

# Symbolism in Jewish Art

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“Man looks with the eyes, but G-d looks with the heart.”<sup>1</sup> When the prophet Shmuel is sent to anoint one of Yishai’s sons as king, G-d does not tell him which one. The last king, Shaul, had been a handsome and tall man, so Shmuel assumes the new king will also have a majestic appearance and tries to anoint the best looking of Yishai’s sons, but he is not G-d’s chosen. The youngest and least assuming son, Dovid, was to be the new king, because G-d knew his inner worth, which was far more impressive than his outer trappings. This episode is highly representative of how Jews view aesthetics; they are far less important than the internal worth of something or someone. This is not to say that there is no value to beauty. Art can be used to bring one closer to G-d, if it is imbued with holy intention and meaning. It therefore makes perfect sense that symbolism has been an integral part of Jewish art since the earliest times. By tracing Jewish art through the millenia, as will be done in this paper, one can see the deeper meanings brought forth by Jewish art, whether they be ritual objects or fine art.

Many people assume that Jews are anti-art, due to the biblical prohibition against graven images.<sup>2</sup> Before discussing the exact definition of a graven image, it is important to understand why such a prohibition exists. The most obvious answer is that statues are often worshipped as idols and Jews are strictly forbidden from such things. A deeper reason, however, can be found in Deuteronomy, where it says “for your own sake, therefore, be most careful—since you saw no shape when the LORD your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire—not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever.”<sup>3</sup> When the Jewish people heard the ten commandments at Mount Sinai (Horeb), they never saw G-d, for one of the fundamental understandings a Jew must have is that G-d has no shape, as He is infinite. Therefore, by trying to make a physical manifestation of G-d, one would be disrespecting Him by trying to limit Him in such a way. According to the Ibn

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<sup>1</sup> Shmuel I 16:7

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:4

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 4:15-16

Ezra, the prohibition only applies to things that are hewn, like sculpture. <sup>4</sup> Rav Joseph B. Solevetchik takes this a step further, pointing out that even “in the most traditional Jewish homes, paintings and photographs are to be found. Many do not object even to the display of sculptures if their esthetic character and universal meaning are so obvious that they exclude the possibility of associations with a cultic motif.”<sup>5</sup>

Judaism is not only accepting of art, but sees it as a positive thing; G-d is called the ultimate Artist and Creator in the Talmud,<sup>6</sup> based on the words “*ain tzur kalokeinu*.”<sup>7</sup> There are several ways art improves a person’s faith. According to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “when art lets us see the wonder of creation as God’s work and the human person as God’s image, it becomes a powerful part of the religious life... Jews believe in *hadrat kodesh*, the beauty of holiness: not art for art’s sake but art as a disclosure of the ultimate artistry of the Creator. That is how *omanut* enhances *emunah*, how art adds wonder to faith.”<sup>8</sup> Art can be used to appreciate G-d’s world.

In Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch’s opinion, art is important for an even more fundamental reason, as it reminds man of his unique mission on earth. “Man is the only creature endowed with a capacity for enjoying beauty. This shows the importance of the aesthetic sense for the moral mission of man. Indeed, the forms of beauty found in creation, along with man's capacity for enjoying them, prevent man from sinking to the level of the beast.”<sup>9</sup> He explains further, that “Joy in the beauty of Nature... leads us to Rejoice also in moral Beauty. In an environment where no attention is given to Harmony and Beauty, man can easily grow up wild and unruly.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Community, Covenant and Commitment Pg. 5

<sup>6</sup> Brachos 10a

<sup>7</sup> Shmuel I 2:2

<sup>8</sup> <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5771-vayakhel-gods-shadow/>

<sup>9</sup> Rav Hirsch Bereshis 2:9

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

Rav Joseph B. Solevetchik feels that the creation of art is an instinctual drive, that G-d gave it to man as a way of reconciling his creative and contemplative sides, of bringing his internal, spiritual existence into external, material reality.<sup>11</sup> As Rav Abraham Isaac Kook put it, “painting and sculpture give material expression to all the spiritual concepts implanted in the depths of the human soul, and as long as even one single line hidden in the depth of the soul has not been given outward expression, it is the task of art to bring it out.”<sup>12</sup>

As much as Judaism values art, however, it’s not about art for art’s sake, but rather to serve a higher purpose. This purpose is often understood through the symbolic nature of the art. According to Gershom Scholem “symbols arise and grow out of the fruitful soil of human emotion. When a man's world possesses spiritual meaning for him, when all his relations the world around him are conditioned by the living content of this meaning – then, and only then, does this meaning crystallize and manifest itself in symbols... Something of the secret of man is poured into his symbols; his very being demands concrete expression. The great symbols served to express the unity of his world.”<sup>13</sup> Rav Hirsch explains the need for symbolism specifically in the Jewish context. “The truth of God's Word - the banner for all future times - is never entrusted to mere words. The word is supported by symbols and symbolic acts that makes for a far greater impact and more enduring retention”<sup>14</sup> and “herein lies the crucial difference between Jewish symbolism and other symbolism - man does not need the symbols in order to represent to himself the Divine; rather, God needs them in order to show man the human traits that He demands of him.”<sup>15</sup>

Much of Jewish artwork can be categorized as ritual objects, which makes a lot of sense, as a Jew has an obligation of *hidur mitzvah*, beautifying a commandment, according to the Talmud. “As it was taught... ‘this is my God and I will glorify Him [*anveihu*], the Lord of

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<sup>11</sup> Lonely Man of Faith Pg. 9

<sup>12</sup> Olat Re-ayah, II, 3

<sup>13</sup> The Star of David: History of a Symbol Pg.257

<sup>14</sup> Rav Hirsch Collected Writings, Vol. III, pp. 17-19

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

my father and I will raise Him up.’ The Sages interpreted *anveihu* homiletically as linguistically related to *noi*, beauty, and interpreted the verse: Beautify yourself before Him in mitzvot. Even if one fulfills the mitzva by performing it simply, it is nonetheless proper to perform the mitzva as beautifully as possible.”<sup>16</sup> This idea is not esoteric, but can be accomplished practically by making “before Him a beautiful *sukka*, a beautiful *lulav*, a beautiful *shofar*, beautiful ritual fringes, beautiful parchment for a Torah scroll, and write in it in His name in beautiful ink, with a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric.”<sup>17</sup> Before getting to examples of general ritual objects, one must look back at the first examples of ritual works of art, those mentioned in Exodus and Leviticus.

