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Jewish Expression
and the Arts



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Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

Photographs in this issue appear courtesy of contributors and Photos.com. Cover painting by Deborah Rosenthal.

Jewish Expression and the Arts

Inherent in the relationship between any community and the arts is a tension over representation. Creative artists seek to express things anew, whereas community leaders often have a vested interest in visions and celebrations of the status quo. In such an atmosphere, conflict is inevitable.

For Jews, historically self-conscious over the perceptions and estimations of the outside world, that tension is only amplified. It is all too easy, and therefore simplistic, to view innovative artistic expression through the binary lens of "Is it good or bad for the Jews?" Unfortunately, while such an assessment seems expedient from the point of view of communal policy, it fails to appreciate both the nature of artistic expression and the breadth and depth of Jewish artistic explorations.

Of course, the community has come a long way. From today's vantage point, when Jews have achieved success and equality in America unequalled in Diaspora history, it's hard to believe that only a short time ago rabbis across the country were pillorying Philip Roth as a self-hating Jew who would usher in a new era of Jew-hatred. Still, there are many, particularly in community leadership positions, who continue to interpret artistic expression not on its own merits but by the kind of light the art is perceived to shine on Jews.

As the articles in this issue of CONTACT reveal, much of Jewish art, like much of Judaism itself, is ultimately about wrestling. Areas of struggle are as diverse as artistic expression itself: obligations to the past versus the present; tradition versus modernity; sacred versus profane; community versus individual commitments; and the struggles for meaning, authenticity and identity in cultures that raise ambiguities about all three. Jewish arts are flourishing, sometimes in raw, unbridled form, in every conceivable medium. By acknowledging, celebrating and supporting the artistic struggle, the community can help all Jews discover new dimensions of the evolving Jewish experience.

Eli Valley

New Jewish Voice: The Arts & Identity

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

When Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation created Makor in New York City in the late 1990s, we understood that an emphasis on arts and entertainment in our programming would be profoundly attractive to Jewish New Yorkers in their 20s and 30s whom we sought to give opportunities for Jewish exploration and connection. To our great gratification, the arts programming developed not only as a means of attraction but as a forum in which young Jewish artists found a Jewish voice in their work. Artistic expression was also used as a tool for reshaping Jewish ideas and elements. This began with our theater programming but quickly grew in all the areas of the arts that Makor presents.

The cultural backdrop for this was a reawakening of Jewish artistic expression in America in general and in New York in particular in the 1990s. The Jewish new music scene, building on the secular Klezmer revival begun in the 1980s, found its roots in rather non-institutional settings and was characterized by artists seeking to fuse Jewish voices and elements with mainstream (and not so mainstream) cultural trends. This movement continues to flower today as fusions proliferate — whether

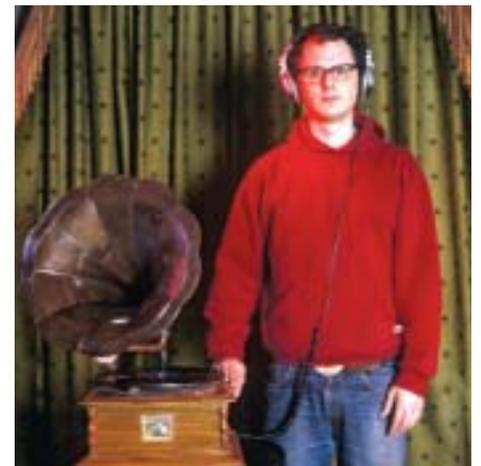
between Klezmer and Cajun, Sephardic traditional with rock and roll, Hasidic melody with reggae rhythm, or Yiddish traditional music with hip hop sampling.

What is striking is that most of this artistic explosion comes not from communal prescriptions, but from individual artists taking full control of their own Jewish American cultural identity expressions. The artistic arena is the most poignant place in which American Jews push the envelope on what is the American Jewish fusion. It may very well be that the Jewish American self-understanding is evolving most resonantly in the areas of music, film, theater and fiction, rather than in theological tracts, position papers, divrey Torah or strategic plans.

It is interesting to note that at a number of important junctures in modern Jewish history, the creation of new Jewish art was a crucial element in attempts to expand Jewish definition beyond conventional categories. The Zionist Revolution would have been a very different enterprise without the creative spirit of a revived Hebrew literature, new musical expressions and other artistic developments. The creation of a new Hebrew culture that found authentic sources in traditions of language and religion but affirmed new articulations of national identity, spirituality and Peoplehood was as crucial to creating a new and

sovereign existence for the Jewish people in its land as were any of the political strategies and achievements of the Zionist movement. Without the inspiration of Jewish artists — from writers and poets like Bialik, Agnon, Alterman and Amichai to songwriters like Yedidya Admon and Sascha Argov — the revival of the Hebrew language as the spoken expression of the new national possibility most probably would have been a hollow pursuit.

At the same time, artistic expression in the Yiddish milieu of Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century was a focal point of another Jewish cultural revolution. For their part, scores of Yiddish writers and other artists saw their work as



Rabbi David Gedzelman is Executive Director of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation and was the Founding Creative and Rabbinic Director of Makor.

part of a new Yiddishist secularism whose artistic expressions were crucial to Jewish self-understanding. Yiddish theater and film in the early twentieth century encapsulated a mix of traditional forms and new desires. Suffice it to say, whether in Warsaw or Tel Aviv, Odessa or Degania, the imagining of new Jewish identities would not be pursued without artistic expression as a central vehicle. In these contexts, Jewish life was not understood by the limits of narrow theological and religious definitions, but was assumed in the terms of an overall and embracing civilization, albeit one with strong religious emphasis. Artistic mediums, therefore, served as a natural focal point for explorations of identity in the evolution of that civilization.

The American Jewish experience was mostly different. Christian, specifically Protestant, categories were imposed on Jewish self-understanding in the West, resulting in Jewish identity being reduced to a matter of participation in a faith community rather than participation in the life of a people. Consequently, American Jewish artistic expression during much of the twentieth century was thought of as mostly a secondary prop in the life of the synagogue. Although it is true that in the early part of the twentieth century, Jewish

immigrants to America gave voice to a rich and vibrant array of Yiddish artistic expression, this outpouring mostly disappeared with the demise of spoken Yiddish and as subsequent generations adopted a narrower Jewish self-understanding primarily limited to religion-based categories.

As these generations came of age in America, many of the fiction writers who attempted to treat Jewish themes were not embraced by the Jewish institutional world. To be fair to the community, in many cases these writers disparaged the label "Jewish writer" and often explored Jewish themes in order to reject any relevance for Jewish identity in the contemporary world. For the most part, during much of the twentieth century in America, unless Jewish art served a liturgical role, decorated the architecture of the synagogue, or was incorporated into ritual objects, it had difficulty finding its base within the organized Jewish community.

