she photographically documented found words and phrases, including the Hebrew word for "letter" (*'ot*), which begins with Alef and ends with Tav, the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. She charted basic shapes, such as the line, the angle, the arc and the meander, as well as random crossing of sticks, giving us X in English and Alef in Hebrew, both reflecting the DNA helix. This led her to extend her investigation to all sorts of ancient alphabets.

Between 1986 and 1987, on one of her many journeys, Hirsch spent eleven months traveling to fifteen Asian countries. Noting how belief systems vary from culture to culture, she sought parallel ways in which her theory that form evokes feeling, feeling conjures metaphor, and metaphor demands expression is played out around the world. She studied alphabetic morphology, forms of perennially powerful and lasting art and architecture, as well as the forms of all things considered sacred cross-culturally. Reflecting upon perception and cognition, she asked herself whether we see because of what we think or think because of what we see. She saw a grand design in nature, and she understood that words, when comprehended through their root systems, both physically and conceptually, reveal many hidden aspects of reality. She gives the example of the Hebrew word *mora'*, which means both terror and revelation and is a homonym of the word for teacher (*morah*). Incorporated in this word is the root *'or*, light, thus making the teacher one who sheds light and brings revelation or terror with the knowledge revealed. In the forms of the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, Alef and Tav, Hirsch has observed a relationship

Figure 4: (a, top) Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Reading the Landscape*. Photo courtesy of Gilah Yelin Hirsch. **(b, bottom)** Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Reading the Landscape*. Photo courtesy of Gilah Yelin Ḥirsch.

to and reflection of human DNA. Having experienced Tibetan, yogic, Native American, kabbalistic and many other systems of spiritual practice, Hirsch concluded that the forms of postures, mudras, mantras, sand paintings, ritual dance, etc., are consistent from culture to culture and are identical to the five forms she had already identified in alphabets universally.[9]

In 1999, after another serious accident, Hirsch had nine large canvases built in diamond shapes (Figure 5, p. 125). Each of the paintings she made on them had Hebrew words and prayers encrypted in the image. Noticing that white spheres occurred in all the paintings in consistent patterns, she realized that she had intuitively worked two additional healing systems into these "medicine paintings," both visualized similarly, but, respectively, of Eastern and Western provenance. White spheres—*tigles* in Tibetan—are perceived as drops of compassion, or *boddhicita*, in Tantric visualizations, which she had learned from the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India, in 1990.[10] These forms are congruent with calcium molecules achieving similar psychophysiological effects in Western medicine. In the diamond painting *Who Will Live and Who Will Die/Mi yiḥyeh umi yamut?* (Figure 5a, 1999), whose title is drawn from the High Holiday prayers, we observe the healing process in action, as white balls consisting of calcium and compassion circulate through the cell, bone and tissue structures of her body, bringing healing nutrients and light energy to her being. Hirsch also noticed that these white spheres were consistently placed in what she eventually recognized as the meridian points, thus bringing in yet a third healing system. She shows us the body in its state of wholeness, healed by imaging and painting the combination of specific energies and consciousnesses.

In later works, such as *Zohar/Zahir* (Figure 5b, 2006), Hirsch focused on the letters *zayin*, *heh* and *reish*. *Zohar* is the kabbalistic Book of Splendor, while *zahir* means "wary" or "careful." She warns us that knowledge can be dangerous. As she told me in a fall 2006 interview: "If you begin unraveling the *keter* (crown) realm of the kabbalistic Tree of Life, you have to be prepared for it." Circles of *bodhicitta* (calcium plus compassion) are unleashed in the body as a preventative agent. By the late 1990s, she had learned that one risks entering dangerous regions when one begins to penetrate the energetic realms of the kabbalistic *sefirot*, but she was already prepared to engage in powerful healing work through her art.

Other paintings, including some of those mentioned above, also helped her to heal. In *Refuge/Chassiah* (Figure 5c, 2000) she painted protection for

the heart and the spinal chord in a bed of healthy cells, wrapping the word *ḥassiyah* around the spinal cord. In *Gratitude/Hodayah* (Figure 5d, 2001), her focus went outward to the world of nature, in gratitude for the gifts of life and hope. In *Ruach/Wind Spirit* (2001) she depicted the rush of interdependent life forces as ribbons interweaving around the white spheres of calcium—*bodhicitta*—feeding energy throughout all her systems.

In *Light as Space and Skin/Or ḥallal* (Figure 5e, 2001), the word *or* is a homonym: spelled with the letter Alef, it means "light"; with the letter Ayin, it means "skin." She writes, "I see light as the skin of space, separating space from space. In this painting I was inside one of those mysterious, revelatory spheres, more deeply understanding the nature of interconnectedness at the smallest and most intimate of levels."[11] Her painting *Riding Bareback on Each Other's Souls* (Figure 3b, 2003, p. 125) comes from her *9/11 Trilogy*. It is conceived as a *ketubah*, a kind of marriage contract between all sentient beings: flora, fauna, human and others. Wedding rings with inscriptions—"with this ring I consecrate you to me"—appear, resembling and symbolizing, for Hirsch, the strings in String Theory. This is a contract of responsibility, based upon her discovery that the Hebrew letters are an organic pattern in nature, forms the cell's basic organism, its alphabet.

Despite her traditional education, Hirsch rejected the restraints of Orthodox Judaism that had confined women to the home and family, preventing them from making independent journeys. However, rather than abandon the rich, beloved heritage of Hebrew and other aspects of Judaism's ethical teachings, Hirsch has taken on a new role for herself. She combines the role of the teacher (rabbi) with those of the scholar and the traveler—not the wandering Jew without a home, but the Jew whose home is the universe. Gilah Yelin Hirsch's life and work teach us that traditional Judaism is in need of expansion, and that now is the time for women to take the lead and guide us on new paths. The new roles thus articulated enable us to reach out to all of creation in search of the truth/*emet* that Judaism commands us to transmit to future generations.

