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Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century



forms spread in both directions toward the extreme points of the ark. Their alternating attenuation and swelling, twist and tension, are expressed in the continuous metamorphosis of a branch which becomes a leaf, a leaf which becomes a swelling fruit, a fruit which in turn brings forth the branch again.

Lipton's *Eternal Light* is a sculptural metaphor for shelter (fig. 73). Branches or wings spread and fold to form a protective enclosure for the flame. The image evokes the words of the Psalmist: 'Hide me in the shadow of Thy wings' (Psalms 17:8).

In his various Menorah sculptures Lipton reverted to the myth of the Tree of Life, whence the Menorah originated (fig. 74). In all his Menorah sculptures he splits the trunk of the 'tree' and explores several formal and symbolic possibilities. In Temple Beth El in Gary, the Menorah is robust and massive. A tree split and damaged by age is still capable of asserting itself and growing, whereas other Menorahs express energy bursting which cannot any more be contained, like the coming of spring. Branches unfold in a rhythmic ringing movement, on both sides of the stem.

After World War II, the American synagogue suddenly appeared on the scene as a significant patron of the arts. The rise of a second and third generation of American Jews, many of whom had moved to the suburbs, necessitated new means of preserving collective intimacy against the threat of assimilation. The Holocaust and the continuing struggle for Israel brought with them a heightened Jewish consciousness which demanded a modernization of Jewish education to meet the requirements of Jewish life. The synagogue also became a community centre to which Jews gravitated for the purpose of identification with their group, even if their religious beliefs had been weakened. In order to respond to new demands coming from its members and in order to evoke the spirit of the sacred, the synagogue had to call on the architect and the artist. Frank Lloyd Wright, Erich Mendelsohn, Pietro Belluschi, Walter Gropius, Louis Kahn, Philip Johnson, Fritz Nathan, Percival Goodman, Minoru Yamasaki and many other architects planned the building of synagogues in the postwar era. Among the architects it was especially Percival Goodman who in his attempt to underline the religious and cultural character of the synagogue called in the modern artist and thereby put into motion a trend which brought paintings, sculpture, mosaic, stained glass windows and weaving into the synagogue, on a scale hitherto unheard of. Some of the foremost artists were actively engaged in this work, among them Adolph Gottlieb, Seymour Lipton, Boris Aronson, Ben Shahn, Mitchell Siporin, Ibram Lassaw, Robert Motherwell, Luise Kaish, Anni Albers, Gyorgy Kepes, Ludwig Wolpert, Bernard Rosenthal, Milton Horn, George Aarons, Hyah Shor and many others.⁴⁴

The work of these modern artists gave new form to traditional Biblical motifs, imaginatively introduced new themes into the synagogue, and created a sympathetic climate for the expression of Jewish motifs.

The large publication of etchings of the Bible by Marc Chagall, the Saul and David lithographs by Oscar Kokoschka, and the Haggadas of Ben Shahn and Leonard Baskin,⁴⁵ while themselves significant artistic events, point to an ever-growing interest in Jewish circles in an art linked to their own tradition.



73. Seymour Lipton,
Eternal Light, 1953.
Nickel-silver and steel,
38 x 40 in (96 x 101 cm).
Temple Israel, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

