Introduction to This Issue from the Guest Editors

Eve Ben-Ora and Vicki Reikes Fox

Imagination is more important than knowledge.
— Albert Einstein

Introduction

A rabbi and an artist walk into a bar . . . . The punch line is the story of how it came to be that we’re working together on this symposium issue of the CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly. What brought us into that bar in New York? Vicki inhabited the arts world comfortably. Being a working artist and a Jewish museum professional, she was attending the Council of American Jewish Museums Conference in the winter of 2010. Eve had been working in the Jewish communal world serving congregations and JCCs for many years. What brought us together was a creative force known as Carole Zawatsky, who was then serving at the JCC of San Francisco as associate director of Arts, Ideas, and Jewish Life with Eve and has been a museum colleague and friend of Vicki for many years. Through this relationship, Eve and Vicki began working on various projects. Then an opportunity was presented to use our respective interests and talents to collaborate on a symposium issue of the Journal; this project would never have happened without our New York bar meeting.

The importance of collaboration has been fundamental to conceptualizing this issue of the Journal and bringing it to fruition. The

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process of working with another person so closely had not been a core part of Eve’s experience in her rabbinic training. The need to have independent ideas played a much bigger role in her development as a rabbi. But the art world flourishes when nourished by collaboration. The exchange of ideas that sometimes contradict and other times reinforce one another results in a more thoughtful and thought-provoking piece of work, no matter what the medium. Hara Person, director of the CCAR Press, had the initial idea to focus an issue of the Journal on the topic of the arts. Her willingness to let us take it in new and unexpected directions brings us to this point. The power of two—with the support of an organized, insightful, and supportive editor, Susan Laemmle, and the fine attention to detail by a patient and all-seeing copy editor, Mike Isralewitz—allowed us to do even more than we could have alone. Putting two creative minds together with different skills and backgrounds, and the backing of the CCAR, allowed us to soar.

We approach this Journal issue as curators approach an exhibit. We have brought together writers and developed the framework and content through which their opinions would be viewed. We sought to collect a wide array of written pieces that would shed light on new ways of looking at the merging of the visual world and the text-based world of Jewish scholarship. We hope that our curatorial vision will encourage new ideas to flow.

At the beginning of our working on this issue we sought to have the most well-rounded representation of the world of Jewish art today. Our Call for Papers elicited responses from working artists, rabbis, educators, and scholars—so many people thinking about the issues of the place of the arts in Jewish life. We were committed to including a broad array of voices in order to bring attention to the creativity happening in the Jewish world today. Proposals for articles included the visual arts, movement, music, theater, puppetry, and more. But after we reviewed them, we decided that our strengths best supported a focus on the visual arts.

The visual arts are easily incorporated into synagogue life through study both formal and informal; through life’s special moments and trying times. There is great untapped potential through the use of visual media to welcome both the trained and the uninitiated into Jewish life. What would it look like if someone’s first experience with collage, photo transfer, or calligraphy became the vehicle to transmit Jewish family stories or the retelling of the
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Passover story? The arts can be a significant entry point for people to find a way into Jewish life who may not have previously seen themselves as having such a place. Consider that words alone are an inadequate language for religious expression.

Structure of This Symposium Issue

The core of the Jewish people from the beginning until today is Torah. The Five Books of Moses represent the foundation of Jewish belief and practice. The divisions of the Torah will serve as our organizing principle, both as a reminder that we always keep Torah as a central object and that the messages contained in the Torah are beyond the textual. According to Ori Soltes, the main question is: “How [can] the People of the Book . . . also be a People of the Image?”

Our primary purpose is to explore the results of what happens when an artist looks at Torah. What a nonartist might typically skip over in a classic text, an artist will see with all the depth and possibility, nuanced or overt. When an artist sees Torah the view takes on many more dimensions: They see meaning in the letters, their shapes, in the words, and even the spaces. A soferet is not only copying a Torah scroll—she is actively passing on the tradition and teaching God’s word. This method of seeing the world is what we want to highlight.

We also want to give credence and legitimacy to the notion of using a visual element in the process of doing traditional text study. The tradition has been to give serious attention to scholars who focus on the words and the words that are built upon the words. We want to bring attention and focus to the space between the words and how those spaces can be filled and reshaped to bring even deeper meaning.

And yet we strive to ground this issue of the Journal in the texts of our tradition. After all, what has been the foundation of Judaism? To that end, the Five Books of the Torah provide titles for the sections of this issue. We use an artistic lens to view Jewish tradition as we work our way through the articles that were so graciously submitted to us.

By using the structure and thematic ideas of the Five Books of Moses as the organizing principle, we invite the rabbinic mind into our conversation about using the visual as a means to inspire Jewish creativity. Please understand that the order of
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the articles does not reflect a hierarchy of importance. Similar to how the Rabbinic mind in classical text does not concern itself with sequence, in this issue there is no before or after. Also there is no definite conclusion to the process. Rather it is an ongoing evolution.

