

Jewish Art in America

An Introduction

Matthew Baigell

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Contents

For Leah and Naomi
I am privileged to have such daughters

Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction	xiii
1 Until 1920, Preliminaries and Beginnings	1
2 The 1920s, Settling In	27
3 The 1930s, Social Issues	43
4 The 1940s, the Holocaust Years and After	71
5 The 1950s and After, the Older Generation	105
6 The 1950s and After, the Younger Generation	129
7 The 1970s and After, Representative Figures	147
8 The 1970s and After, Later Holocaust Responses	169
9 The 1970s and After, Spiritualism	189
10 The 1970s and After, Feminism	213
11 Conclusion	227
Works Cited	233
Index	237
About the Author	253



The 1950s and After, the Older Generation

We need to back up a bit. As previously indicated, artists who matured in the 1930s or earlier tended to avoid subject matter directly associated with the Holocaust or they couched it in images that deflected the full horror of the roundups, the overcrowded ghettos, the train rides, and the camps. Artists of the succeeding generations, those born around 1920 and after, also tended to avoid the subject until the late 1960s. But not surprisingly at least two army veterans, Leon Golub (1922–2005) and Harold Paris (1925–1979) who had been stationed in Europe did respond more directly to what they had seen and experienced. They clearly had a better grasp of the actual visual imagery of the war, especially Paris who had seen the camp at Buchenwald soon after its liberation. In works created upon their return to America, Golub and Paris vented their anger and rage in imagery that had not been seen before and that was not mediated through the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, or the myths, styles, and subject matter of other cultures.¹

By 1948, Harold Paris had made a series of nine engravings, the *Buchenwald Series*, that showed the dead, the dying, and the gas chambers. Within the next decade, he made works including a Moloch figure devouring its own children as well as a painting entitled *Judgement* in which an angel flies over burning corpses. His anger seems to have grown more intense over the years, so that by the late 1960s, he began to make his *Kaddish* environments. These culminated in his *Koddesh-Koddashim* (1972), a sealed room based on the small space in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem that only the high priest could enter once a year on Yom Kippur. When asked what is inside, Paris answered that it looked like the

inside of his soul. When asked what is inside his soul, he answered, "All of my dreams of the outside." So overwhelming were his memories, he could not find the forms and shapes to articulate his feelings and so he literally and figuratively locked them up in the sealed room. But his rage extended beyond his responses to the Holocaust. Like other Jews, he opposed the brutalization of any human being and therefore universalized the experiences of that event. A short poem written as part of *Koddesh-Koddashim* included these lines: "Where does it come from / the wail of the shofar / the 3,000 years / and a scream in Viet Nam."

Golub, who served in Germany, did not see the camps immediately after their liberation. Nevertheless, like Paris, his rage was quite overt and unmediated. And like Paris, he, too, universalized his responses. While still a student at the Art Institute of Chicago in the late 1940s, he made the lithograph, *Charnel House*, a swirl of figures consumed by flames (figure 5.1). In the early 1950s, he created a series of grotesque, burnt, torn, and eviscerated figures as part of the *Burnt Man* series. Interpretations of these figures oscillate between Golub's understanding of himself as a Jew and as a solitary individual in an impersonal modern world.

"I'm a Jew," he explained. "Many of my friends were Jews. It was a shocking incredible thing [the Holocaust]. But that's not all. It also had to do with this sense I had of myself as *estranged*—as marginalized." He felt marginalized, then, in two senses, each slightly different from the kind of alienation about which art critics Greenberg and Rosenberg were then writing. First, Golub did not like or accept the idea that as a Jew he had automatically become a victim and, second, as an individual he knew that he was defenseless against faceless, overpowering state bureaucracies. In *Charnel House*, as Golub indicated, he responded more to the horror of the concentration camps and in the *Burnt Man* series he created a collective self-portrait both of himself and of his times. In subsequent years, Golub focused more on human brutality than on specifically Jewish themes as a portrait of his times, conflating Auschwitz with Hiroshima, Viet Nam, and government-sanctioned murders, especially in Central America. Because of his moral fervor and consistency of his political position, he ultimately became one of the most respected artists through the last decades of the twentieth century.

