

# “What is Jewish Expression in Art and Design?”

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## A.

The notion of “Jew” and Jewish identity arises from the connection of religion and nationalism. Accordingly, identity is formed from the tension between them and between modernity, which includes secularism. This is the same secularism that “revitalized” the outlook of the entire world of Jewish concepts that had been bound within the norms, even to the point where occasionally its content was forgotten. The encounter of Judaism with modernity enabled the examination and subsequent shifting of borders of basic life concepts.

## B.

The question is about identifying the identity. The question “What is Jewish expression?” is one that distinguishes two, if not more, poles. At one pole is the attempt to convey that just as one can identify English expression or Italian expression, so one can identify Jewish expression. In other words, behind this idea is the understanding of the “obvious,” which cannot be mistaken. On the other hand, there is another pole which promotes a sense of evasiveness, of an inexplicable definition where the defined is not ready (if personified) to enter into the limits of definition and definer. To clarify: any boundary that is drawn (and naturally the very dealing with the concept of “Jew” also addresses the boundaries of rabbinic law [*Halakhah*]), is one that can be broken, but the definer’s and the defined’s knowledge of the broken boundary expands the possibilities of discussing and searching anew for the definition of what Jewish identity is in the arts, literature, theater, and cinema.

When one speaks of Jewish expression, one must distinguish between and define chronologically, in my opinion, Israeli expression and Jewish expression in the Diaspora. One must also factor in the historical period: Is the work under consideration from the end of the nineteenth century or is it a work created since the beginning

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of Modernism? Is it an Israeli work from after the establishment of the State of Israel that takes place within the “secular” cultural sphere or is it a post-Holocaust Diaspora work? Is it an Israeli work by someone interested in and obligated by *halakhic* boundaries, or do other boundaries interest him? And within the context of Israeli art, is the period under consideration post-1980s, after the notion of the “Jewish book-shelf” had taken hold or before? Distinguishing between these various possibilities allows for defining the common denominator against the variable. Alternatively, art and artistic expression are testimony to changes in the zeitgeist and to historical movements.

The historical time-line is a shared, collective one, while art in general, and Jewish art in particular, travels along an additional trajectory that is personal and individual and dependent upon the relationship between biography and memory, and between biography and place. These factors are not within the artist’s control, but are forced upon him and build the artist’s character and personal artistic language.

**C. *Halakhah ve-Halikhah* [a play on the Hebrew words for rabbinic law and custom, but also the act of walking]**

The meeting point between personal “language” and society and historical time creates tension and change, which begs discussion and interpretation. From within this tension and change break through works that are both continuation and change. A work such as Nechama Golan’s *In the Place Where I Stand*, which has already become a cultural icon and was first published in the journal *Dimui* [Image] comprises a woman’s shoe made out of a Talmud page taken from a *genizah* [storeroom for unwanted or unusable religious Jewish books]. It examines the boundaries of *Halakhah*, rabbinic law that emerges from the word *halikhah* [custom and walking], and the boundaries of social conventions.

**D. Words, Language, Book**

Here, I would like to note another factor that is essential for the identification and creation of Jewish expression, and this is *the text* (for which there is no equivalent word in the Hebrew language, which in itself deserves further discussion), or the Hebrew letters and the written word.

In the Hebrew text we can identify two main issues: the first is that

every Hebrew text, by virtue of its existence, conducts an inevitable dialogue and correspondence with ancient Jewish sources and with sources written prior to the present text, as part of the identity of the author and the text (see, *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss, USA, 2004, where the characters in the novel speak a mixture of English, Yiddish, biblical Hebrew, and Spanish); the second is that the construction of the Hebrew language is based on root words. These roots establish an internal dialogue within and between the words, which approximates the subconscious of the language that creates internal interpretations of the text even before conscious interpretation has begun. For example: the root of the Hebrew word *hulsha* [weakness] is חלש [“h”-”l”-”sh”] and it is also the root of the word *lahlosh* [to rule over or control] carrying an opposite meaning. In other words, opposing meanings are contained within the root of the words.

In a three-dimensional artwork, the presence of the text, either as a texture of letters or a significant quotation, is a kind of correspondence of the artist with his memory, with his cultural world, and sometimes with the border that he is trying to redefine for himself as a border with his Jewish identity. Examples are Moshe Gershuni, Michal Na’aman in her work *Adonai Tzva'im* [Lord of Colors, a play on the phrase “*adonai tzva'ot*” meaning Lord of Hosts], Michael Sgan-Cohen who copies entire chapters from the Bible in his own handwriting as a new creation, and Avraham Ofek in the words from the Midrash scattered across his drawings.

The concept “Jew” encompasses within it the connection to “religion” and to “nationality.” Jewish expression, therefore, will contain that which may be found in the personal and familial memory of the Jewish creator, including “materials” from the Jewish home, the Jewish ritual calendar and prayer, or the life of the Jewish body. It should come as no surprise that books appear as an artistic obsession in the work of Jack Jano. The interrelationship between object and text features in the work of many artists such as Belu Simion Fainaru, in his work *Light* which is created from letters made out of fluorescent lighting tubes, or Nechama Golan in the exhibition *A Tent of Her Own*, which featured a transparent Torah made out of fiberglass, to name a few.

In my opinion, text and script are the main characters in Jewish expression in art and design. They are the central and exclusive references that define a work as having Jewish identity. They include

the texture, the concrete connection, and the symbolic and literal meaning. In an abstract way they are identified with the creation of the world, with creative power (see Yehuda Liebes, *Sefer Yetzirah*, Schocken Books), and with the identity between the People of Israel with the Book of Books, and with the Bible as a sacred ritual text. The book and the language are the replacement of territory and belonging to a place since the belonging of the Bible to the People and of the People to the Bible is clear and irrefutable.

#### **E. Boundaries of the Body, Boundaries of the Jew**

Another subject that identifies Jewish expression lies along the lines of inversion and friction. It is the relationship between the everyday with the holy, the profane as opposed to the sacred, permitting the forbidden and measuring the shock in the aftermath.

The “body” is a subject that is neither described nor discussed in Jewish literature nor is it treated in classical Jewish tradition, and when dealt with, it is done with modesty and from points of Jewish law. Parading and exposing the body, from the viewpoint of, “We can too. A Jew also has a body,” is part of the expression that is gaining momentum, and exhibits local characteristics. This is apparent in works by Hava Raucher in *Calendar Girls* – the series of voluptuous older women, new immigrants presented fully nude as reflecting emigration and otherness – in Rafi Dayagi’s *Elohim*, dealing with images of male yeshiva students as representative of homosexual presence; or in Zoya Cherkassky’s works in the exhibition *Collectio Judaica*, which take the dictums of Jewish law describing the body and the face of man to the point of absurdity. In other words, a critical position that contains a personal statement on personal identity as opposed to the collective movement enters the Israeli cultural dialogue as “Jewish expression.”