**Genesis/B’reishit: A New View**

Pioneers take a calculated risk when they enter new and uncharted territory. The artists, curators, and rabbis in this section are the pioneers because they were the ones who took the first steps into new arenas. Their goal was to provide meaningful identity development and build toward a solid future for Judaism and the Jewish people.

**Marcia Josephy and Meira Josephy** describe the process of developing a model for a Jewish artisans festival at a time when nothing like this had been done before. This creation of a celebration of Jewish artisans was designed to give Jewish artists a broader audience and make Judaica available to that audience. This was during a time when people were interested in reclaiming their Judaism and searching for the means to do so. The festival produced results beyond all expectations.

**Gary Rosenthal** tells the story of how he became a Judaica artist. With the inspiration of Bezalel he found a way to incorporate his artistic talents with his Jewish upbringing. He had the personal mission of filling a gap in the world of contemporary Judaica, seeking to make it possible for everyone to fulfill the commandment of *hidur mitzvah* and to proudly assert their Jewish identity by beautifying their homes with contemporary objects celebrating Jewish life.

**Tal Gozani** brings a broadening worldview of the role of Jews in the artistic realm in France. Her essay documents Jewish participation in all the major artistic trends of the day and provides context for understanding the role of art in modern Jewish life. The involvement of Jews and especially women in the major art salons during the second half of the nineteenth century gives a remarkable insight into the ability of Jews to be full participants in French culture.
Miriam Terlinchamp brings her passion for the arts and for Judaism to light because she believes strongly that “The problem is not how to bring art into the synagogue walls but how to make congregants active participants in Jewish art.” A self-described “rabbi-artist,” her commitment to using art as a central aspect of her rabbinate articulates the revolutionary idea that practical rabbinics must also include an artist’s palette.

Exodus/Sh’mot: Art as a Guide to Where We Are Going

The Book of Exodus is the prime example of taking a journey into the unknown. Human beings rebel against change, even if it is good for them! The Israelites leaving slavery in Egypt felt challenged and yet they forged ahead anyway. Someone must be willing to be the first to go boldly into unchartered territory in spite of the challenges to be faced. The following authors have either observed or been the instigators of change:

Anne Hromadka asks the important question of how Gen X, Y, and Echoes can be connected to the organized Jewish community. They are much less likely to automatically join a synagogue in the same way as previous generations. They need to feel that community speaks to their understanding of a world that has been deeply influenced by popular culture. The arts are an ideal way to allow them a seat at the table.

Yael Rooks-Rapport investigates the definitions of post-ethnicity in light of contemporary identity politics and the landscape of a specifically post-Jewish identity. These insights arise as a result of a deep exploration of the exhibit The New Authentics: Artists of a Post-Jewish Generation at the Spertus Museum. She discusses the new paradigms of creating identity and the challenges and opportunities presented by each.

Richard Siegel talks about the significance of the cultural elements in Jewish identity that have the potential to have a powerful impact on what being Jewish means today in America. In order to address the ever-changing paradigm of identity, he stresses the importance of nurturing, employing, and supporting the cultural innovators so that they can create.

Joel Schwartzman’s experience as a chaplain in the Air Force provides us with a firsthand account of what is required in a world
that is built around order and discipline when it needs to change paradigms. Using finesse and charisma, Schwartzman’s narrative about choosing art for the Air Force Academy Chapel depicts one such journey.

**Leviticus/Vayikra: Artists’ Voices**

The Book of Leviticus focuses a great deal on describing physical elements. Priestly vestments, ornaments for the Tabernacle, the structure of the dwelling place of God—indeed this is the most visually oriented section of the Torah. This is also where we find the clearest articulation of holiness. Holiness results from actions that reflect our divine spark. Just as the center of the Torah includes the Holiness Code, so too have we placed in the center of this *Journal* issue a group of artists who are engaged in the process of interpreting holiness through the works of their hands.

**Art Historian and Artist Richard McBee** makes a distinction between Jewish art and craft. Crafts have the function of concretely facilitating our service to God, which is not insignificant. Art encourages us to think differently. Each serves an important function and both are necessary in order to create an authentic relationship to the Divine.

These select voices share some insights into the diverse worlds of camp, synagogue, commissioned art work, collecting, and documenting. They provide some examples of what can occur when we are open and receptive to the role of the arts in Jewish life:

- **Flora Rosefsky**
- **Isaac Brynjegard-Bialik**
- **Mark Hurwitz**
- **Peretz Wolf-Prusan**
- **Lisa Sloane**
- **Yehudis Barmatz-Harris**
- **Josh Plaut**

**Leon Morris** creates a model for visual artists that exemplifies their responsibility to serve as commentators on traditional Jewish text using their unique skills to keep classic text alive and vibrant. Through integrating the text study process with the creative
a group of Jewish artists found their voice as they engaged with text on a regular basis. His essay includes the voices of four artists—Barbara Freedman, Susan Kaplow, Larry Frankel, and Rachel Kanter—as he reflects on this concept via the Artists’ Beit Midrash that he founded at the Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning at Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan. This model could easily find its way into other communities.