This seems to have begun to change in the past fifteen years. As small pockets of young urban Jews in America seek to find new terms for understanding their Jewishness, artistic expression has emerged as a powerful language in which to try on new reasons for finding Jewish ideas, forms and attachments meaningful. Jewish fiction,

music, visual art and theater have seen an explosion of interest in venues outside of traditional Jewish institutional life. It is not only that art is used as a vehicle for exploring Jewish ideas, but rather that Jewish ideas and forms give artists an expansive context for growing artistically. So that while in the past, American Jewish fiction writers might have treated Jewish themes mostly as a departure from Jewish life, meaning and commitment, writers today, like Jonathan Safran Foer and Jonathan Rosen, treat Jewish themes as part of a return to and exploration of Jewish experience. They do so as Americans fully entrenched in the open society who now have the freedom to summon Jewish elements of meaning and identity in an artistic enterprise that forges an American Jewish cultural fusion.

This explosion goes hand in hand with a time in which pockets of American Jews are seeking to expand what Jewish identity and definition might be. Perhaps it is the Jewish artist we should turn to for guidance in a renaissance of Jewish life that breaks through old categories and finds new platforms on which to ask questions of Jewish meaning. The greater regard in which we hold these artists, the more profound, relevant and vibrant for Jewish life will be the new creation in which they engage us. 🌸



MAKOR Artists-in-Residence by STEPHEN HAZAN ARNOFF

The Makor Artists-in-Residence program anchors a vibrant community of American and Israeli artists in New York City by supporting emerging Jewish contemporary visual artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians and performers who are creating new work in dialogue with Jewish content and experience. Makor Artists-in-Residence are selected to dedicate 100 program hours over five months to rich curricula designed to foster creative inspiration and artistic growth. Each group of 15-30 artists explores a unique topic for the length of the program. Examples of recent topics include Journey, Inside and Outside, The Book of Jonah and Wandering. Makor Artists-in-Residence faculty facilitate Jewish text learning, the study of examples of relevant outstanding art of all media, master classes, small and large group discussions, artistic collaboration, development of new work, career counseling and a celebration of each cadre's accomplishments at the widely attended biannual Makor Marathon.

Upon completion of a program cycle, Makor Artists-in-Residence are invited to remain a part of

Stephen Hazan Arnoff was Director of Artists Networks and Programming at the Makor/Steinhardt Center of the 92nd Street Y. He is currently developing new programs for Jewish art and artists as a Mandel Jerusalem Fellow.

the community by joining additional rounds of the core Makor Artists-in-Residence groups with new topics and colleagues, by enjoying guest speakers and artists at monthly Makor Artists Salons or by continuing to develop and/or present expanded versions of their work at Makor. Over the past three years, Makor Artists-in-Residence have taken work developed at Makor to major film, theater and performance festivals, gallery and museum exhibitions, and a variety of publications in the U.S. and abroad.

The Makor Artists-in-Residence program addresses a disturbing weakness in the structure of North American Jewish communities. While North American Jews lack nothing in terms of the resources and communal institutions to initiate a golden age of cultural achievement, young Jewish artists, a population of imaginative thinkers and community builders, are placed at the margins of Jewish life if they find themselves in a Jewish context at all.

The Makor Artists-in-Residence program invests in structures that facilitate the ability of artists to expand their Jewish consciousness and connection. It offers a model for the deep impact of a passionate, pluralistic Jewish culture in which art and artists, generating Jewish beauty, complexity, joy and commitment, can invigorate key centers of Jewish life.



The Jewish Music Revolution

by MICHAEL DORF

When I started the Knitting Factory in 1986, the New York music scene, from my myopic downtown perspective, seemed to be made up mostly of “Blacks and Jews.” At least, the world of avant-garde, independent rock and jazz seemed to have an overwhelming number of us “outsiders” who wanted to remain somewhat underground and shy away from the traditional institutional influences. Perhaps that is why a scene gathered around the “Knit” in the late eighties and early nineties, and later gravitated in a similar way to places like Tonic, BAM Café and other nuclei of activity. This sense of independence drew many who were either intimidated by or rebelled against performing arts centers, official community centers or synagogues. We were very lucky to be in the right place at the right time to host between 1,000 and 2,000 concerts a year

Michael Dorf is Founder of New York City's Knitting Factory and a music impresario responsible for, among other programs, the New York Jewish Music and Heritage Festival.

in one of the most fertile grounds of artist expression in the world.

With the discovery of my own Jewish identity along with the many artists interested in creating work identified with Jewish themes and references, the stages of the Knitting Factory became home to various forms of Jewish music. I tried to create a safe place that properly balanced the environment for experimentation and discovery with the financial realities of the commercial market. The artists were creating a unique forum for Klezmer music, experimental Sephardic music, and unclassifiable combinations of liturgical and other Jewish forms of expression. As a producer, I was able to help foster and manifest this into a number of Jewish programs through ongoing series and festivals — at the Knitting Factory, other New York venues and even throughout Europe.

Within a very short time, many artists, including John Zorn, Frank London, Andy Statman, Marc Ribot, Roy Nathanson, Basya Schecter, Gary Lucas, and even Lou Reed were starting to discuss their Jewish influences in their work. There were dis-

cussions at the bar, on tour buses in Europe, and even in panel discussions about the relationship between Bob Dylan, Neil Diamond or the Beastie Boys and their Jewish upbringing. This was not summer camp sing-along, but popular music sprinkled with Jewish thought and influences.

What was going on? We knew the music industry was very Jewish, but how strong were the influences within our society's musical culture? The first “Radical Jewish Music Festival” was created by John Zorn and held at the Knitting Factory; shortly afterwards, it was hosted in Munich. Zorn invited me to speak on a small panel at the very well-funded Munich festival on “What was going on with Jewish Music.” I wish I really knew. But what I did know was that the European cultural presenters were interested in our bizarre scene of Jewish music in New York and were willing to pay more money than we could get in America.

The next year we packaged four groups to go on a European tour called “Jewish Alternative Movement,” which included the Hasidic New Wave, Gary Lucas playing to the silent film classic the Golem, The

by Aaron Bisman

Three years ago, if I had told you that the Shema would be heard on MTV, that thousands would gather to hear Israeli, Arab, Jewish and Muslim hip hop musicians perform together, that Jewish music would be featured on television's most popular late night talk shows, and that a six-foot tall Hasid would sing his way into the hearts, souls and ipods of unaffiliated young Jews the world over, you would have laughed me out of your office. And yet that was our vision when we created JDub Records.

JDub was the brainchild of Ben Hesse and myself, two NYU students who believed that just because their friends weren't hanging out at Hillel or showing up at Chabad events, it did not mean they had no interest in Judaism. JDub developed because we experienced our Jewish and secular interests intersecting. We poured our hearts into the organization's development, because we knew that if we offered our peers high quality, authentic Jewish experiences, they would flock to opportunities to be actively, proudly and uniquely Jewish. And with the help of a few brave and visionary supporters, including the Joshua Venture, Bikkurim and Natan, two young social entrepreneurs were given the chance to put our ideas into action.