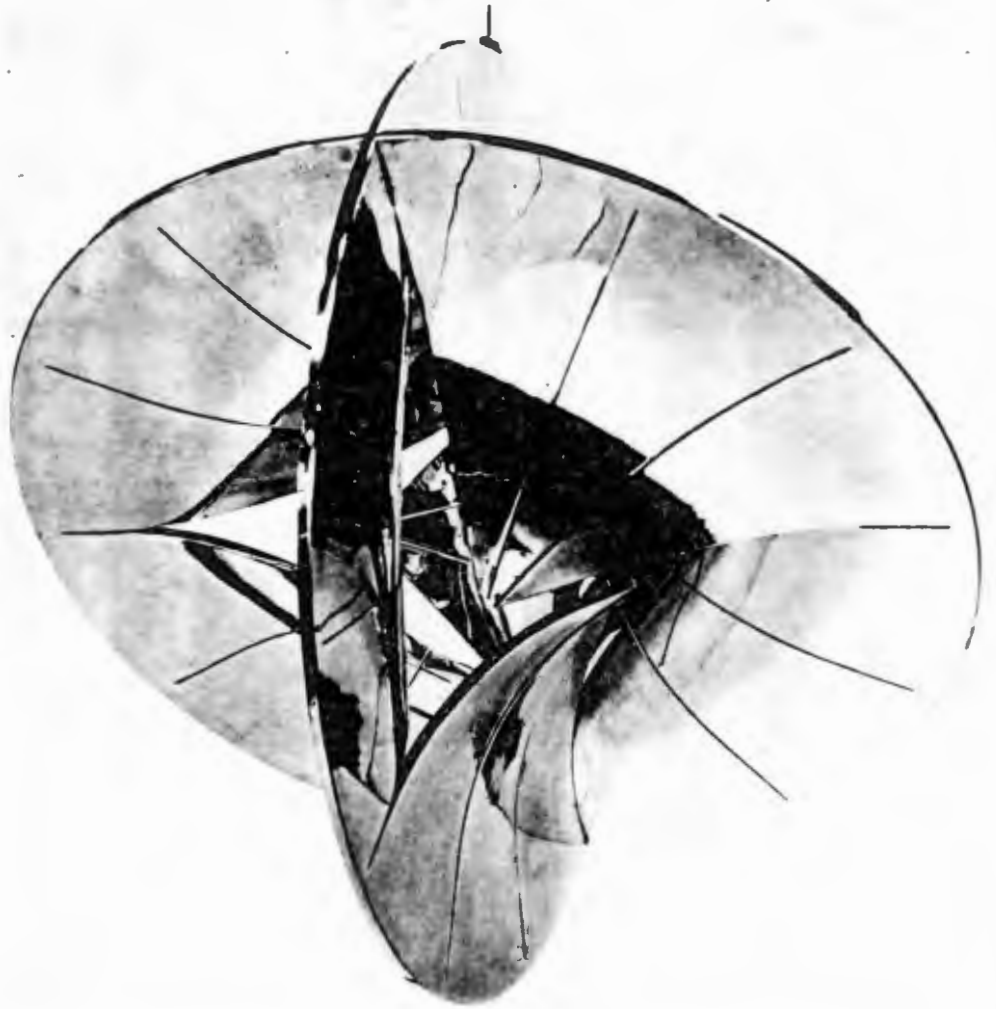


humanistic spirit, but they remain centred in the Biblical landscape. They are the work of a modern Jew who went through assimilation, Enlightenment, and nationalism, but decided to remain a Jew and take from tradition that with which he could live.

Homage to Jerusalem, one of several large triptychs Ardon has created, places Jerusalem at the centre of religious experience. Jerusalem is the place where ladders were erected which stood on the ground but reached to heaven, a place where ladders fell and parchments and scrolls of ancient teaching were written, a place of lamenting nails which allude to the Crucifixion. The painting is a poem about Jerusalem. Ladders are related to the ladder of Jacob, to heavenly ascent. The paintings can be seen as parables of the fate of man, his effort to rise and his unavoidable fall, his illusions and disillusion. The ladder also has an intense personal meaning for Ardon. When he returned to Turov after having finished his studies, an uncle came to congratulate him: 'What did you study?' he asked. When Ardon answered that he had become a painter, the uncle looked around the room and inquired: 'So, where is your ladder?'

The Cabbalistic Sphere by Luise Kaish (fig. 173) evolves from a personal mystical attitude nourished by the Psalms and the cosmic imagery of the *Zohar*, and from her form-giving energy which constantly interprets, elaborates, and shapes her spiritual experience. In the cabbalistic literature, the spheres are manifestations of the hidden process of divine life, which flow directly from the *Ein Sof* (infinite), and mediate between God and the Universe.