A very important role in Jewish history was that of the *Kohein Gadol*, high priest. He led the services in the Tabernacle and Temple, and was often a conduit for G-d’s word. When G-d commands Moshe regarding the making of the *Kohein Gadol*’s garments, he is told they are to be “for dignity and adornment.”<sup>18</sup> By honoring the representative of G-d, one honors G-d. The *Kohein Gadol* had a very special uniform of eight pieces: the *ketones*, *michnasaim*, the *mitznefet*, the *avnet*, the *choshen*, the *ephod*, the *me’il* and the *tzitz*. Their design is described in the Torah in great detail.<sup>19</sup> Not only was each piece a beautiful work of art, but, in fact, each piece had a deeper symbolic meaning.

“And Rabbi Inini bar Sason says: Why was the passage in the Torah that discusses offerings (Leviticus, chapters 1–7) juxtaposed to the passage that discusses the priestly vestments (Leviticus, chapter 8)? It was juxtaposed to tell you that just as offerings effect atonement, so too, priestly vestments effect atonement.”<sup>20</sup> The explanation of the symbolism of the priestly garments will be following this opinion.

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<sup>16</sup> Shabbos 133b

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Exodus 28:2

<sup>19</sup> Exodus 28

<sup>20</sup> Zevachim 88b

The *ketones* was a fringed tunic made of fine linen. It atones for bloodshed because when Yosef's brothers sold him, they dipped his tunic in goat blood so their father would think he was killed by a wild animal.

The *michnasaim* were linen breeches. They atone for inappropriate sexual relations because they cover the nakedness of one's sexual organs.

The *mitznefet* was a headdress made of fine linen. It atones for haughtiness because it is worn high on the head, countermanding the elevated hearts of the arrogant.

The *avnet* was an embroidered sash. It atones for evil thoughts because it is tied over the heart, where evil thoughts originate from.

The *choshen* was a breastplate mounted with twelve stones corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. It atones for improperly made judgements, because it is called the *choshen mishpat*, the breastplate of judgement. The *Kohein Gadol* would inquire of Hashem through it and an answer could be interpreted based on which stones lit up.<sup>21</sup>

The *ephod* was a sort of apron<sup>22</sup> made of gold, blue, purple and crimson thread mixed with fine linen. It atones for idol worship because Hoshea implies that in a place where there is an *ephod*, no idol worship can be found.<sup>23</sup>

The *me'il* was a blue robe over which the *ephod* was placed.<sup>24</sup> Its hem was decorated with alternate pomegranate embroidery and gold bells. It atones for evil speech because the bells make a positive sound.

The *tzitz* was a golden headplate that said "*Kodesh LaHashem,*" holy to G-d.<sup>25</sup> It was secured on a blue thread. It atones for brazenness because it sits on the *Kohein Gadol's* forehead and in Sefer Yirmiyahu, one who is brazen is said to have a "harlot's forehead."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Rashi Exodus 28:30

<sup>22</sup> Rashi Exodus 28:6

<sup>23</sup> Hoshea 3:4

<sup>24</sup> Rashi Exodus 28:31

<sup>25</sup> Rashi Exodus 28:36

<sup>26</sup> Yirmiyahu 3:3

A quick word on the difference between the *Mishkan*, Tabernacle, and the *Bais Hamikdash*, Temple. The *Mishkan* was built while the Jewish People were traveling in the desert, and was also known as the Tent of Meeting. It was a portable sanctuary set up every time they camped and disassembled every time they departed. It was also used for several hundred years as the Jews were settling the Land of Israel. Once the Davidic dynasty was established, G-d allowed David's son, Shlomo, to build the *Bais Hamikdash*, a more permanent dwelling place. Both structures used the same *keilim*, vessels, for the most part, however, and therefore, in discussion of these *keilim*, the two terms, *Mishkan* and *Bais Hamikdash*, can be used interchangeably.

Before discussing the symbolic nature of the vessels used in the Tabernacle and Temple, one must understand the symbolic purpose of these structures. According to the Akiedas Yitzchak "the sanctuary on earth [was] to be a microcosm of the universe at large... when the time had arrived for G-d to reveal part of His glory to His entire people, He commanded the Tabernacle to be constructed as the means to reveal that part of Himself."<sup>27</sup> Rav Hirsch explains further that the Temple was "primarily intended to bring to mind the nearness of God on earth, the intimate relationship of God and man - the presence of God in the midst of human endeavor as well as the heavenward striving of man toward Him. The sanctuary of God is nothing but a concrete symbol of the truth that, wherever all of man's spiritual and physical existence and striving... is devoted to attaining God's favor...to the practical application of the Law of God... then all of human life both individual and communal becomes a throne" for G-d.<sup>28</sup>

There are endless *pesukim* and *gemaras* that can attest to the expensiveness of the materials used and the physical splendor of the Temple. According to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, G-d commanded that it should be beautiful because He understands human nature.

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<sup>27</sup> Akiedas Yitzchak 48:1:5

<sup>28</sup> Rav Hirsch Tehillim 27:4

“Maimonides in The Guide for the Perplexed (III:45) says that most people are influenced by aesthetic considerations, which is why the Sanctuary was designed to inspire admiration and awe.”<sup>29</sup>

The Temple contained many vessels, but two of the most symbolic and well-known ones were the *aron*, the Ark of the Covenant, and the *menorah*, candelabrum. The *aron* was built to house the *luchos*, the Ten Commandments, and other sacred items. It actually comprised three nesting boxes, gold, inside of wood, inside of gold, and had gold overlaid carrying poles.<sup>30</sup> The top was surrounded by a border of gold, symbolizing the crown of Torah, for the *luchos* it held,<sup>31</sup> and the crown of the priesthood.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the most famous feature of the ark were its *kruvim*, cherubs, that graced the top.<sup>33</sup> They faced each other, and their wings were spread above their heads to symbolise humility.<sup>34</sup> According to the Talmud<sup>35</sup> when the *kruvim* faced each other, it symbolized that the Jewish People were doing the will of G-d. When the *kruvim* faced away from each other, it meant the people were not following his ways. Their presence might seem like a violation of the commandment not to make graven images, but that is not the case “since it is G–d Himself who derives satisfaction from such figures,”<sup>36</sup> as opposed to a man making such images for his own pleasure. “The two cherubs” also “symbolise the ‘two faced’ nature of י-ו-ה-א and ה-ו-ה-י,” or G-d’s modes of justice and mercy.<sup>37</sup>