JDub Records is a not-for-profit record and event production company whose mission is to create community and foster positive Jewish identity by promoting proud, authentic Jewish voices in popular culture and through cross-cultural musical dialogue. Since its inception in December 2003, JDub has reached over 75,000 young adults through its CDs and events and millions more through its websites and media coverage. JDub has worked with established artists such as Frank London and Basya Schechter, and has discovered and developed new artists including So Called, Balkan Beat Box and Matisyahu.

As more and more younger Jews find meaning in Eastern religions, foreign spirituality and popular culture itself, it is imperative that the established Jewish community take steps to meet them where they are and offer them a point of connection with no strings attached. By nurturing and promoting unique Jewish voices, JDub reclaims music as a valid and vital method of self-expression within Judaism and as a means of bridging religious, ethnic and cultural boundaries.

Aaron Bisman is Co-Founder and Executive Director of JDub Records. For more information on JDub, please visit www.jdubrecords.org or write to info@jdubrecords.org.

Photograph of Balkan Beat Box
courtesy of JDub Records.

New Klezmer Trio, and God is my Copilot with Anthony Coleman. The tour played in 20 markets in 22 days. It was a *mishugenna* tour, since it focused on markets that were both historically relevant to Jews as well as fraught with historical tragedy. We toured Budapest, Prague, Seville, Amsterdam, Berlin, Munich and elsewhere. In each city, we held a public forum discussing the New York Jewish Music scene and "what is Jewish Music?" In some cities no one came; in others, it was a deeply intellectual discussion. In Budapest, 2,000 people came to the concert, all walking into the venue wearing gray hats and coats covering tee-shirts with big Jewish stars and *yarmelkas*, only to be covered up as they exited the venue. After the concert, in hushed conversations at the local bar, which served bagels and booze into the wee hours, people discussed the evening with great excitement. It was quite a contrast to performing in New York.

When we came back to the States, I approached the opportunity to present Jewish music with more fervor than ever. We needed to have an all-embracing programming attitude and an open mind as to what music we should support. In 1992 we started our first annual Klezmer Festival during the Christmas holidays. It went through many permutations. In 1995, I produced the first "Downtown Seder," which was an attempt to show-

case the most creative interpretations of the ancient texts of the *Haggadah*. Along with John Zorn's Tzadik record label, we created our own label to capture this tremendous amount of activity. J.A.M. (Jewish Alternative Music) released 30 great recordings between 1996 and 2002, the year I left the Knitting Factory. It was an incredibly prolific period of time both in the live performances and recorded material, all of which were heavily marketed and advertised. It is gratifying to see the ongoing support of this activity. There are more Jewish record labels releasing Jewish music, and Klezmer seems to be spilling out from clubs on a nightly basis.

The New York Jewish Music and Heritage Festival is one way the movement's legacy endures. The festival, which grew out of the 350th anniversary of the arrival of the first Jews in America, will now be an annual celebration of Jewish culture embracing all styles of Jewish music as they continue to develop and grow. Seeing both Hasidim and secular Jews dancing together as one people to Matisyahu or Pharaoh's Daughter is the fruition of a long-held dream. If our generation can pass on the use of music as a communication tool to not only heal divisions within our own Jewish communities, but also between different nations and cultures, we will have come quite a long way. ✿





Writing Between Worlds

by TOVA MIRVIS

This dangling act,
this living between
worlds, is unresolved
and probably
unsustainable.
It's not a comfortable
place to live.
But it's a very
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which to write.

I do some of my best writing in *shul*. Not with pen and paper, not with my computer, all of which are forbidden on the Sabbath, but in my head. What moves me to write is the gap created in *shul*, the contrast between worlds: the public and the personal, the holy and the prosaic. People sit in rows, their *siddurs* open to the same page, and recite the prescribed prayers. They stand when the ark is opened, kiss the Torah scroll's velvet cover as it is carried past, bow at the knee as they begin the silent *shemoneh esray*. Prayers ask for cohesion, everyone saying the same thing at the same time. The words are scripted, claiming to articulate what is in the heart.

Spliced seamlessly into these sacred words is another more human, more interesting world. Here, minds wander.

Tova Mirvis is the author of two novels, The Ladies Auxiliary and The Outside World. This essay is excerpted from an essay that appeared originally in the anthology WHO WE ARE: On Being and Not Being a Jewish American Writer (Schocken, 2005), edited by Derek Rubin.

People glance at their watches. They daydream and whisper. Silent, inner words coexist with the outer, public ones. Underneath the beauty of the prayers, inside the appearance of shared ideology and practice, I wonder who believes and who doesn't, and who is here because they want to be and who because they have been forced to come. In *shul*, the gap between the words we say and who we are becomes more pronounced. Lofty moments of yearning co-mingle with mundane moments. Both exist simultaneously, so richly, so exquisitely.

It isn't just in others that I wonder about this gap. I feel it in myself all too well. I know that I'm not praying, at least not usually, at least not very well. I practically grew up in *shul*. Every *Shabbos*, in Memphis, Tennessee, in a purple and silver Orthodox *shul* resembling a disco, I sat in the women's section next to my mother, one row behind my grandmother, my view obfuscated by the domes and decorations of grand hats and the *mechitza* that separates the men from the women. Now, I still *daven* in an

In a well-ordered, tightly constructed community, there are always insiders. And only when there are insiders can there be outsiders, strangers and freaks, this rich cast of characters that a fiction writer longs for.

Orthodox *shul*. The words of the prayers still come naturally. But it's harder to feel moved by them. I am still part of this Orthodox world but at the edge, looking outward. I have one foot inside and one foot stepping out. This dangling act, this living between worlds, is unresolved and probably unsustainable. It's not a comfortable place to live. But it's a very fertile place from which to write.

Orthodox Judaism has so many rules: what to eat, when to eat, what to wear, when to pray. The great works of traditional Judaism are not narrative; they are codes of law, the *Mishnah*, the *Shulchan Aruch*, the *Mishnah Brurah*. Here, every moment of life is categorized and examined. Creating categories is crucial to Jewish law. Underlying much of *halacha* is the need to make distinctions, to separate between holy and secular, between night and day, between Israel and the other nations. There are divisions in space, in time. The Sabbath is holiness in time; the land of Israel, the holy temple, are holiness in space. There are divisions between men and women, between the priestly caste and the rest of the people. There are commandments not to mix species, for men not to wear women's clothing. The laws draw clear lines; they create and enforce strict borders.

But in day to day life, the borders aren't demarcated with the grand strokes of theology. They are constructed from thousands of tiny details. The law resides in the smallest particulars of domestic life. Clothing, food and furnishings are never incidental. They have become the stuff of God. Seemingly unimportant details, with no clear theological origin, bespeak major statements and have taken on the force of law. "There nothing goes and everything matters; here everything goes and nothing matters," Philip Roth wrote, comparing the Eastern Europe of the 1970s to America. The Orthodox world is, in fact, that Eastern Europe. Everything matters. Everything means something. Ideology can be determined from the tilt of a hat.