Bruria Finkel

At the age of two, Jerusalem-born Bruria Finkel moved with her family to a Sefardic neighborhood in south Tel Aviv, where their neighbors were Jews from Turkey, Greece and Bukhara. By the age of five or six, she had learned to

speak Ladino as well as Hebrew. Finkel, who has lived in Santa Monica, California for many years, remembers the nurturing environment of her childhood, the foods, the music and the sounds of the languages. She also remembers her grandmother studying the *Tzena urena*, a Yiddish book of Bible stories and midrashim composed especially for women.

When her friend the poet Jack Hirschman introduced her to the work of the thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist Abraham Abulafia and asked her to translate his *Book of the Letter*, which is written in the Hebrew characters known as Rashi script, Finkel realized that had she not imbibed these languages in her youth, she would never have been able to undertake the task. Though she had left Israel, the languages of her youth and especially the Jewish religion behind, she decided that all things come round. She returned to Israel, to Jerusalem, to meet with Moshe Idel, a renowned scholar of the Kabbalah who had done his doctorate on Abulafia. He gave her some recommendations, and then she was off to the British Museum Archive to find Abulafia's books. Later, when he visited her in the U.S., Idel told her, "You have translated four books; you deserve a doctorate." But Finkel realized that she had never been interested in being a scholar. She had worked hard on the book, translating one page a day for a whole year. At the end of each day she felt exhausted.

Finkel first began translating Abulafia in the 1960s, and by the 1980s she knew that she had to bring his imagery into her artistic work. Her *Divine Chariot* sculptures were inspired by the magnificent vision of the chariot in the first chapter of Ezekiel, which was the basis of Merkabah (chariot) mysticism, one of the earliest forms of Jewish mysticism. Ezekiel saw four angels, each both male and female, running the chariot, and above it the image of a man. No other prophet had seen this—the image of God! It was Ezekiel, too, who had the vision of the dry bones being resurrected (chap. 37). Finkel was moved by Ezekiel's visual imagination, his sense of the ephemeral and the eternal, his questioning of what becomes of those who have departed this life. At first Finkel sculpted just the wheels of the chariot and made a group of artist's books to accompany the work, which was exhibited in 1985 at the Skirball Museum when it was located at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. After that, Finkel went to Spain to get in touch with Abulafia's world. When I interviewed her during the summer of 2006, she described herself in Gerona, the oldest kabbalistic center in Europe, walking ecstatically through the world of the kabbalist Isaac the Blind.

Abulafia's discourse on the Tree of Life deals with the names of God as the kabbalists would chant them at midnight, read in many different ways

with various sounds and permutations. On the basis of a single page of Abulafia's work, Finkel created an artist's book on the Tree of Life and the ten kabbalistic *sefirot*. In this work we see the crowns on the letters of the Torah, which Abulafia interpreted as channels for divine energies. Finkel uses these symbols in the wheels of her *Divine Chariot*, putting dots (*sega*) over the letters of the Hebrew words. These dots and crowns form channels for the energies of other dimensions. One page of Abulafia's letters shows them like stars, a sprinkling of words sparkling on the page. In her book, Finkel combines these star-like displays of letters with images from other cultures, such as the cosmic language of the Pleiades from Algonquin cosmology. Abulafia wrote his poems in circles and shapes, resembling what we now would call concrete poetry. He used the permutations and transformations of Hebrew words and letters in mystical ways to reach a state of bliss in praising God. The letters of the words relating to the Divine Chariot are shown revolving in spirals around the page, whirring and making the ecstatic noises of the names of God. Finkel, in her book, has made the sound of God into a whisper.

In the four works comprising *The Divine Chariot*, Finkel articulates her understanding of the kabbalistic notation of the letters of the alphabet, which suggest that each letter is an opening into sacred space and a portal to the divine. The hub of each wheel of the chariot is the sacred center of one of the four worlds of Creation. Each wheel has ten spokes, and the tenth is always an organic form—twigs, a bush, a plant, etc. In the Chariot entitled "The Divine Influx—Shefa," Bruria envisions the Four Rivers of Eden (Gen. 2:10–14), which emanate from a pair of hands at

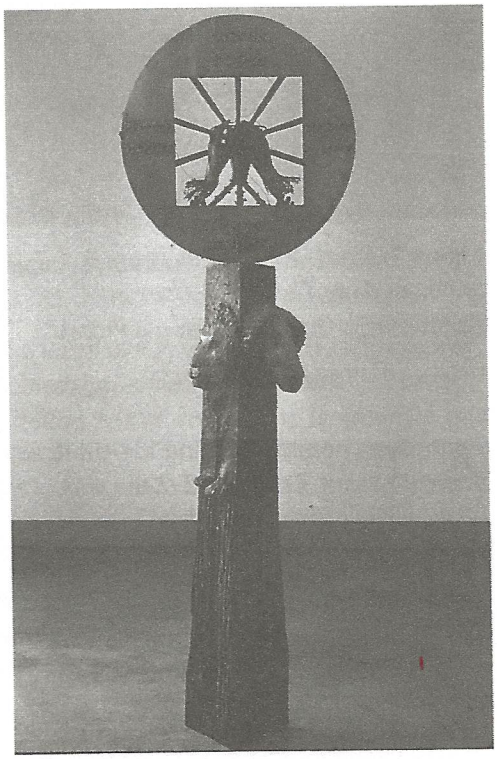


Figure 6: Bruria Finkel, *The Divine Chariot* (1985–1997). Courtesy of Bruria Finkel.