The *menorah* was made of hammered gold, with three branches on each side of the main shaft and one in the middle,<sup>38</sup> standing on a base with three legs.<sup>39</sup> According to the

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<sup>29</sup> <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5771-vayakhel-gods-shadow/>

<sup>30</sup> Exodus 25:10-15

<sup>31</sup> Rashi Exodus 25:11

<sup>32</sup> Rashi Exodus 30:3

<sup>33</sup> Exodus 25:18

<sup>34</sup> Daas Zekenim Exodus 25:20

<sup>35</sup> Bava Basra 99a

<sup>36</sup> Shenei Luchot HaBerit, Torah Shebikhtav, Yitro, Torah Ohr 45

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Exodus 25:31

<sup>39</sup> Rashi Exodus 25:31

Talmud, “the illumination of the Candelabrum is testimony to all of humanity that the Divine Presence rests among the Jewish people.”<sup>40</sup> This was symbolised by the miraculous nature of the *menorah*’s westernmost lamp, which stayed perpetually lit. “This perpetual miracle was testimony to God’s continuous presence among His people.”<sup>41</sup> In fact, the windows of the *Bais Hamikdash* were made “narrow within and broad without,” so that “the light of the Temple [could] be radiated outward,” and G-d’s presence could be felt throughout the world.<sup>42</sup> The Rambam believed that the goblets of the *menorah* were positioned upside down. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, felt this was to symbolize the pouring out and spreading G-d’s light to the whole world.<sup>43</sup> “An overturned cup is [also] associated with happiness” like “the Bais Hamikdash which served as the source of happiness and joy for the Jewish people.”<sup>44</sup>

After the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewish spiritual life shifted to the shul, synagogue, and it is therefore treated with similar reverence. “The legacy is emphasized by the using the nomenclature of the Temple for aspects of the synagogue. Use of biblical terms reinforces the concept of the synagogue as a mikdash me’at (small sanctuary), both as a reminder of the Temple in Jerusalem and as a hope for the renewal of the Temple in the Messianic age.”<sup>45</sup>

As with the Temple, shuls are beautifully decorated, especially the items used in ritual, and there is much symbolic meaning to be found in the choice of adornment. Not every shul looks the same, and like with most architecture, styles vary by region. There are symbols, however, that are ubiquitous in synagogue design.

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<sup>40</sup> Menachos 86b

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> [https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article\\_cdo/aid/148170/jewish/The-Design-of-the-Menorah.htm](https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/148170/jewish/The-Design-of-the-Menorah.htm)

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Jewish Art Pg. 82

A common motif is the juxtaposition of a leopard, eagle, gazelle and lion. This is a reference to the saying that a man should “be strong as a leopard, and swift as an eagle, and fleet as a gazelle, and brave as a lion, to do the will of your Father who is in heaven.”<sup>46</sup> This is a very appropriate concept to remind people of in a shul, as it is not always easy to get up early for morning prayers.

Some symbols serve to concretize certain key concepts of Judaism. The twelve tribes of Israel are frequently incorporated, especially in the form of twelve windows. Some of the tribes are linked with certain animals, based on Yaakov’s assessments of his sons’ natures in his blessings for them before his death.<sup>47</sup> Probably the most famous is the lion of Judah, a popular symbol on many ritual items, as “the lion represents a protector and indicates ‘the ferocious but saving power of the [G-d] of the Torah.’”<sup>48</sup> One also finds many zodiac designs, as each of the twelve tribes corresponds to an astrological symbol.<sup>49</sup>

A pair of hands symbolizes the gesture *kohanim* make when giving the priestly blessing, and designs of musical instruments call to mind the Levites function in the Temple, to sing and play songs of praise to G-d. Other objects from the Temple are depicted as well, “because the whole Jewish community, as well as individuals, could express through them their religious and national aspirations.”<sup>50</sup>

Many shuls utilized the imagery of the *menorah* to express similar hopes for redemption and national freedom,<sup>51</sup> because the Arch of Titus prominently depicts the *menorah* being carried off to exile, and the Jewish people pray for it’s return in the times of Mashiach, the redemption. The *menorah* symbolizes many other concepts as well, such as “God leading Israel as a pillar of fire, and the light with the Shekhinah,” or the light of

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<sup>46</sup> Pirkei Avos 5:20

<sup>47</sup> Genesis 49:1-27

<sup>48</sup> Ancient Synagogues-archaeology and Art : New Discoveries and Current Research Pg. 447

<sup>49</sup> Yalkut Shimoni 418

<sup>50</sup> Ancient Synagogues-archaeology and Art : New Discoveries and Current Research Pg. 285

<sup>51</sup> Ancient Synagogues-archaeology and Art : New Discoveries and Current Research Pg. 323

Torah.<sup>52</sup> An Italian *menorah* recalls the “the Temple Menorah, and its design illustrates the vision of the prophet Zechariah: "'And what,' I asked him, 'are those two olive trees, one on the right and one on the left of the lampstand? . . . What are the two tops of the olive trees that feed their gold through those two golden tubes?' He asked me, 'Don't you know what they are? . . . They are the two anointed dignitaries who attend the Lord of all the earth'" (Zechariah 4:11-14)”<sup>53</sup> The two anointed dignitaries symbolize the leaders of the Jewish people, the *kohanim* and the kings, begging Hashem to reestablish their greatness in future times.<sup>54</sup>

This use of the *menorah* and olive branches as a symbol of hope for a revival of the Jewish People is perhaps best recognized from the seal of the State of Israel, which specifically uses the Arch of Titus *menorah*. “Alec Mishory, an Israeli art historian, explains the rationale: The menorah is returned from the arch of Titus, where it symbolizes defeat, humiliation, and disgrace, and is installed in a place of honor on the emblem of the state, the establishment of which is testimony to the eternity of the Jewish people.”<sup>55</sup>

Much of synagogue symbology deals with hope for the Messiah. Eagles are a popular motif; one depiction in a shul in Jurbarkas, Lithuania, “was surrounded by an inscription:... ‘as an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft. The Lord alone led him; no foreign god was with him.’”<sup>56</sup><sup>57</sup> This refers to G-d taking the Israelites out of Egypt. G-d is compared to “an eagle which bears its fledglings upon its wings... because all other birds place their young between their feet since they are afraid of another bird that flies above them, but the eagle fears none... since no bird can fly above it.”<sup>58</sup> Only an arrow shot by man could hurt it, “therefore he places it (its

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<sup>52</sup> Ancient Synagogues-archaeology and Art : New Discoveries and Current Research Pg. 322

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/362537>

<sup>54</sup> Rashi Zechariah 4:14

<sup>55</sup> [www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/meir-soloveichik/mysteries-of-the-menorah/](http://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/meir-soloveichik/mysteries-of-the-menorah/).