According to the *Zohar*, the thirteenth-century 'Book of Splendour' central to the Cabbala, God emerges not out of chaos, but out of nothingness—out of the hidden hiddenness—and creates the world according to the Torah, which



preceded the creation of the world. God is equated with the *Ein Sof*, the Absolute, Infinite, Boundless, the First Cause which the cabbalists also called *Or Ein Sof* (the unending light). Like a seed this great light contains the potential energy and plan of all the physical and intellectual world—the entire plan of the universe. The cabbalists call the power which resides in the First Cause *Kav*, the line which runs through the whole universe, giving it form and being. The letters of the Hebrew alphabet, developed out of the 'Sefirot', constitute a bridge between the world of the divine and the human. In the words of Gershom Scholem, the cabbalists saw Judaism as 'a symbolic transparency through which the secret of the cosmos could be discerned'.²

Kaish's spherical sculptures do not represent hermetically closed spheres, but seem rather to be formed of organically evolved reflecting elements. They constitute a self-developing and self-revealing dynamic world of becoming: centres of transcendental energy. Their parts are partially overlapping, dissected by the mystical line called *Kav* in the Cabbala, and appear to be growing, spreading fruit. Their convex planes spread, arch, meet and intersect. Some of these spherical structures can even be opened. They reveal a mysterious,

labyrinthine interior. Allusions to cosmic and lunar voyages abound.

Yehoshua Kovarsky, in *Temple Above the Moon* (Plate XV), approaches the mythological domain of the Biblical world, and establishes contact with its spirits. In his other paintings, Kovarsky re-creates the world in which Baal and Astarte, Avatar and Jezebel, Lillith and the White Goddess held sway. He does not present these mythological figures in an allegorical manner but rather seems intent on revitalizing their ancient myths. For him the Bible is a doorway to the mythical world from which its tales of creation and the tree of knowledge emerge. He paints the days of creation as if the images of Genesis were guiding him, but also resurrects the ancient myths of the Near East and pays homage to their gods and heroes. For him painting itself is a ritualistic, myth-producing act in which he re-enacts the process of creation by turning chaos, that is the unformed void of the bare canvas, into an ordered universe.

Penetrating through the act of painting into the world of ancient myth, Kovarsky embodies in his art the central metaphysical human need for a discernable cosmic pattern in the moral and physical universe, a need which links both ancient and modern man. The act of painting becomes for the artist a self-revealing instrument serving his longing for the eternal, the numinous and the transcendent, as well as his craving for omnipotence and magical power. At the same time it establishes a sense of unity in his own life experience, ridden with conflicts and discontinuities, by ever enlarging his own consciousness and by constantly re-examining the conditions of the self. The act of painting links Kovarsky's personal life history to the mythical, archetypal figures of a particular cultural area, providing the background of feelings and associations with the ancient Biblical world in which the artist felt his innermost self rooted.

To give form to ancient myths Kovarsky relies heavily on introspection and the unconscious. This brings him close to the Surrealists, whom he may have encountered during his stay in Paris between 1931 and 1935, and also to the American Abstract Expressionists whose work he saw when he moved to the United States in 1951. Like many of them he embraces the world of mythology and strives toward a visualization of an interior image: "The image", he says,

is somewhere hidden inside. You try to connect and try to get very close to what you have hidden inside of you. Sometimes you get very near, sometimes you never reach it. It comes after a long time. It is a kind of atavistic spirit that you have hidden . . . there is something in you and you are trying to get after it. You come close to your very deep vision inside and it comes to the surface, and you bring it to a visual state. . . . But there is more in you than you can express and therefore you come back and you want to put in more, and every time you see it deeper. There is in theology the idea that you never come close to the Lord, because the higher you go the higher He is. You never come close to Him. It's the same with this. The deeper you get into yourself, the more you can come back to the canvas.³

There is a strong romantic and mystical element in Kovarsky, who grew up in Vilna, 'the Jerusalem of Lithuania', a centre of rabbinic rationalism and of a thriving Jewish secular culture. A student of the Yiddish Gymnasium, a pioneer in Palestine in the early 1920s, paving roads through Galilee and listening with fascination to the miraculous stories of the Yemenite stonemasons with whom

173 Luise Kaish
The Cabalistic Sphere, 1975.
 Polished aluminum, 39" x 39 in
 (100 x 100 cm). Collection of the
 artist, New York.