But even if there were fewer immediate responses than one might have expected to the Holocaust in the late 1940s, the postwar decades proved to be a golden age for Jewish art in America. Several older artists developed, as it were, second careers, but equally important, at a time when galleries and the art press established New York as the center of world art and strongly supported varieties of abstraction that often lacked obvious narrative content, an enormous number of synagogues, around one thousand, were erected in the 1950s and 1960s bringing Jewish art to commu-

Figure 5.1. Leon Golub, *Charnel House*, 1947. Lithograph, 15 x 19 in. Art © Estate of Leon Golub/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.



nities across the country. As Jews left urban centers for the suburbs and became more American in outlook, they did not want to assimilate completely even if their religious and ethnic identities became watered down and services might be tailored to the busy schedules of congregants. More often than not, each synagogue became both the center of its own community and a community center, the building marking both the physical and religious presence of that community. (By contrast, in urban Orthodox communities, a person might recite morning prayers in one synagogue, attend Sabbath services in another, and visit yet another on special occasions.)

The new synagogues were no longer only houses of worship and study, but places for socializing and, as it turned out, aesthetic edification. Perhaps for the first time, congregants saw works by leading figures such as Ben Shahn and Abraham Rattner and a host of nationally known and local artists. Art observer William Schack acknowledged the importance of these new buildings as early as 1955, noting that the future of Jewish art in America no longer lay in Old-World, Jewish genre and religious scenes. He did not predict which direction a new Jewish art might take but did say that the decoration of modern synagogues would spur its development.²

Around 1950, architects and artists began to collaborate on each structure's final designs. Percival Goodman who designed over fifty synagogues was the chief figure in this development. Through his efforts, he helped create a climate of opinion favorable to synagogue decoration that beautified the structure as it enlightened congregants through its decorative program. For B'nai Israel in Millburn, New Jersey (1951), his most famous synagogue, Goodman entrusted the decorations to the then avant-gardists Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, and Herbert Ferber who respectively designed the ark curtain, a mural, and an exterior sculpture (figure 5.2). Goodman's reliance on these artists caused a sensation and prompted other synagogues to commission works by similarly advanced artists. For example, Seymour Lipton designed six sculptures for two synagogues; Ibram Lassaw, fifteen sculptures for six synagogues; and Helen Frankenthaler, a Torah curtain for one synagogue. Works by these and other artists included menorahs, Tablets of the Law, *shofars*, Hebrew letters, Jacob's Ladder, Eternal Lights, Stars of David, pillars of fire, Burning Bushes, and particular biblical stories in varying degrees of identifiable figuration.

These works raised at least two issues that are still relevant today. First, since many artists possessed limited biblical knowledge, how much guidance should they accept? Some merely created generic versions of these symbols without placing them in identifiable contexts, as if their mere presence would set off a conditioned response on the part of the congre-



Figure 5.2. Herbert Ferber, *Burning Bush*, 1946. Brass, copper, lead, 12 ft. Courtesy of B'nai Israel of Millburn, New Jersey.

gants. Were such works merely parts of decorative schemes or did they contribute in some way to religious or spiritual enlightenment? And second, because the works were commissioned to adorn religious edifices, how much artistic freedom should artists demand?