<sup>56</sup> Deuteronomy 32:11-12.

<sup>57</sup> <https://cja.huji.ac.il/wpc/browser.php?mode=set&id=34382>

<sup>58</sup> Rashi Exodus 19:4

young) upon its wings, saying, ‘Better that the arrow should pierce me than my young!’ ... ‘I, too’, said God, ‘did thus’” like it says in Exodus 14:19- 20 “And the angel of God ... journeyed etc.... And he came between the camp of Egypt etc.” ... and the Egyptians were casting arrows and stone missiles and the cloud caught these.”<sup>59</sup> Just as G-d redeemed the nation once, Jews constantly pray for the future redemption.

Many shuls are also decorated with images of the land of Israel, as a reminder of what was lost and what can be gained. It is interesting to note that these scenes were probably based on lush biblical description and were not accurate to the condition of the land at the time. Mark Twain, upon his 19th century visit, declared it “ ...[a] desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds-a silent mournful expanse<sup>60</sup>.....there was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of the worthless soil, had almost deserted the country.”<sup>61</sup>

Though a major tenet of Judaism is belief in a Messiah, Jews always keep the reality of death, and the World to Come, in mind. Therefore, some shuls were adorned with leviathans, which became synonymous with “the reward of the righteous in the world to come.”<sup>62</sup> This is based on the idea that G-d has been saving the leviathan to be served to the righteous in the world to come.<sup>63</sup> A shul in Sandomierz, Poland, had an inscription above it’s rendition, to “know before whom you stand,”<sup>64</sup> an admonishment to always remember that G-d sees all, and every individual will have to account for his actions after he dies.

More unusually, a shul that existed in Khodoriv, Ukraine before World War One, had walls and ceilings decorated with bears eating honey to represent Jewish values. “Synagogue painters transposed the allegory of bears enjoying honey as Jews studying the Torah onto the

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *The Innocents Abroad* Pg. 496

<sup>61</sup> *The Innocents Abroad* Pg. 555

<sup>62</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica* Leviathan Pg. 697

<sup>63</sup> *Bava Basra* 74:b

<sup>64</sup> *Brachot* 28b

<sup>65</sup> <https://cja.huji.ac.il/wpc/browser.php?mode=set&id=1087>

symbolic image of ursine figures climbing a tree to attain wisdom or redemption (Wischnitzer 1964: 131).”<sup>66</sup> There is an even deeper meaning to this as “Ida Huberman noted the distinction between the bears climbing trees, which she associated with the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, and the bear peacefully sitting within a nourishing bush, interpreted as a sign of messianic times (Huberman 1988: 30, 83-84, plates. 67–70).”<sup>67</sup> The Torah is often called “*Eitz Chaim*” tree of life<sup>68</sup>, because it is what gives Jews purpose and meaning in life.

The mosaic floor of the Meroth Synagogue with its depiction of “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,”<sup>69</sup> also references Mashiach, messianic times. “Isaiah's vision of the End of Days is portrayed as perfect peace throughout nature, portrayed in the form of two animals, considered natural enemies, who dwell peacefully together. Perhaps the illustration here is meant as a prayer for peace (Naveh 1989:305).”<sup>70</sup>

No discussion of Jewish symbols would be complete without mentioning the *magen david*, the Jewish Star, which is found all over synagogues. Unfortunately, this emblem does not have deep symbolic meaning. Though various communities had used the symbol for hundreds of years, it was really as a matter of convenience. Its later explosion in popularity arose from “the drive to imitate. The Jews of the emancipation period were looking for a symbol of Judaism to match a symbol of Christianity which they saw everywhere before them,” once they had the freedom to build large, impressive shuls.<sup>71</sup> “The mostly non-jewish architects strove to build these houses of worship according to the model of church construction. They believed they had to look around for a symbol which corresponded to the symbol of the churches, and they hit upon the hexagram... as it's geometrical shape lent itself easily to all structural and ornamental purposes.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> A Taste of Honey: Metaphorizing Nature in Traditional Jewish Art Pg. 383

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Proverbs 3:18

<sup>69</sup> Yeshayahu 11:6

<sup>70</sup> Ancient Synagogues-archaeology and Art : New Discoveries and Current Research Pg. 421

<sup>71</sup> The Star of David: History of a Symbol Pg. 279

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

While shuls might differ in their choice of adornment, there are certain ritual objects that are ubiquitous. Every shul has an *aron*, which holds the Torah scrolls and reminds congregants of the lost *aron hakodesh* of the *Bais Hamikdash*. The *aron* is always placed on the eastern wall, the direction of Yerushalayim and the Kotel, the Western Wall, even if that is not the direction one would actually take to get there from his location.

The Torah scrolls themselves cannot be adorned, but their hardware can; “Torah-crowns (*keter*) or finials (*rimonim*) are placed on top of the staves of the Torah. These are usually decorated with bells whose charms symbolize the joy of the Torah and the bells which were attached to the robe of the high priest (Ex. 28: 31-35 ).”<sup>73</sup>

In front of the *aron*, hangs the *ner tamid*, perpetual light, like the candlestick that stood in front of the *aron hakodesh* in the *Bais Hamikdash*. This was done as “a sign of honour and distinction for the Temple. For a chamber in which a continual light burns, hidden behind a curtain, makes a great impression on man, and the Law lays great stress on our holding the Sanctuary in great estimation and regard, and that at the sight of it we should be filled with humility, mercy, and softheartedness.”<sup>74</sup>

An object that doesn't get daily synagogue use is the Chair of Elijah, used in the *bris milah*, circumcision, ceremony. “The Prophet Elijah is described in Malachi 3:1 as the ‘messenger of the Covenant,’ which is traditionally associated with the covenant of circumcision. The belief that Elijah is present at each *berit milah* gave rise to the custom of providing a symbolic place for him on a special chair.”<sup>75</sup> Form varies; “some of these chairs have a single seat and some have a double seat... one place is for the *sandak* (godfather), who held the child on his lap; the other is reserved for Elijah.”<sup>76</sup> The Bezalel School of Art was established in Israel in 1906 “to create an artistic language that would instill national spirit,

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<sup>73</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica Ceremonial Objects Pg. 547

<sup>74</sup> Moreh Nevuchim (III:45)

<sup>75</sup> Jewish Art Pg. 124

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/247318>

through the use of Zionist symbols and themes from the Bible and the Land of Israel. In this way, the early Zionists identified with Jewish history as both a religious and a national tradition, and linked the Jewish nation's future to its past in biblical times."<sup>77</sup> Therefore, a Chair of Elijah created by the school "features appropriate biblical scenes, emblems of the twelve tribes, and cherubs in classic Bezalel style. It is fitting that a chair/altar designed as a symbol of Jewish national revival should be used for the rite of circumcision, which symbolizes the ongoing covenant between God and the Jews."<sup>78</sup>

Judaism is not just a religion, but a way of life, and many rituals take place outside of the synagogue, in the home. Some of these take place every week, on Shabbos, and some happen on specific holidays, and many involve the use of ritual items. While the exact forms of many of these objects differ through regions and eras, their makers often strived to capture the deeper meanings of these rituals, and the thoughts and feelings associated with them.