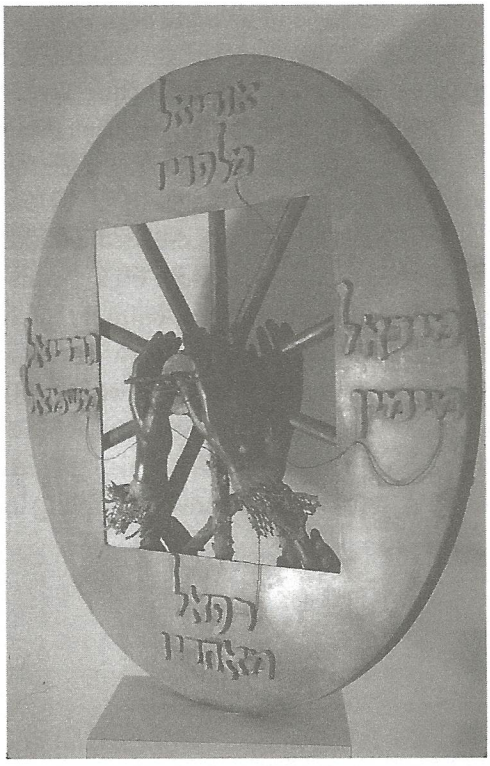


Figure 7: Bruria Finkel, *Placement of Power*, from *The Divine Chariot* (1985–1997). Courtesy of Bruria Finkel.

the center as a mandala for meditation about water as the source of life (Figure 6, p. 113). Acknowledging the feminine symbolism of the circle, she uses the female hands as those of a female Creator of life, art, the universe, consciously using this symbolism to make of her venture into the Kabbalah, a domain previously barred to women, a feminist act. This, together with the organic forms of the flowering branches, implies a reference to the Shekinah—the mystical presence of the female aspect of the deity.[12]

Each of the bronze wheels has a front and a back. The wheel called "The Placement of Power" includes the names of the angels who symbolize the four corners of the earth: Uriel in front; Raphael in back; Michael on the right; and Gabriel on the left (Figure 7). "The Power of One," a wheel within a wheel with its double circles and alchemical star, refers to the belief in one God. "The Power of Many" symbolizes community and has three sets of hands around the hub, in which flowers bloom. Embedded in the wax is a *tallit* that belonged to Finkel's father (Figure 8).

Both Finkel and Hirsch freely combine Jewish cosmologies and sacred systems with those of other native, shamanistic or visionary cultures, showing the correspondences that unite humans within their diversity of mystical systems. Although Finkel self-identifies as an atheist, I see her as having a Jewish mystical sensibility. Women who have delved deeply into Jewish traditional texts, are conversant with them in their original languages and can read and comprehend their mystical dimensions appear to be acquiring a new freedom to fuse their Jewish education with a feminist consciousness. As they mature, they claim the

further freedom to travel widely in pursuit of knowledge from the worlds of other cultures. For these "female kabbalists,"[13] their deep rootedness in Jewish tradition is their passport to independence in their spiritual quests.

As I contemplate the spiritual and artistic journeys of Bruria Finkel and Gilah Yelin Hirsch, I conclude that we need to find a new word to describe the Jewish visionary, seer, mystic and artist who nevertheless remains skeptical about the existence of God. This word would stand in contrast to the term "New Age" so often used to depict a composite of diverse spiritual quests. Hirsch and Finkel do not depart from Judaism to advocate other religious paths; rather, they bring wisdom from the other paths they have explored back to Judaism and fuse these newly discovered teachings with the old to expand their Jewish spiritual practice.

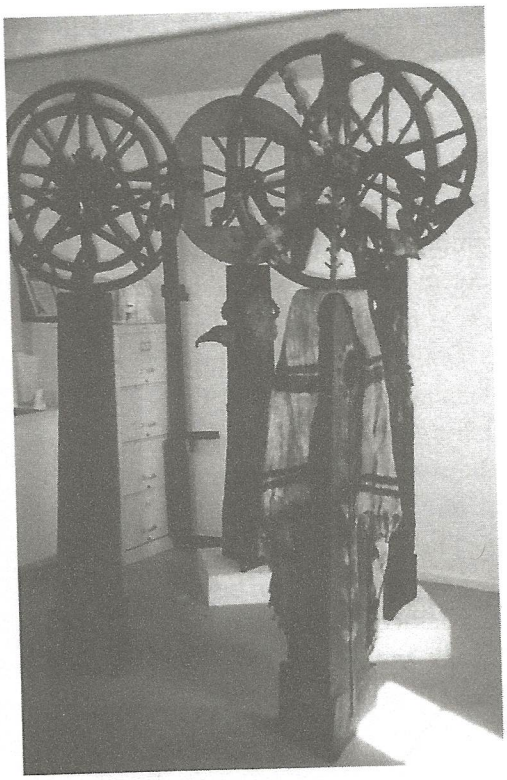


Figure 8: Bruria Finkel, *The Divine Chariot* (1985–1997). Courtesy of Bruria Finkel.

Ruth Weisberg

Ruth Weisberg's Jewish journey diverges from those of the previous three artists in that, over the last several decades, she has not only been drawn to study Torah and to learn Hebrew, but she has become an observant Jew. Raised in a secular, leftist environment that was rich in Yiddishkeit and imbued with the values of social justice, she has sought to integrate those values with the Jewish values of *tikkun 'olam*.

In a fall 2006 interview, Weisberg spoke with me movingly about the awakening of her more religious Jewish identity and how it has come to expression

in her art. After the death of her grandmother in the 1960s, Weisberg came upon the Yizkor (memorial) book for the town in eastern Europe where her maternal grandparents had lived. She was deeply impressed by the observant Jewish life led by its inhabitants. Thinking about what her life might have been like had she been born in such a place instead of in Chicago, she was brought up against the fate of these communities. Weisberg found that she had a new purpose for her creative expression: to do something special for those who did not survive. She wanted her art to be a redemptive act, a place of memory for the souls that had perished in the Holocaust and other persecutions.