Marriage prospects are decided, and a whole world is transmitted, in the absence or presence of a seam down the back of a pair of stockings.

All these details, these rules, do more than just restrict behavior. They hold people tightly together, creating a hotbed of community. Every individual action has an echo in a communal forest. With eyes and ears lurking everywhere, nothing goes unseen or unheard. For me, as a writer, community is always primary. Both of my novels have taken place within the Orthodox world. My first novel was about an outsider longing for community and trying to become part of an insular Orthodox community in Memphis. But it is narrated by the insiders, and ultimately, it is about them. My second novel is about the confrontation between tradition and modernity, about doubt and tolerance, about wanting to be inside this world and wanting to be outside it.

Happily for the fiction writer, communities bestow more than just rules. They offer the possibility for rebellion. Flannery O'Connor said, "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one." In a well-ordered, tightly constructed community, there are always insiders. And only when there are insiders can there be outsiders, strangers and freaks, this rich cast of characters that a fiction writer longs for.

I learned about community as much from my Southern background as from my Jewish one. Though O'Connor's Mississippi was just a short drive from my house, it was supposedly worlds away from Orthodox Memphis. But I recognized the voices in which her characters spoke. This was true of Eudora Welty and William Faulkner as well. In their

rich, complex evocations of community, I saw my own world clearer.

I cannot imagine Eudora Welty's characters without community surrounding them, without these whispering, gossiping, all-seeing and all-knowing voices. The communities in which she places her characters, plots and themes are not merely the side-story of "setting." The presence of a community observing and wondering magnifies every individual action. Without the question of "what will they think," the fictional world becomes so much thinner.

The writer wrestles with her own question of "what will they think." In order to write about a community, you have to hear their voices, this ubiquitous "they" of public opinion. You have to know what they are proud of and afraid of, what they wish you would say, what they fear you will say. You have to know your subject matter so well that you can narrate a story from their perspective, until you could almost, almost quiet your objections and become one of them again.

But for a writer, this is impossible. The official communal point of view always, eventually, must be pushed aside in favor of the individual voices that bubble underneath. Fiction reveals what people might think but don't say, or what they won't let themselves think or don't notice or simply don't believe. There is always a story, in every community, for every individual. Fiction is about what it feels like to be a human being, in all its complexities. It is the writer's job to chip away at any insistence that all people act a certain way or feel a certain way. Stories come from, and strive to capture, the tensions, the oscillations, the struggles and the compromises. Without ambivalence in either direction, the intersections are gone, the conflicts are blanched, and in its place everything is pareve. 🌸



Why the Jewish Community Should Support the Arts: A Conversation

by RICHARD SIEGEL

Over the years, I have often been asked a version of the question: Why should the Jewish community support the Arts? I generally try to make a compelling case, or at least a coherent case, for supporting the Arts in Jewish life by wrapping my response around whatever word is the current hot concept in the Jewish community. For a while, it was “Education.” Then it was “Continuity.” (The National Foundation for Jewish Culture, where I have worked for the past 26 years, had a button made up for the GA one year that said: Culture IS Continuity.) Recently, it’s been “Renaissance,” but that seems to be on the decline. (And just as well, since this was probably the only renaissance in history that did not include the Arts.)

Frankly, I’m getting a little tired of trying to make the argument, because increasingly I feel that it is a self-evident proposition, and either one gets it or one doesn’t. We don’t ask: Why is it good for the Jewish community to support Senior Citizen services? Why is it good for the Jewish community to support Jewish education? Why is it good for the Jewish community to support the resettlement of Ethiopian Jews? We don’t ask these questions because they are self-evident. These are activities that define the Jewish community as a Jewish community.

The question — Why is it good for the Jewish community to support the Arts in Jewish life? — should be similarly self-evident, because the Arts are intertwined within the very fabric of a society, of a living community. Imagine America without the Kennedy Center or Lincoln Center or the National Endowment for the Arts. And if this is true in general, then it is also true in particular with regard to the Jewish community. Addressing those communal leaders who view Jewish culture as a luxury in an era of increasing intermarriage and decreasing affiliation, the writer Nessa Rapoport often begins her talks with these words:

This speech is being brought to you by the people who gave the world monotheism, the Bible, the Sabbath, the idea of covenantal justice, the only successfully revived language in the history of the world, psychoanalysis, the theory of relativity, the American musical theater, Abstract Expressionism, American feminism — and the comic book.

If we look back on our unique history as a people, what has enabled us to transform the world if not culture? We have never had the most power, the most money, or the most citizens — and we never will. Our strength and our gift lie in imagination — words, books, symbols, images and ideas that have been, in their seeming dreaminess and impracticality, precisely the most lasting, venerable building blocks of universal civilization.

So perhaps we can just leave it at that. Why should we fund the Arts in Jewish life? Because they are “in their seeming dreaminess and impracticality, precisely the most lasting, venerable building blocks of universal civilization.”

I suspect, however, that the “self-evident” proposition will not satisfy everyone. So let me try yet another response, built around what I predict will be the next hot concept in Jewish communal life: the Jewish conversation. In my recent Executive Director’s Report to the NFJC Board, I spoke about Judaism as a conversation, sometimes with God, sometimes with the past, often with the present. And I proposed that if Judaism is fundamentally a con-

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Richard Siegel is Executive Director of The National Foundation for Jewish Culture.

versation, then the Arts are where some of the best Jewish conversations are happening these days.

The Jewish conversation — to some extent for all Jews, and to a great extent for the more institutionally disaffected — is taking place over coffee after watching *Trembling Before G-d* or *My Architect*, to name just two of the more than 50 documentaries that the NFJC has helped send into the dark of the movie theater. The Jewish conversation is happening on elevators with co-workers talking about Charlotte's conversion to Judaism on *Sex and the City*. The Jewish conversation is taking place in downtown music clubs like the Slipper Room or Southpaw, when the band Golem or the Hasidic rapper Matisyahu or the Hip Hop Hoodios perform. The Jewish conversation is taking place in theater lobbies after a Paul Taylor Dance Company performance of *Klezmerbluegrass* (commissioned by the NFJC), which the program book describes as “celebrating 350 years of Jewish life in America, where Jews have

long been part of the fabric of the nation's cultural life.” Well, that's a good topic for discussion right there, even before the performance begins. The Jewish conversation is taking place in book groups discussing Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*. The Jewish conversation is taking place in the galleries of The Jewish Museum — in a kind of echo from the recent exhibit on “The Power of Conversation: Jewish Women and Their Salons.” (They basically created the Art of Conversation.)

The Arts in Jewish life provide both the means and opportunity for interesting Jewish conversations. The Arts in Jewish life provoke the Jewish conversation. And at their best, the Arts in Jewish life *advance* the Jewish conversation. If Judaism is an evolving religious civilization, a proposition of Mordechai Kaplan's to which I subscribe, then the Arts are its RNA.