Some ritual items reference concepts from *kabbalah*, Jewish mysticism. This was especially popular among the Chassidic Movement. Often the amount of a certain decorative element was significant. Many *kiddush* cups, special goblets to recite the blessing over wine on Shabbos, follow this trend in the Chassidic world. The cup of the Maggid of Mezrich featured "a rosette design made up of twelve petals; each petal has ten veins... the repetition of ten, which may refer to the ten sefirot is significant, whereas the number twelve in Jewish art and artisanship often refers to the Twelve Tribes of Israel."<sup>79</sup> The ten *sefiros* are the ten modes through which G-d manifests Himself. They are a very important kabbalistic concept. A cup that belonged to Rebbe Yitzhak of Bohush has thirteen petals on its base "as a reference to the thirteen attributes of mercy or lovingkindness."<sup>80</sup> Another example has 26 petals, a hint to one of G-d's names.

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<sup>77</sup> <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/196034>

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah Pg. 95

<sup>80</sup> Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah Pg. 96

Flora are not just decorative; however, some plants have deeper kabbalistic meanings. Many chassidic *kiddush* cups were in the shape of apples, *eppel bechers*, because of “a Safed Kabbalist tradition of referring to the Shekhinah as the ‘orchard of the holy apples’”<sup>81</sup> and as a symbol of “the Jewish People, who are likened to the ‘apple among the trees of the forest.’”<sup>82</sup> The apple imagery extends to seder plates as well. “On the Seder plate of R. Moshe Yehudah Leib of Peshkan, there is a crown finial with an orb and three leaves above the crown (Fig. 71; see also Figs. 54a–b). One can think of the orb as an apple, alluding to the imagery of the “grove of apple trees,” which also refers to the Shekhinah,”<sup>83</sup> G-d’s presence.

Roses also have a deeper meaning. They can be found on chassidish *kiddush* cups and seder plates, because “the rose is identified with the Shekhinah... as set forth in the opening chapter of the Zohar (I, 1a): Rabbi Hizkiyah opened, ‘Like a rose among thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens (Song of Songs 2:2). Who is a rose? The Assembly of Israel [the Shekhinah]. For there is a rose, and then there is a rose!’”<sup>84</sup> The rose also refers to the nation of Israel in a famous midrashic parable.<sup>85</sup>

The *atarah*, collar, adorns the top of a *tallis*, prayer shawl. It was a chassidic innovation, but is much more than the simple decoration people think it to be. The *atarah* reminds one who is praying “of the atara (crown) of the Holy One blessed-be-He, composed of the prayers of the Assembly of Israel. Indeed, as early as in the Talmudic midrash, such as Yalkut Shimoni, we find the tradition that the prayers of Israel rise up to create an atara or crown that adorns” G-d.<sup>86</sup> One can take the symbolism a step further, by recognizing that “there is a mimetic aspect to the figure of the worshipping Hasid with the atara of his tallit on his head and the crown composed of prayers that adorn the Holy One blessed-be-He, a kind

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<sup>81</sup> Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah Pg. 102

<sup>82</sup> Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah Pg. 106

<sup>83</sup> Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah Pg. 178

<sup>84</sup> Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah Pg.179-180

<sup>85</sup> Leviticus Raba 23

<sup>86</sup> Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah Pg. 261

of parallelism wherein the higher sphere serves as a paradigm for the lower reality. If this is, indeed, the case, then there is some sort of parallel between the atara on the tallit and God's atara composed of the prayers of the congregation, a conceptual affinity between the two apprehended during the prayer service."<sup>87</sup>

Similarly to synagogues, many ritual items were decorated with symbols of hope for the Messiah. On the Festival of Sukkos, one puts up a temporary hut called a *sukkah*, and spends the holiday in it. The *sukkah* commemorates G-d's divine protection of the Israelites in the desert.<sup>88</sup> It is therefore quite fitting that many examples are decorated with scenes related to redemption. A set of painted *sukkah* boards from Szeged, Hungary, depict the *ushpizin*, the biblical guests who each figuratively "visit" on one of the nights of Sukkos. "Seven of the nine boards feature the figures of the Ushpizin in contexts with which they are associated. The others depict Temple implements: the seven-branched candelabrum and the Levites' washing basin. These two boards may have been added to the series in the belief that the Ushpizin will be present at the advent of the Messiah and the construction of the Third Temple."<sup>89</sup>

Another *sukkah* is laden with even more meaning when one hears its background. When the chief rabbi of Denmark, Rabbi Freidiger, was arrested during WWII, his wife fled to Stockholm and was sheltered by a local Jewish family. "As a token of her gratitude [she] gave them these wall-hangings from the *sukkah*... [depicting] images from the life of Moses and the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert before they arrived in the Land of Israel."<sup>90</sup> Mrs. Freideger probably felt that she too had been wandering in an exile, and had been protected through the hand of G-d by this family.

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<sup>87</sup> Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah Pg. 265

<sup>88</sup> Rashi Leviticus 23:43

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/366619>

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/322635>

The whole Festival of Pesach, Passover, is associated with redemption. The seder comprises telling the story of the Exodus, and expressing faith in an ultimate redemption. It therefore makes sense that the *ke'arah*, seder plate, is often decorated with related scenes. The *ke'arah* of the Rebbes of the Chernobl chassidic court, depicted various scenes of the court, “which represents and symbolizes the Hasidic dynasty and the authority of the Admor... however, in the context of the Seder plate, it also stands for the exile in Egypt, rather than being a replacement or substitute for the Temple in Jerusalem, which is visual evidence that the Admorim considered themselves in exile in Europe.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, the Rebbe of Sadigora had a seder plate that also emphasized the current exile. It showed “a scene of Egypt depicted with stone buildings reminiscent of the Hasidic court ; the Crossing of the Red Sea in two scenes—the drowning of the Egyptians and the safe passage of the Israelites; and a scene of Eretz- Israel (see Fig. 51f). The Egyptians are depicted as Polish or Russian, some on horseback, including an officer, as well as a knight in shining armor and a cavalier,”<sup>92</sup> a reminder of the persecution Jews faced in these countries.

