

What is Jewish Expression in Art and/or Design?

Yehuda Moraly

The area of my expertise is the theater. I hope that my relating to this field in the following discussion will be fruitful to those working in other areas.

The Prohibition of Visual and Artistic Expression in Judaism

There is a paradox inherent in the concept “Jewish Theater.” Traditionally, Judaism objected to theater and to the visual arts in general. It is told in a midrash (biblical homily), that when Ruth the Moabite attempts to clarify with her mother-in-law Naomi what it means to be a Jewish woman, Naomi answers her: “It is not the way of the daughters of Israel to frequent the theaters of the gentiles.” This sharp conflict between the world of theater and the Jewish world exists, as we know, not only in the midrash, but also in reality. Since biblical times, there has been a restrictive relationship when it comes to the visual arts (“Thou shalt not make thyself any graven image or any likeness”). Theater and the arts developed in Greece and were seen in the eyes of *Hazal* (the Jewish sages) as connected to idolatry, incest, and even murder.

Not until recently could one have thought about any kind of cooperative effort between the theater and Judaism, but over the last twenty years we have witnessed a new development: Many religious people are active in the world of theater without giving up their devoutness, and conversely, theater people return to their religious roots without abandoning the theater. In addition, more and more rabbis are emphasizing the impossibility of ignoring the world of communications and theater. Recently, a number of books were published dealing with questions of rabbinical law that arise from being involved in the theater and the arts. This proves that theater and the visual arts have gained legitimacy in religious society.

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While the intensive engagement in the theater among the religious is albeit a new phenomenon, Jewish theater has been in existence for many years.

Trends in Jewish Theater

Jewish theater can be broken down into a number of subdivisions:

1. Work that is completely and manifestly Jewish (Jewish topic, Jewish actor, Jewish audience). Examples may be the plays performed from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in the Jewish theater in Italy (such as *Tzahut Bedihuta DeKidushin*, [Marriage Mischief] by Rabbi Yehuda Sumo; *Layesharim Tehillah*, [Glory for the Righteous] by Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzato); plays from the Enlightenment period (for example, *Al Kalut Da'at ve-Tzvi'ut* [On Frivolity and Hypocrisy], by Aaron Wolfsohn); the Yiddish Theater and Cinema (with fascinating works such as, *Yemot Ha-Mashiah* [Days of the Messiah] by Abraham Goldfaden; *Mirele Efros*, by Jacob Gordin; *Der Vilner Hazan*, [The Cantor from Vilna] by Gili Olmer). Many of the plays have a western model, but they were reworked for a Jewish audience.

2. The playwright or director is Jewish, but the play's subject and audience are not Jewish. In these instances, the Jewish identity of the work may not be apparent at all or may be present as a subtext. It would be interesting to define what is Jewish in the works of the many Jewish playwrights writing in Germany, France, England, and the United States. The list of names of these artists is long, as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many Jews were involved in the theater and motion picture industries.

3. Jewish subject matter, where the actors and the audience are not Jewish. An example of this would be the biblical plays of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Despite their marginal place these works were of great importance: figures like Samson, Saul, David, Esther, Judith, and others, were used as inspiration by Jewish and non-Jewish playwrights and directors. A comparison of a work on the same subject by a Jew and a non-Jew might be quite illuminating.

4. The status of Israeli theater is hard to define as a type of Jewish theater. Within Israeli theater are works that clearly belong to the realm of Jewish theater, because they deal with a Jewish subject, even if the position presented is negative. It would be interesting to examine the Jewish aspects of Israeli plays that do not deal with clear Jewish subject matter.

A rich tradition of Jewish theater is also developing abroad, with artists like Jean-Claude Grumberg and Liliane Atlan, Arnold Wesker, and others. In Israel there is a new phenomenon of religious groups involved with theater or film (as for example the film school “Maale,” Ta’ir Theater, Emunah, Aspaclaria, Shuli Rand, and various groups of ultra-Orthodox women who are active in theater). In addition, in the last thirty years there have been a number of artists who have sought to create a unique Jewish theater language: Yossi Yisraeli, Gabi Ben-Simchon, Michal Govrin, Dani Horowitz, Jerusalem Theater group, among others.

An Attempt to Define Formal Characteristics of Jewish Theater

Jewish invention in comparison to the general production may be defined by a number of features:

1. The use of humor and parody – Jewish artists abroad, such as Jacques Offenbach, Mel Brooks, or Woody Allen exaggerate upon a western topic or style. Parody is their area of expertise. Offenbach pokes fun at the highest forms of western art, such as the opera, and at subjects such as Greek mythology (for example, *La Belle Hélène*, written by another Jewish writer, Ludovic Halévy). All of Mel Brooks’ movies are parodies that rely on established Western genres, such as the western, the horror film, etc. Perhaps, a Jewish artist feels inherently alien to the ruling or host culture and observes it from the sidelines.