Obviously there were no clear answers then or now, although one might well imagine how both traditionally minded and religiously adventurous congregants might react. Herbert Ferber's *Burning Bush*, for example, an apparently straightforward, easy-to-understand work, raises a handful of issues worth considering. It certainly evokes its subject, but it was also a typical example of the artist's style. Regardless of its quality as a work of art, then, does it convey meaning appropriate to the facade it adorns? There are two answers to this question. First, it does in fact evoke the Burning Bush. Second, because the synagogue was constructed a few years after the war's end, the subject is appropriate because, like the Jewish people, the Burning Bush burned but was not consumed. Yet, Ferber stated that the story of the Burning Bush was one with which Jews and Christians were familiar. Consequently by universalizing its message, he sidestepped the sculpture's uniquely Jewish meanings. Many such works, then, called for flexibility of spirit and intention on the part of the congregation and also a willingness to allow, in this instance, a sequence of abstract shapes to evoke rather than actually describe a particular biblical story or event.

Many other congregations preferred more representational pieces that illuminated biblical passages or historic events. Subject matter might range from the reasonably obvious to the obscure. A rare instance of a mixture of both realistic and abstract as well as obvious and obscure imagery characterized the entire interior of B'nai Yosef, a Sephardic synagogue in Brooklyn, New York, that Archie Rand (b. 1949, not a member of the older generation) completed in 1978. (It is thought that this was the first synagogue interior covered with thematic murals since the decoration of the synagogue at Dura Europos in Syria in the third century C.E.) Sections of Rand's murals are based on passages in Genesis, the coming of the Messiah, the Holocaust, various holidays, the Passover Haggadah, the Kabbalah, and images of the artist's own invention. The images invite the observer to think about or to meditate in front of the various evocative forms or simply be enveloped by them. Since the synagogue houses an Orthodox congregation several images that might seem obscure in meaning are understandable to many of its members.

Several other artists created works that were more didactic. One of the earliest was the relief sculpture of a Cherub subduing Behemoth designed by Milton Horn (1906–1994) in 1950 for the facade of Har Zion in River Forest, Illinois (figure 5.3). His work also adorns at least one other synagogue, Temple Israel in Charleston, West Virginia (1960). Horn came to

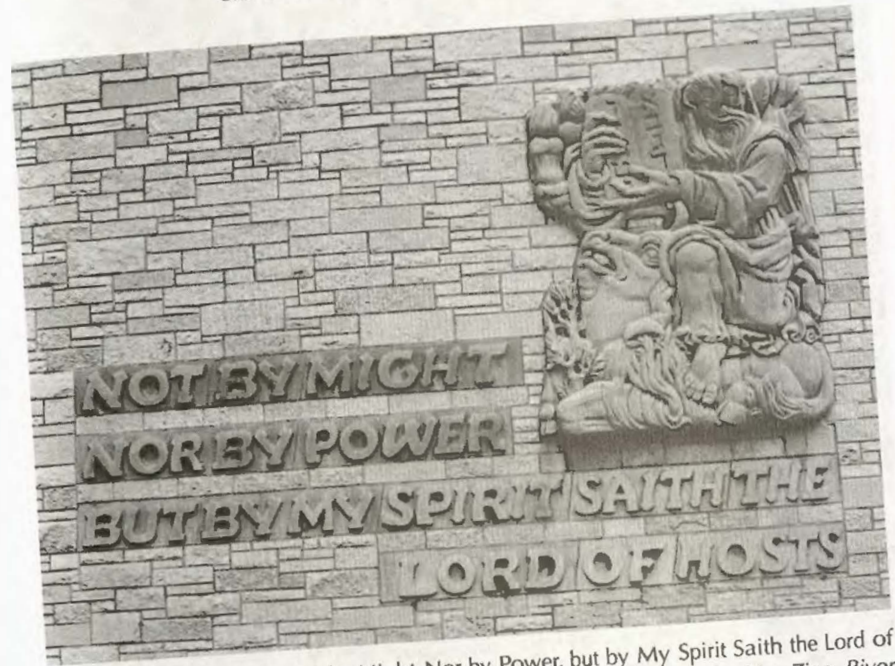


Figure 5.3. Milton Horn, *Not by Might Nor by Power, but by My Spirit Saith the Lord of Hosts*, 1950. Stone, 12 x 10 feet. Courtesy of West Suburban Temple, Har Zion, River Forest, IL.