Delving deeply into memory, Weisberg seeks to reclaim the past and make it shine through the layers of time to illuminate the present. By 1971, following a lengthy study of archival and photographic material on lives lived in the shtetls of eastern Europe, she had completed an artist's book, *The Shtetl: A Journey and a Memorial*, commemorating her grandmother's Yizkor book and marking an important turning point in her own artistic career. (The same redemptive quest can be read into her frequent artistic references to the works of Masaccio, Leonardo, Velazquez, Goya, Degas and Kollwitz, as well as to Greek and Roman painting, by which she pays homage to the influence of these inspirational figures and works in her creative life.)

With the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s, Weisberg had the privilege of studying Torah and Hebrew with Laura Geller, rabbi of the University of Southern California, where Weisberg was a Professor of Fine Arts.[14] As their work together grew into a close friendship, she was inspired, in a number of pioneering art works, to depict Geller in her historic new role as a woman rabbi. A bout with cancer during the early 1980s led Weisberg to another important turning point. As with Gilah Yelin Hirsch's recovery from her near-fatal car accident, Weisberg's artistic energies may have proved to be healing as well. She felt she had to move rapidly to do her most ambitious work.

Weisberg created two major works in this period, both revolving around the female life cycle placed within the context of Jewish history. The first is *A Circle of Life* (1984–1985), a series of eleven large paintings linking the past with the present. In *The Great Synagogue of Danzig* (Figure 9, p. 128), for example, Weisberg portrays a group of Jewish children holding hands in front of a wooden gate layered over a vision of the Great Synagogue of Danzig, one of the most important sanctuaries of the Jews of Poland.[15] These are the souls of those who died, now remembered in this work of redemptive art. In *Passage* and *The World to Come* (Figure 10, p. 129), too, Weisberg depicts the

Figure 11: Ruth Weisberg, detail from *The Scroll* (1987–1988). Courtesy of Ruth Weisberg.

souls of the departed hovering over us, or as memories of the immigrants who arrived in New York harbor at the end of the nineteenth century. Weisberg's work enables us to visualize the reuniting of souls from all periods, in a world to come where they merge and continue their cyclical journey through eternal time. In the depiction of that journey and those times, the protagonist is a feminist artist, and the story is that of the autobiographical engagement of her body, mind and soul with Jewish history.

The second of Weisberg's major works from the 1980s is *The Scroll* (1987), which was newly "unfurled" at the Skirball Museum in 2007.[16] In the continuous narrative of this monumental (94' × 4.5') work, we again find autobiography combined with themes from the Jewish life cycle, Jewish history and the Torah. Keeping the observer's eye moving forward, around and over, *The Scroll* curves from right to left—as Hebrew is read—around the space of the room in which it is installed, so that the viewer feels enveloped in it. The opening image is that of creation. In a May 2007 interview with Nancy Berman, Founding Director (now Director Emerita) of the Skirball Museum, Weisberg explained that many people have misinterpreted the image in this section of a woman touching the lip of a baby about to be born (Figure 11). It represents

not a mother and child, but the midrash according to which unborn babes know the Torah in the womb, but are made to forget it by an angel tapping them on the lip (forming the cleft below the nose) before they are pushed into the birth canal (see BT *Niddah* 30b). Here, the physical birth is related to the parting of the sea, combining the life cycle with Jewish history, as one form of creation is like a hologram of another in the larger scene of all cosmic creation. A circumcision follows, and then the bat mitzvah of Ruth's daughter—showing a woman reading from the Torah scroll, presided over by Geller, one of the first woman rabbis.

The Scroll is both feminist and inclusive: A male rabbi presides over the wedding scene. Clearly, however, women have become equal participants in Jewish ceremonial life and leadership roles. Thus, *The Scroll* is a document not only of the past, but of the historic changes in Judaism, beginning with those brought about by the Women's Movement of the 1970s. The center portion of *The Scroll*, Revelation, shows a Tree of Life with its roots in the heavens and a wedding taking place under its canopy. It is the kabbalistic Tree of Life. As the bridal couple moves upward, it encounters a curtain inscribed with constellations, alluding to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and reminding us that what lies beyond this realm is the unnamed, the unknowable, the ultimate mystery to which we have no direct visual access in this world.

As Weisberg eloquently explained in her interview with Berman, she weaves together, conceptually and visually, elements of what has been called "synchronic time" with elements from Jewish life-cycle events and from personal history. A technique of color washes makes the images from the past seem to bleed through into the present, reminding us of how we descend from and stand upon the shoulders of our ancestors, and of the struggles they lived through and the memories they left us. Weisberg's use of synchronic time is a visionary technique, drawing viewers to realize that cosmic time and history—past, present and future (including what Jews call the World to Come)—are interconnected. Some elements may be invisible to us in the present, but the present is only one fragment of the whole continuity of life in creation.