Chanukah is another holiday that commemorates G-d saving the Jews from their enemies, in this case the Greeks, and making a miracle that one day’s worth of oil for the *menorah* lasted eight. In remembrance of this, every Jewish family lights their own *menorah* at home. This holiday also serves as a reminder that G-d watches over His people in their exile. An Italian example features “the representation of an arm emerging from a cloud and pouring oil from a pitcher is a reference to the miracle of the jar of oil that burned for eight days. The hand therefore symbolizes the divine assistance rendered to the Maccabees and the people of Israel, and perhaps the divine spirit that will rebuild the Temple.”<sup>93</sup> Jews liberated after the war imbued a similar spirit in their *menorah*, “manufactured in the ceramic workshop of the "Joint" by liberated Jews in Munich, Germany, for use among Jewish

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<sup>91</sup> Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah Pg. 192

<sup>92</sup> Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah Pg. 143

<sup>93</sup> <https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/7843-hanukkah-lamp>

displaced persons. [T]his menorah is made up of a tree cut down almost to a stump, with a branch growing out from its side. Leaves are sprouting, symbolizing sustained life. The small branch serves as the menorah's shamash. This menorah illustrates the notion that in spite of two-thirds of European Jewry being erased from existence, a nation was not lost; instead it was reborn.”<sup>94</sup>

Some *menorahs* honored the heroes of the Chanukah story, those who fought for their people and G-d against their oppressors. “A number of Italian cast lamps bear a representation of the heroine Judith in a prominent position. Judith came to have varying symbolism over the millennia among both Jews and Christians” and “took on a secular symbolism, becoming the embodiment of civic virtue and the struggle of the citizens of Florence against Medici rule... in one hand she raises a sword, in the other she holds the head of Holofernes. This form of representation became the standard iconography for depicting the courage of this heroine.”<sup>95</sup> Another Chanukah heroine was Chana, depicted on a German *menorah*. “Channa, a pious Jew, was brought before King Antiochus IV, who wanted to force her to fall away from her belief. When she and her seven sons refused and clung to their Judaism, Antiochus had all seven sons tortured, mutilated and finally killed in front of the mother. In the end, Channa would rather die a martyr than break the laws of Judaism. Their story thus symbolizes Jewish heroism and steadfastness.”<sup>96</sup>

Until around 200 years ago, Jewish artists mostly produced ritual objects, as opposed to fine art. This was not due to lack of interest, but rather lack of opportunity. Before this time, outright discrimination against Jews was the norm. Often confined to ghettos, Jews were also barred from many professions and opportunities. They certainly could not join

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<sup>94</sup> <https://archives.jdc.org/exhibits/jdc-artifacts-through-the-years/>

<sup>95</sup> <https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/9099-hanukkah-lamp>

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<https://objekte.jmberlin.de/object/jmb-obj-524899/Chanukka-Leuchter?se=Schlagworte/d02b5b90-9861-473c-aba0-afcf1c65df8b&qps=q%3DZeremonialobjekt%26f.collection%3DJudaica%252FAngewandte%2BKunst%26f.hasImage%3Dtrue%26page%3D4>

many artisans' guilds or attend art academies. This all changed at the end of the 18th century. The French Revolution was fueled by the republican ideals of the Enlightenment and the Jews of France were given equal rights in 1791. Napoleon extended these freedoms to the Jews of every European country he conquered at the beginning of the 19th century. A slew of revolutions in the mid 1800s led to most of the major countries and empires of Europe emancipating their Jews in this spirit of liberation. Jewish creatives were now free to express themselves how they chose and filled the world with their thoughts and feelings, but many did not forget their roots. Jewish artists utilized symbolism as a way to visually express their experiences, both personal and collective. The ones highlighted in the coming sections, such as Marc Chagall, Arthur Szyk and Jaques Lipschitz, use their chosen medium to convey uniquely Jewish experiences through the use of and reference to Judaic symbols and concepts.

While many Jewish artists of the last century employed symbolism in their work, none are as renowned as Marc Chagall, perhaps the most famous Jewish artist of all time. While many of his contemporaries were interested in abstraction, Chagall uses recognizable forms and symbols because every element held great meaning for him. Though Chagall left Russia as a young man, living in Paris and later America, much of his work is emblematic of his shtetl childhood, perhaps in an attempt to recapture a world that no longer existed .

One of Chagall's first paintings, *I and the Village*, painted in 1911, depicts a man and a goat gazing into each other's eyes, surrounded by fragments of other scenes. This painting represents Chagall's feelings about memory; "Chagall posits his belief that the memories of the village and of the beloved can be shared by an animal and a human being... the green milkman (a self-portrait) sees himself as a young man walking along the hills of his village, his beloved happily floating upside down ahead of him, while the cow remembers being

milked by the same girl. Chagall literally offers a bouquet to the power of memory.”<sup>97</sup> This piece is symbolic not just of Chagall’s memories, but of memory in general. The fragmentation throughout the painting can represent the nature of remembrance, how past events are never whole in the mind, but are rather flashes and glimpses, always slipping away. Memory is also subjective; two individuals never remember the same event or place the same way; “each ‘I’ sees a different village.”<sup>98</sup>

*Paris Through the Window*, painted in 1913, is a confusing mix of images, perhaps emblematic of the turmoil Chagall felt. “Paris Through the Window appears to reflect upon Chagall's feeling of divided loyalties - his love both for modern Paris and for the older patterns of life back in Russia. Hence the figure in the bottom right looks both ways, and the couple below the Eiffel Tower seems to be split apart.”<sup>99</sup> One could argue this is the constant struggle of the Jew in exile, always longing for his home and previous way of life.