America in 1913; his religious family ultimately settled in Chicago. Around 1947, he began to sculpt some biblical figures, his motivation based, he said, not just on memories of his grandfather taking him to synagogue but on "the great poems of my people." Like other artists, Horn explained that because the "poems" were not merely Jewish but had universal implications, he wanted his work to reach out beyond his religious community.

At Har Zion, a huge Cherub, holding the Tablets of the Law, has the body of a man and a head with four eyes engulfed by flames symbolizing the Divine Presence. With its feet, it presses down on Behemoth, a figure uncontrollable by humans, one that only God can subdue. The following words from Zechariah 4:6 are set beneath the relief: "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit saith the Lord of Hosts." Horn drew his imagery from various sources. The head of the Cherub approximates the description of the cherubs supporting the chariot holding God's throne that appears in Ezekiel 1:5-10 and perhaps in Psalm 18:9, as well. The Behemoth is described in Job 40:15 to 41:26. The Book of Zechariah describes, among other things, the glorious future of Jerusalem and therefore of the Jewish

people. This particular passage as interpreted in modern times usually refers to the traditionally weak and powerless Jewish community that nevertheless finds comfort in its reliance on God and trust in the triumph of a godly presence over brute physical power. So, the ultimate meaning of Horn's relief, created just a few years after the Holocaust, is that Behemoth was subdued with or entirely by God's help.

Horn usually emphasized the faces and limbs of his figures by deep undercutting, thus providing strong emotional overtones through dark-light contrasts. Louise Kaish, born in Atlanta in 1925, created works in a variety of styles for her five synagogue commissions and her several sculptures based on Jewish subjects. These include a relief commemorating those lost in the Holocaust as well as both figurative interpretations of biblical stories and abstractly styled mystical readings based on the Kabbalah. Two of her synagogue commissions especially describe her artistic and spiritual journey from literal representation to mystical inspiration. Her sculptural embellishments to the Ark holding the Torah scrolls for Temple B'rith Kodesh in Rochester, New York, completed in 1964, include several biblical figures while her Ark doors for Temple Beth Sholom in Wilmington, Delaware, completed in 1968, are largely abstract. The latter's reflective surfaces and kabbalistic signs mirror her readings in *The Zohar*, a major kabbalistic text written in Spain by Moses de Leon in the late thirteenth century.

For the Ark at Temple B'rith Kodesh, Kaish employed what might be termed an impressionist style in that her very active shallow as well as deeply cut surfaces seem to shimmer as they capture and reflect light, thus adding to the drama of each scene (figure 5.4). These, arranged in episodic fashion, include Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law, Abraham with an angel, David playing a harp, and Elijah on a chariot, among many others. Derived from her profound commitment to Judaism, Kaish's general theme seems to be one concerned with ultimate human redemption after various encounters with God.

Members of the Chicago Loop Synagogue were provided with an entire Jewish cosmogony in 1958 at the unveiling of Abraham Rattner's stained glass window, *And God Said, Let There Be Light*, probably the most important and complex Jewish stained glass window in the country (figure 5.5). (In Chicago, windows have been designed by A. Raymond Katz and Archie Rand for Temple Anshe Emet, by Rand for Temple Shalom, and by William Gropper for Temple Har Zion in suburban River Forest.) Briefly, Rattner's point of departure was the passage from Genesis 1:3: "God said: 'Let there be light.'"³ For Rattner, light illuminated and, he hoped, elevated the hearts and souls of humans so that they might sense the totality and unity of the world created by God. By the light that shined through his window, he wanted to suggest God's presence in order to create an at-



Figure 5.4. Luise Kaish, *Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law* (detail), 1964. Bronze 16 ft. 6 in. x 73 ft. 6 in. (entire). Courtesy of Temple B'rith Kodesh, Rochester, NY.