Concerned with involving the viewer as an active participant in the experience of Torah, Weisberg gave much consideration to the architectural realization of spiritual space, wrapping the viewer in the Torah as in a prayer shawl. As the viewer moves through the space of the gallery, reading the narrative of *The Scroll* alongside the artwork, it is as though s/he is taking a journey with the artist and the figures in her work. With this journey, according to Weisberg,

to Palestine and Israel (1900–2000). Works relating to its middle section, which deals with the clandestine immigration to Palestine in the 1940s, were included in her show "New Beginnings," which opened at the Jack Rutberg Fine Arts Gallery in Los Angeles in the spring of 2006. Again combining history and personal narrative, Weisberg's mural starts in Ellis Island, where immigrants were processed upon arrival in New York before and after the turn of the twentieth century, and ends back in New York in the year 2000. It shows immigrants arriving in Israel from places like the Soviet Union and Ethiopia, seeking a new life and new beginnings. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, many Jews who had survived and were living in displaced persons camps were kept from immigrating to Palestine by the restrictive quota system instituted by the British mandatory authorities. Jews in the U.S., Europe and Palestine hired boats to carry these refugees secretly to Palestine. Almost all the boats were captured by the British, who interned the immigrants in detention camps in Palestine and Cyprus. Weisberg's painting *1947* (2004) shows one such immigrant being forcibly taken down a gangplank by soldiers, with the once-hopeful faces of immigrants still on an upper deck looking on. Weisberg used the raw materiality of oil and mixed media on unstretched canvas to convey the brutality of the scene.

Weisberg's technique of superimposing planes of color and light foregrounds the dreams and yearnings of the refugees. Often the suggestion of a mist of memory is created, as the layers of light mingle with a wash of blue paint. Many of Weisberg's works are done in blue tones, which denote both personal and historical memory by creating zones of vaporous color through which we feel we are seeing with our mind's eye. Two other works in the "New Beginnings" series are painted in tones of amber and gold, conjuring, according to Weisberg, the hues of faded sepia photos. *Keep The Gates Open* (2004), whose details are based on archival sources, depicts refugees in a boat displaying a banner that reads, in Hebrew, "Keep The Gates Open, We Are Not The Last." Yearning for a homeland can be read in the eyes of these immigrants as they stare straight ahead, their gazes fixed on the future, hoping and believing that a safe harbor awaits them in the distance. *The Floating World* (2003) comprises two paintings placed one on top of the other. In the upper one, a tugboat pulls a large ship at sea. Is it being captured, or towed into port? The image is ambiguous, and the passengers in the lower painting do not see what is happening. Their faces, too, bear the imprint of their dreams of a safe harbor. Yet danger may be lurking in the waters that pour from the upper painting into the lower

one, with the immigrants. Plastically and metaphorically, we are being shown how our most fervent dreams may be dashed instantaneously, for our "floating world" is on dangerous waters.

Although not based on any specific biblical passage, "New Beginnings" evokes the themes of Weisberg's earlier works on Jewish subjects: Exodus, diaspora, crossing the waters, rebirth and the yearning for new beginnings in a new homeland. The regeneration of hope among people who have been through the most harrowing and traumatic of historical events is, from the perspective of this Jewish feminist artist, clearly related to their Jewish spirituality, the source of their strength and faith.

Cheselyn Amato

Cheselyn Amato began her studies of Torah and Hebrew in South Orange, New Jersey, by attending Hebrew school after school and on Sundays as a high school senior in 1975. Her studies launched her onto an artistic journey in which, in installations and visual works in diverse media, she has sought to express Judaism's mystical concepts. She has experienced firsthand the ways in which everyday life is infused with the sacred energies of divine creation. Her work illuminates the ways in which we call upon the Shekinah, the Divine Presence, to enter into our lives, and in which we respond to the call of the creator. Amato's installations create places where the divine and the human enter into a sacred encounter.

A Temple in Honor of Life Lived Every Day: An Unfinished Song of Love is a mixed-media installation of 18 large, classical columns with an inner chamber surrounded by suspended fabric—a place where the artist's personal space and individual history become entwined with public space and references to ancient history.[19] In *Apparitions in the Backyard* (1998), Amato projected slides onto a circular arrangement of columns and then photographed the projections. In one such apparition, the artist is transformed into an angel in her own backyard, in the midst of everyday life. Amato writes of this installation: "Taken as a single, whole event/experience, the piece is committed to the envisioning of transcendence, transfiguration, divine presence, womanhood, the pleasure of light, the pleasure of magic, and the pleasure of spectacle."[20]

In Amato's vision, all of reality is sacred. All things are capable of participating in the creation of a sanctuary—a holy space within daily reality, wherein

the mystical, visionary, and spiritual dimensions of Judaism are manifest. Another installation, *Manna Redemption* (2002), envisages the divine cloud that covers the tabernacle at Mt. Sinai as a canopy. Using materials from the everyday world—such as parachutes, structural armatures, conic forms, hoops, disks, pulleys and trampolines—as well as manna (food from heaven), Amato creates what she refers to as a "vessel of reception and transmission reverberating as spaceship, transformer, jellyfish, chariot, caravan, tent, canopy, nuptial chamber."[21] In this Tent of Meeting, the Shekinah is invited to descend and meet with the everyday world, which ascends to greet her. Amato reveals ways of rigging our world so that the Indwelling Presence will feel welcome to meet with us at the appointed place.

Many of Amato's other works are based upon the kabbalistic Tree of Life. *Swags and Swoons* (1998–2003) is a series of digitally printed images from different sources, including photographs, textiles, roadways, concentration camps, architectural and landscape plans, maps, symbols, emblems and so on, arranged to represent the *sefirot*, or emanations, of the Tree. Keter, the highest *sefirah*, is linked with the Ineffable and with Incantations at Home. In a January 2007 interview, Amato explained to me that she draws a poetic link between Da'at, the *sefirah* of Knowledge, and the image of the Matador Dance. Ḥ$okhmah, the "masculine" *sefirah* of Wisdom, is also linked with the Matador, who "is about human mastery over things with grace and heroism. But it is also a paternalistic form of conquering." However, she has also placed the Red Matador on *Binah*, a "feminine" *sefirah*, because "Binah shows a new feminine paradigm for confident leadership, and a new feminine modality for reasoned knowledge" (Figure 12, p. 129). She writes:

> These works are a kind of improvisation in which personal history and collective recorded experience meet in a swaggering and swooning of the sublime, itself. Sublimity's impact is imparted through beauty and spectacle. I believe that certain images conflated via beauty, pattern, and spectacle activate the conditions for the experience of the sublime—awe and epiphany through pleasure and delectation.[22]

When images of intense emotion and passion taken from daily life are superimposed upon the *Sefirot* of the Tree of Life, the ordinarily eclipsed mystical aspects of reality are revealed to us as they fuse with the energies and qualities of the divine realms.