*Bride With Blue Face*, painted in 1932, depicts Chagall’s love and wife Bella Rosenberg. The first thing that strikes the viewer is the bride’s seemingly unnatural color. But in fact, it is the most natural thing in the world, as blue is “the world's favorite color, the color of sea, sky, and dreams” while the groom’s “own green face, the color of grass, the emblem of life, [is] in the white mantle of her bridal gown.”<sup>100</sup> While “blue and green are not complementary colors; they are adjacent on the color wheel and share ‘blueness’ (i.e., green is made by mixing blue and yellow). Hence, the two heads meld in a... melodious way” symbolic of the blending of their two lives in matrimony. The idea that a wedding is a gateway toward a new life is repeated throughout the painting. “In glorious bright colors across the top of this painting, Chagall has arrayed many of his standard symbols: a fiddler (music at a wedding), a cock (fertility), the head of a cow (life), a herring in memory of his

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<sup>97</sup> Neurosurgery, Volume 45, Issue 6, December 1999, Page 1495

<sup>98</sup> Emerg Infect Dis. 2008 Dec; 14(12): 1978–1980.

<sup>99</sup> <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/chagall-marc/artworks/>

<sup>100</sup> Neurosurgery, Volume 61, Issue 6, December 2007, Pages 1322–1324,

father.”<sup>101</sup> In regard to the chuppah, wedding canopy, one of its legs “is supplied by a tree (life). The subtle fringe of colors at the front edge is derived from the Jewish prayer shawl or tallis, several of which are often combined to construct the roof of the chuppah” which is “itself a symbol of the moveable Tabernacle used by the ancient Hebrews in the desert.”<sup>102</sup> The Tabernacle is a symbol of the source of life, as it is G-d’s dwelling place.

Only a few years after Chagall painted this ode to life, death surrounded the Jews of Europe. Many felt the danger before it arrived in the ever deepening anti-Semitism. These artists used symbols as a universal language, making a foreign political situation understandable worldwide. In the mid 1930’s, Polish artist and caricaturist Arthur Szyk began to work on his monumental version of the *haggadah*, the seder text. Original sketches show Hitler as Pharaoh, a human representation of oppression, and the wicked son in distinctly German garb, with swastikas all over, though Szyk was made to tone down the anti-Nazi images before publication. After moving to New York in 1940, Szyk created popular anti-Axis propaganda, often depicting Hitler with symbols of death like skulls or as literal evil, like in his 1942 *Anti-Christ*. Other art made before the mass deportations and killings display the disgust and despair of those Jews who could not escape. Felix Nussbaum painted *The Refugee* in 1939. It depicts a man sitting with his head in his hands beside a globe. The man stands as a symbol for all the Jews without a place to find refuge, the globe a world that rejects them, leaving them ever wandering.<sup>103</sup>

Those who actually made art during the Holocaust did so in secret, either to bear witness to the atrocities being committed, or as a way to express their feelings, whether they be hope or dread. Many of these pieces were very symbolic. A painting by Bedrich Frida, *Rear Entrance*, was lent to the German Historical Museum in 2016 by Yad Vashem as part of an exhibit on Holocaust art. The piece depicts a dark gate, half open. The show’s co-curator,

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<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160203-art-from-the-holocaust-the-stories-behind-the-images>

Walter Smerling explained “the half-open gate is a metaphor for death, there is no visible alternative, the only way out is into the darkness... he shows architecture and empty nature as a stage for an event that is itself invisible.”<sup>104</sup> Leo Hass’s *Transport Arrival* is barren and bleak. “Haas used the motif of the birds of prey to suggest the ominous presence of death. He also painted the letter ‘V’ in the bottom left-hand corner of the painting, a symbol of underground resistance.” That “V” at the bottom is a sign of hope in Smerling’s opinion. He commented that it is “an incredible image, you see death and the organisation of death before you, and you still think about victory.”<sup>105</sup>

A study of the art produced by the children interred at Terezin found that “while the work of the adult artists... is mainly documentary, the children seem to be trying to create a rational world of the madman's dream which was their life at Terezin. They tell of hunger by the many pictures depicting food, of their yearning for freedom by the birds, butterflies, railroad trains and windows.”<sup>106</sup> The children’s art is more hopeful; “there is the beautiful Queen Esther who in ancient times saved her people from destruction. There are many drawings of the Passover Seder with its themes of food, family and freedom.”<sup>107</sup>

The kind of imagery used when depicting the Holocaust is a sort of visual synecdoche, with one image coming to represent the whole experience. Oren Baruch Stier explains that “public memory is a distillation of the material of the past, poured into vessels useful in the present. Even though both history and memory select items from the past in their attempts to describe and appropriate it, history tends toward elucidation, clarification, and differentiation, while memory tends toward simplification, mythologization, and identification: that is, toward symbolization. This distillation process is acutely evident in the symbols most commonly used to represent the Holocaust in the contemporary cultural milieu,

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<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> The art of the children of Terezin. A psychological study.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

especially in its icons.”<sup>108</sup> For example, “shoes, in the aggregate, are one of the most common symbols of the devastation and loss of the Holocaust... as remnants of destruction on display, they are always evocative, especially of the absence the Shoah has left in its wake... they are parts of a whole, as it were—because their existence as postmemorial artifacts is predicated upon the murders of those who wore them.”<sup>109</sup>

According to Ziva Amishai-Maisels “non-inmates preferred easily readable images of refugees, people behind barbed wire, transport trains, bearded Jews with guns, corpses or survivors, images which would arouse horror and/or sympathy. The result of this combination of limited sources and limited choices was the simultaneous development of stereotypes among artists in many countries—the creation of an immediately recognizable Holocaust iconography.” Some ““primary Holocaust symbols,”<sup>110</sup> are “barbed wire, the crematorium chimney, remnant belongings, and memento mori (objects whose depiction in art traditionally serve to remind the spectator of the presence of death, such as ruins, skulls or skeletons, and candles)—and human images, such as of mother and child, of the child alone, and of the human scream.”<sup>111</sup>

Liberation did not lead to immediate healing, as many survivor’s grappled with feelings of guilt, anger and confusion. In Ilka Gedo’s self portrait, done shortly after the war, the artist depicts herself without a head, “while focusing on her fragile upper body and hands deformed by pain. The portrait reveals the artist's difficulty in returning to life following her undermined existential state and the disturbing questions about identity.”<sup>112</sup> The Nazis dehumanized their prisoners, most notably by numbering them. This loss of identity must have been especially confusing for Gedo, someone just entering adulthood, not yet fully formed.