Contrary to the opinion of the communal pessimists, the Jewish conversation is not over. In fact, it's literally going on as we speak. We are continuing old conversa-

tions. And we are starting new conversations. The American Jewish experience is not the end of the 4,000-year-old salon of Jewish conversations. It may very well prove to be one of the most interesting, creative, long-standing and defining Jewish conversations.

One of our most important goals as a living community, when you come right down to it, should be to seed new Jewish conversations in as many venues, and through as many different forms of expression as possible. Jewish theater, literature, film, visual art, dance, music — these produce the tastes and smells that shape our Jewish identities, define our Jewish community, and feed our Jewish conversations.

So why should the Jewish community support the Arts? Because the Arts create good Jewish conversations. As it says in Pirkei Avot, “Where two sit together and discuss words of Torah (here understood to include all Jewish conversations), then the Divine Spirit sits with them.” ❁

Avoda Arts by DEBBIE KRIVOV

Avoda Arts was founded on the belief that an arts-infused Jewish curriculum can help teens and young adults tap into their expressive impulses, create new artistic traditions and tell their own powerful Jewish stories. Started in 1999, Avoda Arts brings the power of the arts to Jewish students and educators by integrating film, photography, painting, music and theatre into Jewish learning. Multifaceted programs offer a fresh and vibrant perspective to the Jewish curriculum and provide a valued venue for young people in which their cultural interests and Jewish identities can be fused. Through traveling exhibitions, artist-in-residence programs, classroom workshops, custom curriculum design and teacher training, participants have experienced for themselves how art connects Jewish culture and community.

The New York-based organization designs and produces a variety of arts-based learning experiences, including:

- **THE JEWISH LENS** — a comprehensive middle/high school curriculum that explores

Jewish values and Jewish communities through the art of photography. Based on the work of renowned photographer Zion Ozeri, the program includes a hands-on component for students to document their own Jewish communities and curate exhibits of their work.

- **CREATING COMMENTARY** — a semester-long “Artist Beit Midrash” for college students that has been taught at New York University and SUNY-Purchase College. Through interactive discussion and hands-on art making, students interpret, critique and make new meaning from traditional Jewish texts. The course is now being adapted for high schools.

- **THE NEW YORK JEWISH STUDENT FILM FESTIVAL** — a showcase of emerging Jewish filmmakers from around the world. Since its inception in 2003, the festival has received submissions from more than 150 student filmmakers and has screened winning films from the U.S., Canada, Europe and Israel.

Avoda Arts has worked with more than



7,500 high school and college-age students, some 350 Jewish educators and scores of Jewish communal professionals across the country. By using the arts as an entry point into Jewish learning, Avoda Arts offers educational and communal institutions an opportunity to engage young people in a dynamic, substantive manner that resonates with students' lives.

Debbie Krivov is Director of Avoda Arts. For more information on Avoda Arts, please visit www.AvodaArts.org.

Storytelling From A Jewish Point of View

by AMY FOX

Writing is not only self-expression — it is a means by which people can exchange memories, experiences and perspectives.

If anyone in my childhood synagogue had wanted to investigate whether the little girl with fat black braids was actually paying attention to Shabbat services, they might have discovered the truth: I always had a novel tucked neatly inside my prayer book. My parents were aware of my transgression. My dad questioned it sometimes, but my mother always defended me. Leave her alone, she'd whisper — at least it's a Jewish book.

And it always was a Jewish book. Just before services, I'd sneak upstairs to the synagogue library to select my diversion. There was no librarian and no stacks, just a few crowded shelves and a tin box where you could leave a signed card if you took something out. My favorite options were the "All-of-a-Kind Family books," a series about a large family of sisters living in a crowded apartment on the Lower East Side in the early 1900s. The book fit right into my romantic worldview of New York Jews, a clan that my parents had left behind when they moved to the Rocky Mountains.

My family obviously wasn't the only Jewish family in Boulder, Colorado, but we were definitely in the minority. A childhood friend's great aunt once told me about the family of "Hebrews" who had moved in next door to her. "They're the nicest people," she said, "those Hebrews." Surrounded by kids whose family trees were exclusively rooted in Western Europe, I found solidarity in those books I turned to on Friday nights, while the adults around me navigated through the Shabbat service. Those novels fueled my desire to connect to an experience of growing up Jewish that was both similar to and entirely different from my own.

I wrote a lot as a kid, and some projects certainly reflected this fascination with the world my family came from. I created a fictional diary of a young Jewish woman who survived the 1911 Triangle Fire in a New York shirtwaist factory, and I collaborated on a play about three generations of Jewish women in America. Of course there were unrelated projects too, such as an elaborate mystery in which a blonde cheerleader named Jillian was found

murdered on the tennis courts during a high school reunion. My parents didn't love the mystery novel too much. I guess it wasn't the sort of thing a good Jewish parent would want their kid dreaming up during someone's Bar Mitzvah service. But I've never believed in questioning inspiration too much. If something compels me to sit down and write, I follow my instincts. I may produce a great opus, or I may fill three spiral notebooks with a trashy teen mystery. But I never know where it will lead.

When my grandmother died while I was taking my first playwriting course in college, I did a writing exercise based on my experience helping my parents clean out her New York apartment. When my playwriting teacher encouraged me to move beyond the autobiographical set up, I introduced a fictional story in which these characters discover that their atheist grandmother had an unsuccessful love affair with an Orthodox Jew. The piece, called *In Every Generation*, became my first full-length play.

I have never defined myself as a Jewish writer. There have been only a few occasions in which I set out to write Jewish material. I was once commissioned by the Makor Theatre Project to write a play based on a Yiddish folk tale, and I have written a couple of Purim plays. But Jewish themes and characters have always had a way of creeping into my work.

Rabbis, in particular, have a habit of showing up in my stories. I was involved in a rabbi search in college and became fascinated with the combination of skills the role requires — scholarship, writing, public speaking, leadership and counseling. At that time I briefly flirted with the idea of becoming a rabbi myself, but had to acknowledge that my own religious beliefs were not solid enough to give spiritual guidance to anyone else. But I seem to have remained interested in rabbis.

First there is Rabbi Mendel, a small but significant character in my film *Heights*. Played brilliantly by George Segal, Rabbi Mendel got a lot of laughs with his exercises meant to prepare couples for interfaith marriage. But later in the film, the character has a more serious function — he offers a source of humanity and comfort to a character who does not know where else to turn. I am currently working on a novel, *Signs of Rejection*, which features

another strong rabbi character, a woman who becomes a source of fascination for a recently-separated woman who is beginning a new life in, of all places, Boulder, Colorado.

I have lived in New York City for the past eight years, and I have had ample opportunities to explore the world I was so fascinated by as a child. A couple of years ago, I returned to familiar creative territory in a play about garment workers, in which I interwove the story of early twentieth-century Jewish immigrants with the stories of Asian immigrants currently working in sweatshops. I have just finished a screenplay set in 1940s New York, based on a true story about a group of white tenants, many of whom were Jewish Communists, who joined residents of Harlem in a fight to integrate an enormous housing complex.