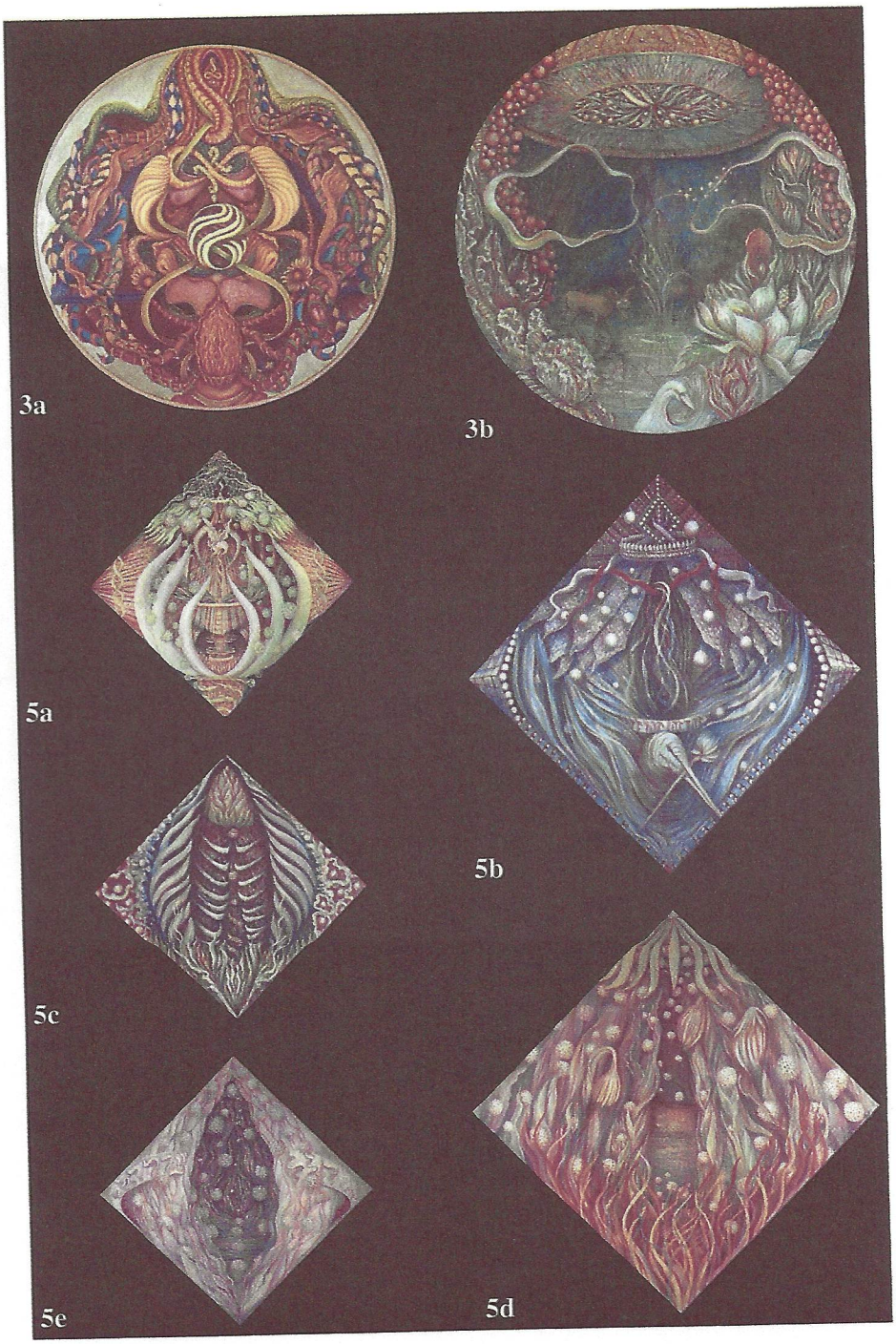
by critics and scholars as they evaluate the Jewish feminist elements in their creative lives and work.

Each of these artists has meditated upon the sources of Judaism, reinterpreted its bodies of knowledge, and played with the literal and metaphoric meanings of the Torah in Hebrew. Each of them has envisioned a contemporary Jewish feminist art that is rooted in the specificity of Torah study and an understanding of the mystical dimensions of the Hebrew language. Yet, because of the flexibility and freedom within the rigor of Jewish tradition, most Jews view their creative art neither as idolatrous nor as an example of "the graven images" forbidden in the Second Commandment. Rather, it is part of the lineage of talmudic commentary and interpretation. Each of these artists has questioned the traditional role ascribed to women in Judaism and has depicted feminist transformations of that role, without abandoning the Judaism she has inherited.

For centuries, the creative work of women that could have emerged from the experience of study, always available to men, was absent from our cultural history, both secular and religious. With the maturation of the first generation of Jewish women artists to find creative freedom, both as artists and as Jews, we may come to understand just how much was excised from our heritage during all the years when women had to masquerade, like Yentl, in order to obtain an education in Torah. The works of the artists discussed herein illustrate the paradoxes and diversities of Jewish faith and the intellectual questioning and spiritual questing that emerges from studying the sources of Judaism. At the same time, they explore the rich world of women's creative visions, springing from a profound encounter with the sources and from exploration of the

Figures 3 and 5 (opposite):
(3a) Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Ain Soph* (1976).
(3b) Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Riding Bareback on Each Others' Souls* (2002).