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<sup>108</sup> Holocaust Icons : Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory Pg. 4

<sup>109</sup> Holocaust Icons : Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory Pg. 15

<sup>110</sup> Holocaust Icons : Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory. Pg.18-19

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/art-liberation/gedo.asp>

Some survivor's struggled with more global dilemmas after liberation. In Eliazer Neuburger's *Ahasver*, "a man, barefoot and exposed, wearing torn garments gazes at the viewer with a guilty countenance. Behind him an elderly, mysterious figure reminiscent of the prophet Elijah raises his hand as in blessing. The contrast between the figures is echoed in the background: next to a smoke-filled, burning sky, there appears a hint of an illuminated Star-of-David. Neuburger... paints the survivor in the figure of the wandering Jew, whether blessed or cursed unclear, who continues down the via dolorosa of the chosen people."<sup>113</sup> Many Jews struggled with the concept of a G-d who would let the Holocaust happen to His chosen nation.

This is a theme Samuel Bak grappled with again and again. "In face of the genocide of the Jewish people... Samuel Bak ponders not only man's wickedness and the injustice of murdering the innocent, but he also grapples with another fundamental query – God's silence despite the commitment of the Covenant."<sup>114</sup> In one piece, wracked with survivor's guilt, he paints Mt. Sinai, though it "depicts neither tablets nor graves – it depicts the figure of a child, his arms raised in surrender... this is the well-known icon of the Warsaw ghetto boy murdered in the death camp of Treblinka. Complete identification with him causes Bak to wonder about his own better fate, the fact that he, Samek Bak, survived. The child, Bak, continues to wonder when he will make up with the Creator, when he will hear an Apology, and when he will cease to doubt the Covenant."<sup>115</sup>

Other artists also used biblical imagery to represent their pain, often referencing the story of Job and the sacrifice of Isaac, which share common themes. According to Ziva Amishai-Maisels, "in each case, a devout, innocent man is tested by God, and after suffering the threatened or actual extinction of his family, affirms his faith and is rewarded: Isaac is spared and Job prospers and fathers a new family. Yet there are major differences between the

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<sup>113</sup> <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/art-liberation/neuburger.asp>

<sup>114</sup> <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/bak/thou-shalt.asp>

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

stories which should supply important nuances within a Holocaust context. Job is not asked to sacrifice his family; they are suddenly and senselessly killed, and he himself suffers physically. Yet Job not only refuses to "curse God and die" (Job 2: 9), but will not accept the blame for what has befallen him. On the contrary, he demands justice of God, an explanation of the evil that has overtaken him in his innocence. This protest is a major part of the story, even though the only answer Job gets is that God's ways are inscrutable."<sup>116</sup> Therefore, "Job seemed to many artists to be the perfect paradigm of the innocent Holocaust victim who has no control over the evils that befall him, from the loss of his family to his physical suffering from starvation, overwork and disease."<sup>117</sup>

The iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac is different in that "Abraham, on the other hand, is asked to make the sacrifice, and it is his willingness to kill Isaac, and Isaac's willingness to be killed that is rewarded. Thus while Job clings to life and confronts God, Abraham humbly accepts the divine decree. We should therefore expect them to symbolize two distinct types of Holocaust victims: Job, the argumentative inmate or survivor, as opposed to Isaac, the willing martyr. This prognosis is only partially fulfilled by the art-works."<sup>118</sup>

The sculptor Jaques Lipchitz managed to escape the Nazis, but still grappled with the pain of the Holocaust, as seen in two of his more famous works. His 1943 sculpture *The Prayer* depicts a man engaging in an act of atonement traditionally performed before Yom Kippur. "Sculpted in the midst of the Second World War, *The Prayer* served as a direct expression of Lipchitz' horror upon learning of the Nazi's concentration camps... the figure is surrounded by projecting organic forms, flames, or foliage suggestive of the Burning Bush. As a part of the ritual, the man flings a large rooster over his head while in his other hand he holds a prayer book.... it is... deeply emblematic of the complexity of the prayer ritual itself

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<sup>116</sup> The Use of Biblical Imagery to Interpret the Holocaust Pg. 20

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*

and functions both as the manifestation of a prayer for Holocaust victims and of Lipchitz' own process of praying through sculpting. Indeed, the artist explained that he had wept throughout the production of the work; for Lipchitz, the sculptural process provided a sort of spiritual and emotional catharsis,<sup>119</sup> something many Jews found through art after the war. The lamb resting in the man's blown out abdomen, where a woman would have a womb, could be seen as a symbol of hope and rebirth.

Lipchitz's *Mother and Child*, started in 1939 and finished just after the war, conveys similar themes. A woman raises her arms to the heavens as a child clings to her neck. She has been mutilated. "The plaintive, primeval cry of the disabled mother, her child clinging to her back, resonates as a universal gesture of anguish, yet honors the resilience of the human spirit...<sup>120</sup> though she has been mutilated, her body is muscular and firm; she is still strong. Lipchitz characterizes this work as one of despair and yet one of hope and optimism and even aggression."<sup>121</sup>

Some survivors were able to heal through art, many years after the fact, "whereby images of past horrors, acquire new unthreatening form, and material drawn from the individual's life, become works of art regarding humanity."<sup>122</sup> One survivor, Yehuda, explains that "the crematorium will always be in front of my eyes. I drew it from memory exactly, but it lost its horror because I painted it as if it were a structure, like this and that. Or I suddenly draw a picture, a musical one, yes, you see the music key, but slowly the notes become, if you look a little more, these are barbed wire. But it's not a barbed wire fence that attacks me, you hardly see it, you have to look closely at it, that is, it's my transformation. And that is art, not to describe something but to make the transformation. Everyone dreams about their

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<sup>119</sup> <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/lipchitz-jacques/artworks/>

<sup>120</sup> Jewish Art Pg. 279

<sup>121</sup> Jewish Art Pg. 295

<sup>122</sup> From a World of Threat to a World at Which to Wonder: Self-Transcendent Emotions Through the Creative Experience of Holocaust Survivor Artists

childhood, but a great artist gives it another dimension.”<sup>123</sup> The experience is cathartic and empowering, the helpless victim is now in control of the narrative.

Another survivor, Sara, “describes her painting of prisoners in a concentration camp which, through her artwork, have been transformed into Tallit (Jewish prayer shawl) and Tefillin (phylacteries). Through her art, Sara has transformed a world of oppression into something holy. Detached prisoners become united in prayer. She describes a process of stepping back from the horrors, an almost dissociative moment, which allowed a new image of past reality to take form.”<sup>124</sup> This is the task of Jewish art, to make the most complex truths tenable. It is not always easy to grasp the deeper meaning these pieces try to convey, but once one understands the symbolism inherent in the art, it elevates one’s viewing of the piece and the world at large.

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*

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