I'm sure there are more subtle ways in which my Jewish heritage manifests itself in my writing. Perhaps there is something recognizably "Jewish" in my voice and sense of humor. (My father was often compared to Woody Allen by Coloradans who may have had limited exposure to funny neurotic men with glasses and thick New York accents.) I know that my Jewish upbringing encouraged the budding storyteller within. I loved how the act of storytelling was incorporated into rituals like the Passover Seder, and I found something inherently theatrical in the public reading of the Megillah at Purim.

And Jewish experience carried a reminder of the power of words, oral and written. As a young adult, I learned about the Holocaust mostly through the words of survivors and came to understand that storytelling can be an act of remembering and witnessing. I believe that writing carries social responsibility. I've taken on projects which explore social issues, such as civil rights or drug research, but the act of writing is perhaps more significant than the choice of topic. Writing is not only self-expression — it is a means by which people can exchange memories, experiences and perspectives. The sharing of experience creates empathy. Stories compel us to imagine the perspective of others, just as we are asked during the Passover Seder to remember that the plagues caused suffering for the Egyptians. Storytelling is one way we can begin to heal a broken world, something Judaism challenges us to do.

The Jews have been called the people of the book. I know this refers to the Torah, not to the books I routinely hid inside my *Siddur* on Friday nights. But I can't help but think of those library books as the triggers for a particular kind of creative development in my consciousness. I don't attempt to explain the mysteries of creativity. I don't know where a character like Rabbi Mendel comes from when he shows up in my brain with his interfaith exercises, saying he wants to be in pictures. But I trust that he has come for a reason, so I make room for him in the story. 🌸

Amy Fox writes plays, screenplays and fiction. Her film *Heights* was released in theaters last summer.



Sacred Art Is No Longer Possible

by DEBORAH ROSENTHAL

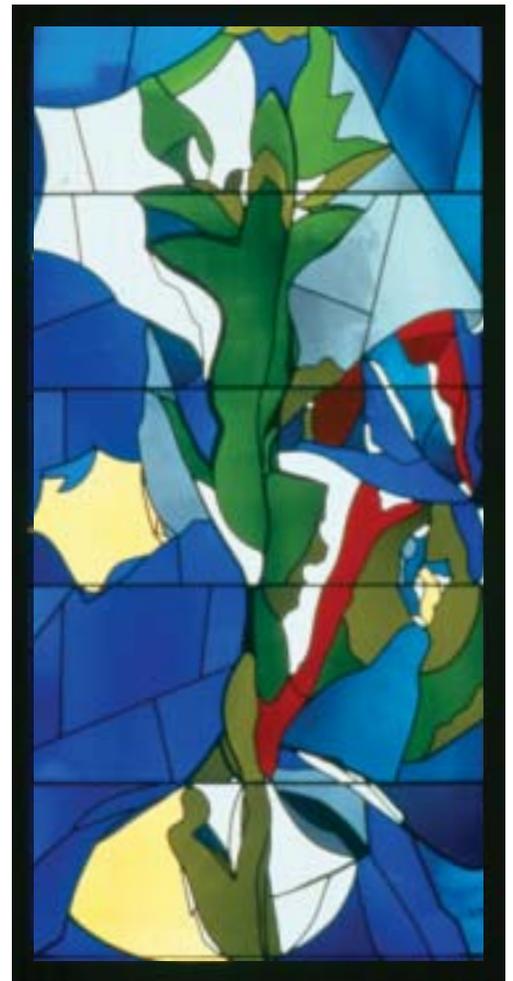
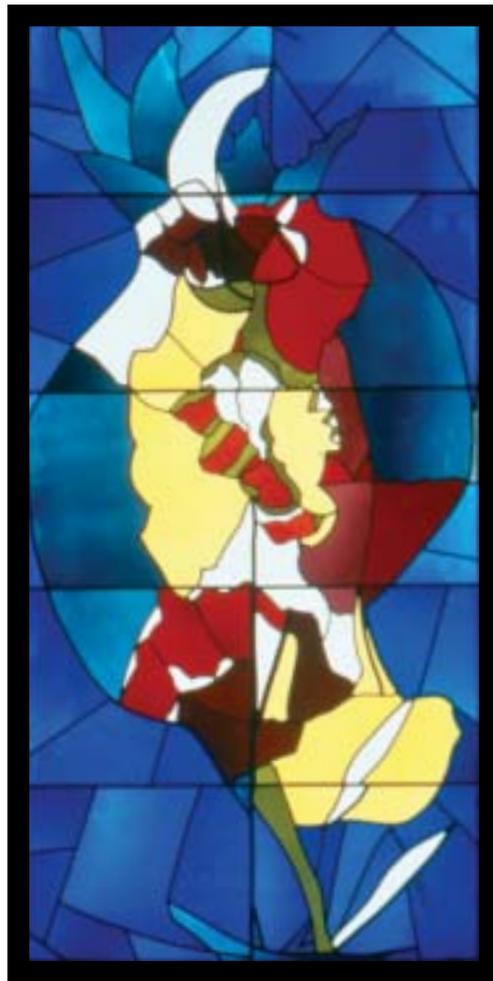
Deborah Rosenthal is a New York artist whose recent work may be seen at Lori Bookstein Fine Art. She received a National Endowment for the Arts award for her writing on art, and she is Professor of Art at Rider University.

The abstractionist Ilya Bolotowsky introduced me to *Abstraction and Empathy*, a psychology of art by the early twentieth-century art historian Wilhelm Worringer. Once, when Bolotowsky and I were talking about the motivation to paint abstractly — one of Worringer's subjects — Bolotowsky said to me, "You paint abstractly because you're a religious Jew." At that point, in 1977, this seemed wrong to me. It seemed to situate me too far from the painting issues that obsessed me, too far from my artistic roots in early twentieth-century abstraction. Ironically, with the paintings that I have done over the past fifteen years — where the human figure appears often — I finally feel that there is some truth to what Bolotowsky said to me. Through motifs and conventions learned from their applications in Christian art, I have come to painting pictures which arise from my Jewishness, not least of which is a connection to the narratives and personalities of the Torah. Sacred art is no longer possible.

Nothing can equal it. It is a decadence to fashion the sacerdotal from art itself. Like the Kabbalist, I decline orthodoxy (in painting) in order to expand freely through a universe of thought while firmly rooted in traditional practices. Paint is always there, and the easel picture leads me, inevitably, to the lyric mode. But I revolve my rectangle of canvas, lengthen it, bisect it in shadows and emanations of the iconic, the hieratic, even the sacred. The frescoed wall and the illuminated page, the carved stone cathedral doorway and the stained-glass mirage, all haunt me. History and homage have nothing to do with it! This is, instead, where I begin.