(5a) Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Who Will Live and Who Will Die?* (1999).
(5b) Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Zohar/Zahir* (2005).
(5c) Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Refuge/Chassiah* (2000).
(5d) Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Gratitude/Hodaya* (2000).
(5e) Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Light as Space and Skin/Challal* (2001).
All Courtesy of Gilah Yelin Hirsch.


3a
3b
5a
5b
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5d
5e

possibilities for egalitarian transformation within a tradition they have not abandoned, even after experiencing exclusion and marginalization within it.

The feminist movement gave women the freedom and the courage to critique Judaism's patriarchal premises while still appreciating and treasuring its moral and ethical foundations. Their themes often differ from those by Jewish male artists even when they engage with the same subject matter, for they view Jewish texts and practices through the lens of the omission of women. Whether engaging with biblical, spiritual or historical themes, they explicitly introduce female imagery, female life passages, female presence in history and female participation in all aspects of Judaism, including its sacred texts and its historical narratives. Feminist artists often address critically Judaism's laws regarding women's purity, procreation, marriage, motherhood, adultery and divorce. In all of these works we observe the minds of women artists at work, re-visioning women's relationships with language, the environment, sacred texts, and Jewish rituals and social institutions, and envisioning newer, more complex roles crafted specifically for women acquiring agency within Judaism in the twenty-first century.

Thus, we see, for the first time, women rabbis presiding at sacred life-cycle ceremonies, women creating sacred space in order to invite the Indwelling Presence of the Shekinah into a holy encounter, and women taking on the role of teacher and critiquing the patriarchal biases of the texts of the Torah. We find women reading prophetic and kabbalistic texts and discovering their deep implications, as they relate them to our spiritual as well as our quotidian experience of a multi-dimensional comprehension of creation. We find women artists exploring the alignments and relationships between cosmic creation, procreation and artistic creation. The artists we have studied have not found a need to posit a Goddess in order to see themselves in the image of God. Their Hebrew studies have taught them both masculine and feminine names for God, and so, for example, they know that biblical Shaddai has been interpreted as referring to breasts, and that the Shekinah is the feminine aspect of God's Indwelling Presence on earth.

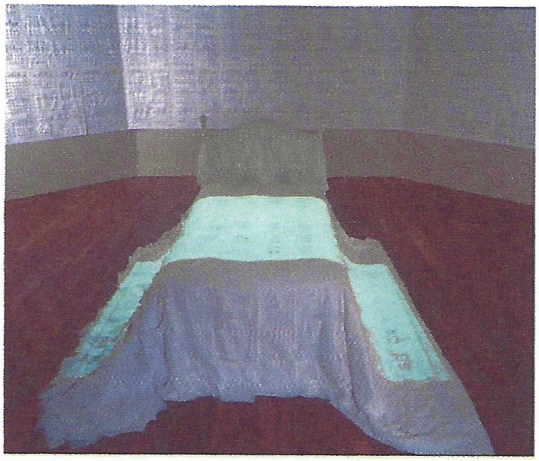
These artists have traveled around the world, both literally and in a shamanic fashion, seeking knowledge and vision from other cultures and worlds of the imagination. The prevalence of travel in quest of vision and to sites of spiritual encounter, along with their exploration of spiritual healing modalities, constitutes a new paradigm in the lives of Jewish feminist artists. Torah study, knowledge of Hebrew, extensive travel, secular scholarship, knowledge

of multiple foreign and ancient languages, explorations in the relationship between art and healing, and chutzpah in combining all these into new roles for women artists—all these have impressed me as the innovative artistic assets brought to our Jewish heritage and to our art history by feminist artists steeped in the Jewish canon.

Notes

Acknowledgement: A special word of thanks to Mindy Menjou, whose assistance in all things technological and in many things editorial was inestimable to me in completing this work.

1. See Barbara J. Love (ed.), *Feminists Who Changed America 1963–1975* (with a Foreword by Nancy F. Cott; Urbana–Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006): "During 1963–1975 many participants in the women's movement thought of themselves as a 'second wave' of feminism comparable to the long struggle for the right to vote that began in 1848 and culminated in 1920. Their daughters' generation in the 1990s began to call themselves a 'third wave,' signaling both the continuation of feminist activism and its necessary evolution" (Introduction, p. xiii).
2. Lisa E. Bloom, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (New York: Routledge, 2006) , pp. 1–13.
3. See Gloria Orenstein, "Vision and Visibility: Contemporary Jewish Women Artists Visualize the Invisible," *Femspec*, 4/2 (2004), p. 49.
4. In "Beyond the Pale: Jewish Identity, Radical Politics and Feminist Art in the United States" (*Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 4/2 [2005], pp. 205–232), Gail Levin argues that the innovative use by Chicago of embroidery and by Schapiro of patterned cloth (in her "femmages") expresses their honoring of the crafts done by their Jewish grandmothers, illuminating the role that Judaism played in the background to their early works. Since the 1990s, most of the artists discussed by Bloom and Levin have placed their (secular) Jewish identities more in the foreground of their work.
5. Helene Aylon, *The Liberation of G-d* (1990–1996), quoted in Robert Berlind, "Helene Aylon: Deconstructing the Torah," *Art in America* (October 1999).
6. Helene Aylon, interview with the author, New York, August 2006.
7. Many thanks to poets Marsie Scharlatt and Gloria Frym, friends of Helene Aylon, for their consultative, editorial and informational assistance with this section while Aylon was ill and hospitalized.
8. Gilah Yelin Hirsch (director), *Cosmography: The Writing of the Universe*.
9. Hirsch has presented her ideas at many conferences, including The Meninger Foundation's Council Grove Conference, Kansas (*Cosmography,* 1983), and in her paper