**Numbers/B’midbar: Challenge and Perspective**

The desert experience created a time and place for the Israelites to make the transition from being slaves to becoming a nation. This section provides the opportunity to consider who has been left out of Jewish life and what we miss when we ignore artistic expression. When we add the depth and meaning of the visual, we will be able to create a community that embraces the richness of all modalities of expression, holiness, and spirituality.

**Historian Ori Soltes** lays out the fundamental questions that Jewish art raises in trying to incorporate the inherent issues of portraying visual images. What artists produce invites the ongoing commentary that has engaged us for centuries. There are no easy ways to define the question of what is Jewish art and what makes a Jewish artist.

**Curator Michal Friedlander** writes about the place of Jews in the cultural world in Germany today. Jewish popular culture takes on a unique role in Germany that is not the same as Jewish communities around the world. Jewish kitsch, not typically considered part of high culture, should not be ignored. Upon close analysis of this genre we gain insights into the impact of German life on the Jewish psyche.

**Adina Allen and Pat Allen**’s collaborative effort seeks to present an integration of text study and art therapy into a new model for creatively understanding the Divine. The ancient and modern combine to give new voice to an eternal desire.

**Jean Abarbanel and Anne Hromadka** collaborate on an essay that tells the story of how the Skirball Museum was preparing to move from the HUC-LA campus when they realized that the role of the arts in a seminary education would be missing. How would they
be able to preserve the impact of the loss of a world-class collection of Judaica on campus?

Jean Bloch Rosensaft and Laura Kruger reflect on how the noted collections in the HUC-JIR Museum in New York have historically and currently provided opportunities for students to elevate their knowledge and integrate their experiences with the visual arts.

Curator and Art Historian Daniel Belasco writes about how Jewish ceremonial art becomes a means for a younger generation to apply their worldview. Pushing the boundaries of the assumptions of what a ritual object should look like reveals the reality that the eternal messages of the traditions can hold up under critical questioning and radical experimentation.

Deuteronomy/D’varim: Moving Forward Creatively

In this section, D’varim brings us back to the importance of words; at the same time it does not diminish the exploration of the visual world. In order to be able to communicate the visual, especially in a journal such as this, the written word must still be skillfully employed. The very last word of the Torah is “Israel,” and that topic also needs to be included albeit from a unique perspective.

HUC–JIR Professor Bill Cutter shows us how the words of modern Israeli poetry incorporate the visual imagery that we can often relate to but can easily look beyond without gaining a heightened awareness of the value of the visual and the power it contains. Both the process of creating poetry and the objects the poets describe result in a modern visual midrash that potentially has the same enduring quality as the classic midrashic texts that have defined Judaism for centuries.

Artist and Architect Amy Reichert raises important questions about aspects of hidur mitzvah that have implications for the way that sacred space is conceived. Her interweaving of the inspirations from Torah text with her knowledge of design and architecture challenges our preconceived notions of what can happen in a synagogue.

Roy Walter and Garey Marks think about the need to consider synagogue architecture and art. What does it look like to incorporate into a place of worship a visual sensibility that goes beyond
just putting pretty things up on the wall or finding a place for well-meaning donations? This article provides a model for how to thoughtfully engage in this process.

**Jewish Educator Cheri Ellowitz** provides a detailed description of how one congregation went through an intense process that began with rethinking the way that their educational program could be transformed. Through a thoughtful planning-and-implementation process, teachers, children, and adults discovered the arts as a means of expression as well as a way to build community.

**Historian and Rabbi Lance Sussman** urges us to enter the twenty-first century by incorporating visual culture into synagogue life. The assumption that this is a new phenomenon is a misunderstanding and to ignore this is at our peril.

**Conclusion**

Jewish art is commentary that contains deep and important ideas; it is a creative response to traditional sources. The goal is to use art as an expansion, extension, and elucidation of Jewish text sources through the use of one or more of the five senses. Even if we are not personally involved in using the tools to create, our senses are responding. As we look around the Jewish world today we see the opportunity for Jewish institutions to be open to creative possibilities and become places of creativity in conjunction with deep learning and meaningful prayer. In this period of new possibilities it could be argued that we are seeing a level of creativity that would indicate we are indeed in another Golden Age.

And finally, we want to express our thanks to our wonderfully supportive families, especially to Avi and Steve, for putting up with our phone calls and many hours engaged in this process.