When I see what many of my pictures look like — frontal, flat, hieratic, geometric — I think of the painter André Masson's dictum, "I paint as I must." I do not will — though I think a great deal about — my affinity for the sacred aspect of Catalan painting, Romanesque and Gothic stained glass, sculpture, and painting. I have dreamt of and yearned towards such an art of the "non-I" — an

From the small fragment of sense memory to the Biblical story, it is memories, reveries and dreams that engross us and distract us into painting.



anonymous, seemingly handless art. The exact sufficiency of the manuscript illuminator's concise line, forming pleated drapery and gesturing fingers colored in with hue or gold, attracts me. But I look in my own canvases and find their scumbled, impastoed or thinly washed surfaces, their signs, lines and shapes loudly proclaiming my inevitable presence. The structure and the narrative must indeed be willed, summoned into existence. Regrettably, the "I" surfaces from its temporary shade (was it ever safely there?).

Ornament is a special mode within abstraction that I am drawn to, perhaps owing to my lifelong exposure to the ornamentation of letters in scribe-written Jewish sacred texts. Pictorial ornament achieves its final shapes by accretion, through many artists' refining journeys along nature's ways. No "I" can invent ornament, but perhaps the traditions of ornament can propel the "I" down one avenue toward the heart of the maze — nature and creation itself. The hubris of the manuscript illuminator (going beyond the ornamentation of script) lies in his expatiation

on form even unto the highest degree: the human figure. How I've learned that no amount of variation or expatiation can hide an emergent human — moral — presence! I paint as I must both because of my being, and despite my being, a religious Jew.

Artists like me who are drawn to abstraction are under the spell of analogy (as was the Psalmist). The direct, one-to-one equation of time and space that perceptually based art exacts is not for us. We know there is a bifurcation in our consciousness. Each forward-pressing, outward-glancing moment of the advancing present is a foil for a barrage of glances backward, inward. From the small fragment of sense memory to the Biblical story, it is memories, reveries and dreams that engross us and distract us into painting. Though contemplative, I am not a stationary contemplator, a passive worshipper. Form begins to occur to me through the mental juxtaposition of two places, two times, two states of being. This back and forth is the motion of analogy, the turns from here to there making a gyre of the horizon line, and suggesting a vantage point anywhere from

ground to heaven. The remembered time of the Jew Proust, the dream time of the Jew Freud, have their corollary in ritual time, which also insists on the double consciousness, of now and then, of the individual and the people.

Of course I recognize that my tendency to abstract is anti-naturalistic, anti-illusionistic. As a young artist, I found in such abstraction my deepest inclinations, my sense of the abstraction that lies behind the perceived world. I worked hard to make my pictures as full of this abstraction as they could be. But in maturity, having lived in my temperament for so long, I feel more of an otherness within myself. Though tending towards being a fabulist, a myth-painter, a dreamer, I have found ways to let the world in, to exhale my life as the particular perfume of my work. The figure paintings I have done on Jewish themes have ranged from Biblical narratives to images based on metaphors from Psalms to images from Jewish life such as the wedding ceremony. They have been a romantic's and a woman's zigzag path through herself in the world of the Creator. 🌸



Coming to A Jewish Theme

by HENRY BEAN

I have never set out to treat Jewish themes, or any other themes for that matter. Characters, conflicts, visual images and spoken words present themselves; only in following them, their internal logic and requirements, have I (sometimes) come upon a theme.

The only explicitly Jewish film I have written is *The Believer*, yet when I first read about Daniel Burros — whose life as a “Jewish Nazi” was the jumping off point for my story — it was not Jewishness that seemed to me the subject, but hiddenness and self-hatred. That what he hated and hid was his religion (and mine) made it easier for me to grasp, yet that seemed, in the end, incidental. Indeed, it was easy to imagine all

sorts of alternative versions: gay, Black, lower or upper class and so on. A secret was a secret; I was more interested in the impulse to concealment and the torments of self-hatred than in what was being concealed and hated.

But during the film’s long gestation, this changed, and religion became more central. There seem to me now two chief reasons for this. One was personal: over those years, for a variety of reasons, I became more involved in Judaism, both in study and practice. For the first time, I attended shul with some regularity, and the prayers and the Torah and even certain spiritual matters began swimming around in my daily thoughts. Perhaps the key moment came when, reading some essays by Yeshayahu Leibowitz, I found an answer to a question I had been asking for years: what is a Jew? A religious Jew, Leibowitz says, is one who

accepts the “yoke of Torah,” by which he means dutifully performing the *mitzvot*.

That definition could have been news only to someone who knew as little about the religion as I did, but in its rigorous simplicity, its complete freedom from questions of belief or faith, its immense if mysterious practicality, it had for me the force of revelation. Even if I did not keep these *mitzvot* myself (or at best in a haphazard way), this understanding seemed to make Judaism mine in a way it had never been. Knowing what a “real Jew” was demonstrated that I was not one, yet that in itself somehow drew me closer to the religion.

The other reason that Judaism became central to *The Believer* concerns the exigencies of writing. It is all well and good to announce that you are interested in the concealment, not in the thing concealed, but the moment you try to make

Henry Bean is a novelist, screenwriter and occasional director. His new film, *Noise*, will be shot in the fall.

real characters speak and act, you are compelled to use specifics — not only the hiding, but the thing hidden. Self-hatred may be universal, but we each hate ourselves in our own way, and we hate different things: you, perhaps, your body, me my dark thoughts, and that one over there his entire ethnic identity. The senses of shame are different, as are the strategies of concealment, the ways in which the truth might leak out, the consequences of discovery and so on.

It is worth noting that to this point I had been “thinking about” the film for more than ten years without writing a word. As long as I remained stuck in abstractions, like concealment, there was nothing to write. And, I suspect, nothing would ever have been written if the character hadn’t one day gotten up and started doing things on his own.

One day Danny — my invented Danny, not the historical one — led a group of neo-Nazis into a synagogue,

intending to vandalize and desecrate the place. But standing before the ark, he hesitated. To his surprise and disgust, the Torah meant more to him than he had realized. This reaction enraged him, but he was helpless before it.

I had not planned that scene. It had sprung to mind unbidden, at least in part, I suppose, as a result of my own reading and *davening*. But whatever the cause, in that moment the film changed. It ceased to be about a self-hating Jew and became instead about a *rabbi-manque*, a rabbi in spite of himself, a rabbi who didn’t know he was one, but whose discovery of this strange destiny would both save and destroy him.

The film, from this new vantage, wasn’t so much about hiddenness or self-hatred as about contradiction, Danny’s longing for an “impossibility” that, alone, could accommodate the complexity of his heart. And in this love of contradiction, in the film’s endless

argumentativeness, its attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, the Jew and the Nazi, it was like certain passages of *midrash*, or even Talmud, which set out as if to resolve some abstruse and difficult point, but leave us instead with a myriad of opinions, still competing, each raising its voice in an endless dispute that seems, finally, richer, more vital and even truer than a single, definitive answer could possibly be.