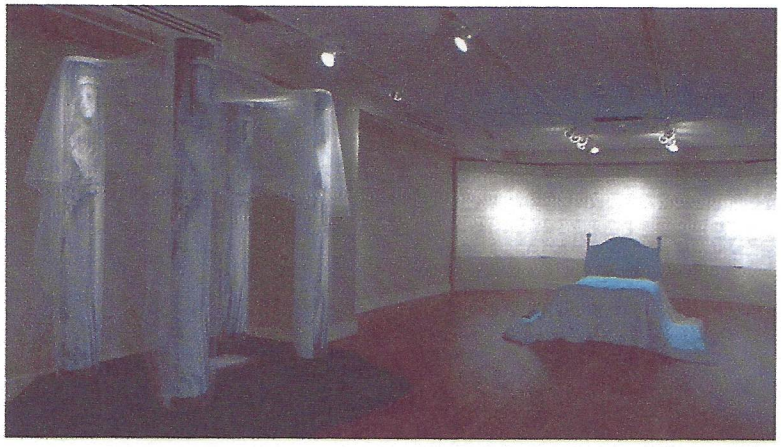


Figure 1 (top):
Helene Aylon, *My Clean Days* (2001). Courtesy of Helene Aylon.
Figure 2 (middle):
Helene Aylon, *My Bridal Chamber* (2000). Courtesy of Helene Aylon.

Figure 9 (right): Ruth Weisberg, *The Great Synagogue of Danzig* (1984). Courtesy of Ruth Weisberg.

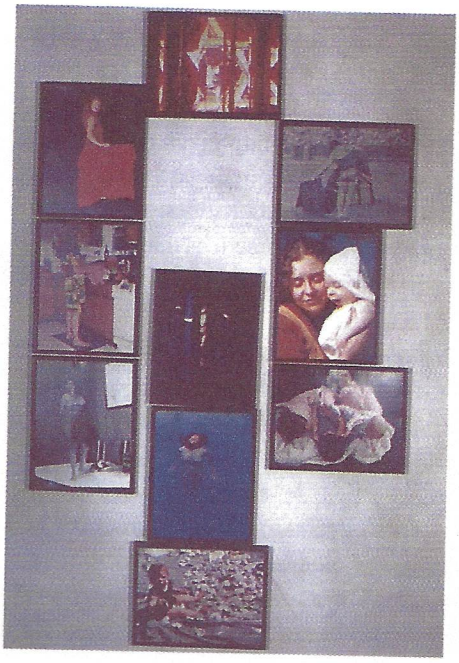


Figure 12 (top left): Cheselyn Amato, *Swags and Swoons: The Tree Of Life* (1998–2003). Courtesy of Cheselyn Amato.
Figure 13 (top right): Cheselyn Amato, *Meditations on the Human Body* (1991). Courtesy of Cheselyn Amato.

Figure 10 (left):
Ruth Weisberg,
The World to Come (1985).
Courtesy of Ruth Weisberg.

"A Conjecture on the Relation between Bodhicitta and Calcium: Cultural Interlocutors of Health and 'Right Action,'" presented at the Science of Consciousness Conference, Skoyde, Sweden (2001).

10. In April 1990, Hirsch took the first secret (Tantric) teaching given by any Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India, a tiny town perched in the Himalayas, the home of the Dalai Lama in exile. The teachings consisted of direct transmission, including mudras and mantras—visualizations—psychophysiological practices that may lead to Samadhi and Buddha-mind.

11. Hirsch, "A Conjecture" (above, note 9).

12. See Gloria F. Orenstein, *The Reflowering of the Goddess* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), p. 88.

13. Traditionally, only males over the age of 40 who were Jewishly erudite and had married were permitted to undertake study of the Kabbalah.

14. She is now Dean of the USC Roski School of Fine Arts. Weisberg was the first woman artist to be President of the College Art Association and is the founder and past president of the Southern California Women's Caucus for Art.

15. I have written on this work in "Vision and Visibility" (above, note 3), pp. 54–55.

16. *The Scroll* was commissioned by the New York branch of Hebrew Union College and later acquired by the Skirball Museum, part of the Los Angeles branch of HUC, by Sandy and Adrea Bettelman in memory of Al Bettelman. In the catalogue accompanying *The Scroll*'s renewed "unfurling" and Weisberg's retrospective exhibition at the Skirball Museum, art historian Matthew Baigell writes: "I want to present my conclusion right at the start: Ruth Weisberg's *The Scroll* is one of the most important works ever created in the entire history of Jewish American art" (Baigell, "The Scroll in Context," in *Ruth Weisberg Unfurled* [Los Angeles: Skirball Cultural Center, 2007], p. 14). I wrote about *The Scroll* in "Vision and Visibility" (above, note 3), pp. 46–82.

17. Sue Levi Elwell (ed.) and Ruth Weisberg (art), *The Open Door: A Passover Haggadah* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York 5762/2002).

18. Elwell and Weisberg, *The Open Door* (above, note 17), p. 23. The image can be viewed and downloaded on the CCAR website at: http://ccarnet.org/publications/haggadah/.

19. For more on this work see Orenstein, "Vision and Visibility" (above, note 3), p. 66.

20. Cheselyn Amato, Artist's Statement for *Apparitions in the Backyard* (2003).

21. Cheselyn Amato, Artist's Statement for *Manna Redemption* (2002).

22. Idem, Artist's Statement for *Swags and Swoons: The Tree of Life* (2003).

23. Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Art in America: An Introduction* (Boulder, CO: Lanham, 2007).