2. Destiny and watchfulness – the ruling notion in theater since the days of Greek tragedy until today is man at the mercy of blind destiny and condemned to perdition (Shakespeare, Racine, Beckett). One of the characteristics of the Jewish playwright is a less grim outlook a propos the destiny of his characters. *Mirele Efras* borrows from *King Lear*, however, whereas *King Lear* is a chilling and desperate play underlining the absurdity of human existence, *Mirele Efras* concludes on an optimistic note with the grandson’s bar-mitzvah, allowing for resolution of the generational conflict in the third generation. *Romeo and Juliet*, a play that stands at the center of Western culture, brings the absurd to its peak. When the play was adapted to the musical genre (*West Side Story*) by a group of artists who were all Jewish (Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins), the play ends with a glimmer of hope. The Israeli musical *Kazablan*, based in turn on *West Side Story*, ends even more optimistically with the *brit milah* (ritual circumcision ceremony) and resolution of the communal conflict. As opposed to

the pessimistic Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*), the playwright Eugène Ionesco, who had Jewish roots, offers a more compassionate and lighter view of reality in his absurd plays.

3. Combining Laughter with Tears – many theater productions, particularly in the Yiddish theater, and in Jewish theater in general, alternate between moments of great poignancy and situations provoking laughter (Abraham Goldfaden, Jean-Claude Grumberg, Liliane Atlan, Hanoach Levin). This aspect is revealed not only in the plays but also in the craft of the great Jewish actors, such as Shlomo Michaels, Molly Picon, Morris Schwartz, Tsilla Chelton (the actress for whom Ionesco wrote *Les Chaises* and *Le roi se meurt*).

4. Musical Theater – the roots of Jewish theater may be found in the *purimspiel*, a type of musical theater. The works of Goldfaden, father of Yiddish theater, belong entirely to the musical theater tradition. The form of the Broadway musical was created in large measure by Jewish artists who were influenced by Yiddish theater.

Center and Periphery in Jewish-Israeli Theater

In Israel today there are different types of Jewish art. At the center are those works that use Judaism solely as cultural material, while directing at it sharp criticism. An exemplary work like *Vayomar Vayelech*, judges the Bible from an entirely western viewpoint.

In the periphery are a number of artists working in a variety of theatrical genres who are trying to create works that have the quality of prayer – a direct connection between man and Creator. These artists work under particularly difficult conditions, without any support either from the cultural authority, which rejects every devout artist, or from the religious authority, which is interested in culture mainly as a form of entertainment and not as spiritual challenge.

Among the ultra-Orthodox there is a flourishing movement in the various fields of theater arts. Because this is a society that has stated clearly its disinterest in taking any part in secular culture, the need has arisen to provide the cultural requisites of this community via internal means. Even in the field of film/cinema there is extensive activity in the ultra-Orthodox community (films from production companies such as Groweis Brothers, Nitzotzot Shel Kedusha, etc.). These films are intended mainly for young children and adolescent audiences and deal with stories from Jewish history, and even with contemporary difficulties of coping with the everyday in light of their traditional religious world.

This cultural renaissance has affected other fields as well, such as dance (Orot College, creative artists like Avi Assaraf, among others), the plastic arts (Emunah College, Talpiot College, and artists like Israel Hirschberg, Baruch Nahshon, Chana Nussbaum, and others), and poetry (the publication *Meshiv HaRuah*). An original, religious Jewish theater requires a long and serious exploration process. There are a number of groups attempting to work towards the creation of a new theatrical language that remains loyal to Judaism not only in terms of strict rabbinic traditions, but deeply also in other aspects. These groups are working without almost any funding and without the support of the religious society or its institutions. These works could thrive either as totally voluntary endeavors (such as Romemot Theater run by the women of Gush Etzion that stages a number of musicals based on stories from the Bible), or one-man or one-woman plays or plays with a limited cast (such as Amukah Theater, that performs the play *Nissim ve-Nisuin* [Miracles and Marriage]).

Financial realities dictate the lack of motivation and ability of the creators of the religious theater to fulfill their artistic dreams. There is a one-way relationship between those in the center and those on the fringes. The religious artists on the fringes are aware of the Israeli theater tradition in the center, but the center does not allow the religious theaters any room for expression.

The Jewish theater could serve as a bridge between artists of different backgrounds (religious and secular). There is a real need for the creation of a laboratory framework in which it may be possible to create significant inroads towards a work that encompasses its Jewish roots.