In short, the story was Jewish to its core, and all those alternative versions — gay, Black and so on — that I had presented as proof that the religion was “incidental” were a self-deception. In fact, it wasn’t merely Jewish, it was about Judaism, my understanding of it, and if it had never found its way to acknowledge this Jewish theme, it would have persisted forever in the netherworld of abstraction and never become a film. Which might have been a good thing, but now, thank God, it’s too late for that. ✿

The Steinhardt Jewish Heritage Festival by KAREN BROOKS HOPKINS

As an urban arts center in downtown Brooklyn, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) serves the general New York City and Brooklyn audiences. In addition, we reach out to specific ethnic and cultural constituencies with the hope that they will make BAM a home. To that end, we’ve developed community partnerships with groups such as Cinema Tropical, NewFest, the Haitian Film Festival and the New York Korean Film Festival. These partnerships provide each important community with a connection to BAM and create opportunities for general audiences to learn about another culture’s heritage, traditions and concerns.

The Jewish community has a great history in Brooklyn. Its multifaceted and influential culture, size, traditions of social activism and depth of cultural engagement all contribute to our great interest in reaching its members. However, many young Jews don’t necessarily relate to religious-based institutions. We felt it was vitally important to establish a program like the Steinhardt Jewish Heritage Festival at a secular and diverse organization like ours.

The inaugural Steinhardt Festival included a variety of contemporary music — Klezmer, hip hop and jazz. The *Alicia Svigals Tribute*, at which she and others performed her work, was a particular success and brought her more visibility. *Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross: Unleavened!*, a cabaret with the “Queen of Judeo-Kitsch,” was also a hit. We included an array of films and stand-up comics. In the future, we’ll look to add literature, lectures, and discussions.

On its main stages, BAM has presented a variety of artistic works which connect to the Jewish experience. Krzysztof Warlikowski’s *Dybbuk* combined biblical text with the dybbuk as a metaphor for larger concepts, creating a special language with which to examine anti-Semitism. John Adams, Alice Goodman and Peter Sellars’s *The Death of Klinghoffer*, a controversial opera, examined the tragedy of Leon Klinghoffer’s murder and the underlying issues of hatred and terrorism as seen from all sides. Steve Reich/Beryl Korot’s *The Cave* featured the ancient cave at



Hebron with the viewpoints of Israelis and Palestinians. Israel’s modern Batsheva Dance Company brought the highly acclaimed *Naharin’s Virus* to BAM in 2002; they return this fall with *Mamootot*. We know that these programs, presented in large theaters, have fostered knowledge and an atmosphere of empathy.

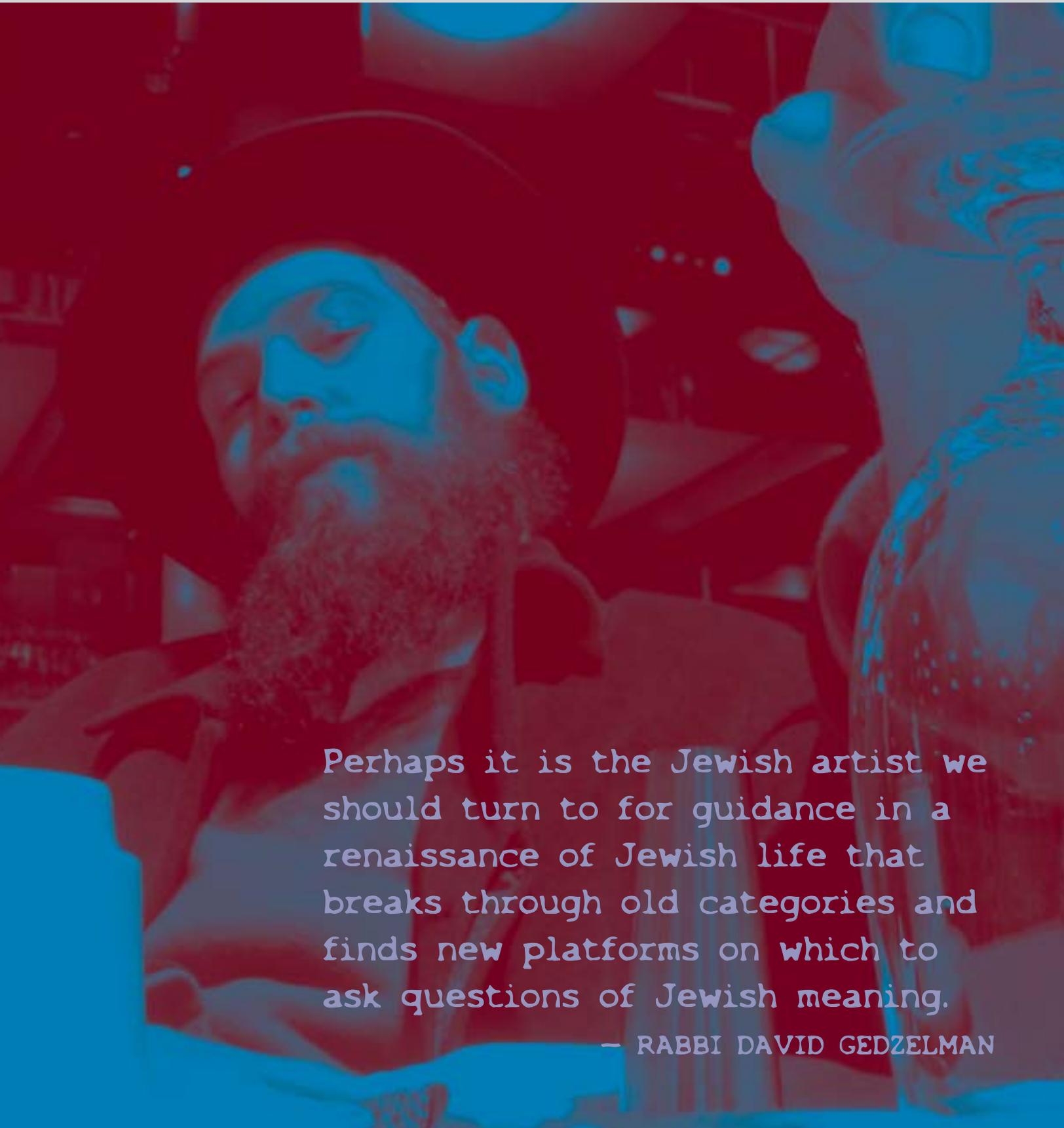
Historically, the BAM audience has been artistically curious and intellectually open. Many of our audience members believe in the integrity of what BAM presents. Therefore, we have the ideal foundation on which to build ongoing explorations of Jewish artistic expression. ✿

Karen Brooks Hopkins, BAM’s president who is celebrating her 25th year at BAM, was a volunteer in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and lived on a kibbutz and in Jerusalem for over a year.



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Perhaps it is the Jewish artist we
should turn to for guidance in a
renaissance of Jewish life that
breaks through old categories and
finds new platforms on which to
ask questions of Jewish meaning.

— RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN