We Are Living in a Golden Age of Jewish American Art and We Really Don’t Know It*

Matthew Baigell

I

Most people do not realize that we are living in a golden age of Jewish art in America. But we are. Beginning in the 1970s, artists all over the country have started creating an amazing number of works based on the Bible, the Talmud, Kabbalah, Jewish legends and midrashim (explanations of and elaborations on biblical texts usually associated with rabbinical commentaries), the daily and High Holy Day prayer books, as well as certain contemporary events in Jewish history. This is happening now more than at any other time in the nation’s history. Moreover, this is a golden age with a difference. Rather than illustrating episodes in the lives of biblical figures in traditional ways or presenting stereotypical genre scenes such as grandma lighting the Sabbath candles, dancing hasids, or, say, tacking on a Star of David (just to leave no doubt that a given work of art has a Jewish theme), artists today have found new artistic approaches that have no inhibitions about questioning what they can discover within a Jewish context. Depending on their points of view—feminist, psychological, existential—they approach their subject matter in entirely different ways that distinguish them from past artists as well as from each other.

These artists, the ones who search out and challenge subject matter derived from ancient texts and traditions are—for me—the most vital and interesting artists of our time, the ones most willing to take risks with their material
as they open up new ways to create art that has Jewish religious content. So, I will assert that these artists make up the current avant-garde in Jewish American art and are the most important artistic contributors to contemporary Jewish American culture.¹

We do not know as much as we should about their work because most of it flies under the radar of art historians, art critics, and curators who, for whatever their reasons, have ignored or neglected their existence. Nevertheless, these artists persist. Styles range from the representational to the abstract, and modes of presentation include cartoon and commix imagery. Many hope that their art contributes to a sense of tikkun 'olam, or “repair of the world,” and almost all have created narrative cycles based on the lives of individuals or particular episodes in the Bible. These cycles are a recent development, dating only from the 1980s. The artists make use of post-modern modes and formats that include performance activities and the use of found objects, but they are anything but post-modern in attitude. By the designation, “post-modern,” I mean an artistic mode of expression that uses intentional irony, dislocated or ambiguous meanings, lack of responsibility for completion of a work, purposeful illogic, and willful miscommunication. In contrast to this, the artists I have in mind abjure any kind of dissembling and prefer instead to communicate directly and straightforwardly with their viewers. They are post, post-modern in that they assume moral positions and openly reveal their spiritual and religious values. Further, many maintain a post-secular attitude in that they have rejected the insistent secularism of twentieth-century art for one based on ancient religious sources.

Two statements by contemporary historians explicate the contours of my argument. First, literary historian Julian Levinson made an important point in his book, Exiles on Main Street: Jewish American Writers and American Literary Culture, when he noted that figures such as Gertrude Stein, Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller, and Norman Mailer did not “evince any particular inclination to return to Jewishness,” or have much to say about “the ways in which Judaism and Jewishness have been reimagined and reconfigured” (4). In contrast, authors such as Emma Lazarus, Ludwig Lewisohn, Alfred Kazin, and Irving Howe, among others, did embody such qualities in their writings. The artists whose works I want to discuss have been exploring the ways in which Judaism can be reimagined and reconfigured.

The second author, cultural historian Stephen Whitfield emphasized through his book, In Search of American Jewish Culture, the importance of Judaism over Jewishness. He said: “Only religion can form the inspirational
core of a viable and meaningful Jewish culture. . . . There is simply no longer a serious way of being Jewish—and of living within Jewish culture—without Judaism” (224, 237). I would not deny the importance of other aspects of Jewish culture, but Whitfield states upfront that, without religion at the center, all the rest is sociology; that, in effect, bagels-and-lox Sunday brunches, visits to parents and grandparents in retirement communities, and Jackie Mason’s and Sarah Silverman’s jokes are interesting cultural phenomena but are hardly central to Judaism.

I will describe briefly here the artists I admire and respect; and, after looking at a handful of representative examples, I will have more to say in my conclusions.² They were born between the 1930s and the 1970s. They are too young to have shared directly in the experiences of the immigrant generations early in the twentieth century or of those who lived through the Depression of the 1930s. They were not yet adults, some not even born, during the years of the Holocaust. Unlike earlier artists, they have grown up in an environment largely free of virulent anti-Semitism. They are also assimilated Americans who have chosen not to give up their Judaism. Rather, they identify positively with it, exult in it but also find that they must often wrestle with it. They go to synagogues, join havorim, and study individually with rabbis. Some are quite observant; others, less so; but certainly they all have spiritual values that they are only too happy to share with their viewers. Several have recently banded together both in Southern California and in the New York regions to explore Jewish identity and what it means to be an artist who identifies with the religion and culture of Judaism in the contemporary world. The existence of their organizations, the Jewish Artists Initiative formed in 2004 on the west coast and the Jewish Art Salon in 2008 on the east coast, are impossible to imagine before the 1980s. As readers of this essay will discover, this sense of the late 1970s and early 1980s as a defining period of significant change is one of the touchstones of this exploration of Jewish art.

Because many artists work independently, there have been no obvious chronological, stylistic, or thematic developments. Rather, a happy anarchy has been the rule with regard to attitude, approach and subject matter. Their scope is wide and quite varied and encompasses comprehensive accounts of Jewish history and the various Torah portions; women as outsiders, victims, and heroines; close examinations of particular biblical episodes; the creation of actual physical spaces for meditation and contemplation; and, of course, moral issues. Aspects of Jewish history have also served as starting points for journeys through their own imaginations. On balance, one might say that the artists’
points of view have been primary, which they then connect to ancient texts and contemporary rituals.

II

A particular case in point will illuminate what I mean. The New York-based Archie Rand (b. 1949) completed a series of paintings of rabbis in 1985; of particular note among these is a work entitled *Rabbis II* (fig. 1; Pl. I). We see a group of rabbis passing by on a street. On the table behind them, a candle, a glass, and a decanter suggest ritual activity. Rand has said that he likes rabbis but respects those who deserve respect. They are no longer necessarily the awesome arbiters of religious doctrine and might be average people one might pass on the street (Goodman 34). It is this attitude that dominates his subject matter, not the other way around, a point of view not generally articulated before the 1980s.³

*Figure 1. Archie Rand. The Rabbis II. 1985. Oil on canvas, 58 x 48 in. Courtesy of the Jewish Museum, New York.*
However, there are anticipations of this attitude during the 1960s in certain works by Ben Shahn (1898–1967) and Leonard Baskin (1922–2000), ancestor figures of many contemporary artists—not so much because of their stylistic influences, but rather more because of the ways biblical subjects served as points of departure for their personal statements. For example, Baskin’s woodcut portrait of Moses (1960) is composed of two parts; a passage written in Hebrew, which takes up the entire right side of the woodcut, relates that Moses is about to see the vision of God in the burning bush (Exodus 3). This passage represents the Jewish Moses. On the left, a portrait of Moses reveals a sad-eyed, disheveled figure seemingly discomfited by the horns protruding from his head. This is the Moses co-opted by Christians. He is no longer Jewish. Baskin seems to be saying that the Moses on the right is our Moses, the Jewish one embodied, as it were, in the biblical text. The other one is their Moses—a graphic reflection of the mistranslation of the horns for the radiance of Moses’ face. My point is that Baskin did not so much illustrate an episode in Moses’ life, but rather used him as the point of departure for an artistic statement about Jewish-Christian relations and about the disputed ownership of the Jewish Hebrew Bible/Christian Old Testament, and about his own feelings concerning these matters. In a work such as this, Baskin’s feelings are the main subject.

Connecticut-based Janet Shafner (1931–2011), one of the more senior artists I am considering here, was an observant Jew. She created many kinds of works including a long-running series on the triumphs and defeats (including dismemberment and murder) of women, as recorded in the Bible. Perhaps as a result of reading about so much biblical mayhem and having lived through and witnessed times when extraordinarily senseless acts of murder, violence, and destruction have occurred, she seems to wonder if humanity can ever redeem itself. Like other artists, who find many parallels between present day reality and what was recorded in the ancient texts, Shafner invites her viewers to ponder the contemporary relevance of the Bible. As she has said,

I found that the dramatic lives of our biblical ancestors were strikingly contemporary, and I was fascinated by the connections. Everything that touches us deeply today has a parallel occurrence in the Bible—family jealousy, sexual obsession, enduring love and sacrifice, murder, rape, incest, man’s inhumanity to his fellows, even ethnic cleansing—it was all there (3).
Among her most powerful and poignant works concerning the possibility of human sin and redemption is *Adam and Eve: The Sparks* (1999) (fig. 2; Pl. I).

*Figure 2. Janet Shafner. Adam and Eve—The Sparks. 1999. Oil on canvas, 58 x 50 in. Courtesy of the Artist.*

This painting simultaneously combines the beginning of human time, as recorded in Genesis 2ff. in the story of Adam and Eve with the beginning of cosmic time as imagined by the kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, in the sixteenth century CE, who envisioned in Genesis 1:3 the shattering of the vessels of light at the first moment of Creation. This double-depiction of creation, concurrently on a human and cosmic scale, also hints at the potential for disaster. Adam and Eve appear in the lunette illuminated by the sun and the moon. The biblical Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil that separates Adam from Eve reminds us that soon there will be trouble ahead. This sense of foreboding is reinforced by the brilliant colors of the many hundreds of brushstrokes that represent Rabbi Luria’s belief that at the moment of Creation, there was such commotion that the divine light contained by the vessels broke free, scattering light everywhere (cf. Scholem 265–68). The idea Shafner wished to portray
was that returning the light to the vessels would take place only after people conducted themselves morally, among other things, and thus Creation could be complete and the Messiah would arrive. So, this ambitious painting’s representation of the first humans, Adam and Eve in the Garden, juxtaposed with the first moment of divine Creation, foreshadows on two levels the introduction of evil into the world.

Shafner, in her combination of the biblical and kabbalistic stories, locates Adam and Eve as actors in a cosmic scheme of creation, destruction, and—maybe—redemption. According to Rabbi Luria, Adam compromised Creation by eating the forbidden fruit. To restore the light to its former glory, individuals would have to lead a moral life (Scholem 279–80). But, for Shafner, redemption for humanity is not certain in spite of the painting’s bright, sparkling colors. The lights are so shattered that perhaps putting them back in the vessels and thus completing Creation and the arrival of the Messiah, might be impossible.

It is worth noting here that Archie Rand handled the inception of evil in the Garden of Eden in a different, equally ominous yet funny way. In a panel from his series, 60 Paintings from the Bible of 1994, Adam, who had already eaten the forbidden fruit, turns to Eve and in a cartoon bubble yells out the words—“we’re naked!” This alludes to Gen 3:7–13 and especially vs. 11, where God asks Adam how he came to know he was naked—meaning that Adam now realizes that he no longer lives in a state of innocence in the Garden of Eden but has sinned. Adam and Eve appear shocked, surprised, and perhaps not yet fully aware of the seriousness of their predicament. They are all too human and, as humans, perhaps incapable of ever finding their way back to the Garden. Despite Rand’s cartoon-like style, his underlying message is as grim as Shafner’s.

Again, neither artist was just illustrating a scene based on ancient texts—a double-scene with the kabbalistic elements in Shafner’s painting—but rather each used the scene to make a general comment about the nature of humanity and about the present world situation. The questions they raise are these: Are we moral failures as people? Is redemption possible? Yes or no?

The same questions are raised by Chicago-based Ellen Holtzblatt, but in a more personal and revealing way through her images based on the story of Noah and the Flood (Gen 5:28–9:28). Before considering her work, it should be said here that, because narrative cycles by Jewish-American artists are a recent development, there are no canonical scenes that must be included as, for example, would be the case for a series describing the life of Jesus.

Holtzblatt’s Hamabul or The Deluge (2005) consists of fourteen woodcuts
In an exchange of emails, she explained that the series is a *midrash* based on the Flood, in which she reveals her intimate thoughts about life and death, birth and rebirth, and her “connection to the story as a woman who has experienced cycles of fertility and sexuality.” Making the woodcuts was, as she said, “a vehicle for learning about myself and the world.” It provided her with a way to meditate on the meaning and purpose of her own life. Again, this could not have been done so openly, if at all, before the 1980s.


She found the biblical story riveting but also “spare and emotionless.” A wrathful God punishes sin and human corruption but nevertheless allows mercy to triumph over his harsh judgment. However, this biblical account leaves blank details that her imagination has had to fill in. She saw the story less in terms of bad versus good or retribution versus forgiveness and more as a story with intertwined aspects of creation and destruction, and death and rebirth. For her, the Flood remains the ultimate *mikvah*, or ritual bath; for in it she symbolically felt that she could return physically and spiritually to God, to submerge herself in God, and to reemerge as if newly born.

In *Corruption*, based on Gen 6:11, she visualized a corrupt and lawless earth as a pile of bodies with their “gaping orifices freely admitting the seas into their bodies, boundary-less with the waters.” It is as if they were being simultaneously destroyed and reformed in the water. The last woodcut in the series, *All the Days of the Earth*, based on Gen 8:22, marks both the end of the Flood and God’s promise never to destroy every living thing again. Holtzblatt portrayed
this in the form of an androgynous being lying on his/her back nursing a newly
born child who symbolizes physical and spiritual renewal and the continuity
of generations.

For the artist, then, the waters of the Flood signify purification and re-
birth, a call to each person to take advantage of the second chance given by
God to become a better individual, to build a better world and, thus, to be
redeemed. Her series relates to paintings and photographs of *mikvah* scenes,
which would never have been exhibited or published in books before the femi-
nist movement began in the late 1960s.7

At the same time, her attitude, as well as that of other artists, echoes the
conclusions reached in a recent study commissioned by the synagogue consul-
tancy, “Synagogue 3000,” which determined that younger Jews are more spiri-
tually and less ethnically inclined than their elders (Harris 11). Their quest, no
less than the artists I’m considering here, is less for community than for mean-
ing and purpose in life. In the ancient texts, they find existential issues with
which to grapple as well as reminders of their Jewish heritage.

Holtzblatt’s narrative series is obviously a confession about her beliefs,
her hopes for the world, and her relationship with God. It is impossible to
imagine, say, Philip Guston or other older artists being so open about their
religious beliefs. Other contemporary figures have also found in biblical texts
ways to confront and to resolve various religious and personal issues. One of
the most poignant examples is that of New York based David Wander (b. 1954),
who explored his own confrontation with God through the story of Jonah (fig.
4; Pl. II). Like many others of his generation, distressed by God’s abandonment
of His people, wondering what it meant to be Jewish, and finding no spiritual
nourishment in organized Judaism during the 1970s, he became interested in
Zen Buddhism, Kung Fu and Tai Chi martial arts as well as Native American
rituals. At that time, a non-Jewish spiritual teacher, knowing that he was a born
student, suggested that he stop shopping the world’s religions and philosophi-
cal systems and turn to his own religion for metaphysical enlightenment. He
did so, and began and still continues to study Jewish religious texts.

During the mid-1990s, Wander found that Jonah’s existential dilemmas,
as set down in the Book of Jonah, reflected his own search for and ultimate re-
ociliation with the Jewish God. After studying with a rabbi for a year, Wander
found in Jonah a surrogate for his own search, and we can follow their joint
paths through 16 ink and watercolor panels entitled *The Drawings of Jonah*
completed in the late 1990s. The first thirteen are connected in the form of
a fold-out book that describes Jonah’s initial rejection of God’s command to
go to Nineveh to “proclaim judgment upon it” (Jonah 1:2) and Jonah’s (and Wander’s) ultimate acceptance of God’s will as recorded in the Bible and in many legends that “explain” Jonah’s actions.

Figure 4. David Wander. The Drawings of Jonah: The Word Came to Jonah. Early 1990s. Ink and water color on paper, 20 x 41 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

The first panel, The Word Came to Jonah—the title taken directly from Jonah 1:1—reveals Jonah in profile as being quite disturbed and perplexed about his assignment to go to Nineveh, seen in the middle distance. His face records that moment of fear, anxiety, desperation, and helplessness when he asks himself; “what am I to do?” He does, of course, ultimately do God’s bidding and goes to Nineveh.

For Jonah, as for Wander, he could either run away from his destiny, from God, or accept responsibility for one’s fellow humans and, in addition, accept God who provides life with purpose. The answer ultimately was to accept. Wander concluded that because God created everything, including good and evil, his energy was all pervasive and far beyond finite human comprehension. One must simply come to terms with the presence of God in one’s life and, in effect, become a partner with God in sustaining life and living out God’s will as he, Wander, assumed Jonah did or else he would not have gone to Nineveh.

The final image of The Drawings of Jonah attests to Wander’s decision. In it, one sees an almost completely closed circle, symbolic of God’s totality. Wander chose not to close the circle perhaps because, like Abraham and Job as well as contemporary individuals, he still reserves the right to make his own decisions or perhaps is still uneasy over the decision that he has already made.
The panel also includes a living and a dead tree indicating God’s control over

Another series, this one by New York-based artist Jill Nathanson (b.
1955) entitled *Seeing Sinai* (2004–06) might also have raised eyebrows thirty
years ago. But unlike David Wander, she will use only abstract shapes. She has
told me that as a person and an artist she searches for connections between
what she terms good art and human merit (Baigell, “Abstraction and Divine
Contemplation” 14–15). She finds the Torah to be the major connection be-
tween the two, in that one can live a life of merit by adhering to the spirit of
the Torah and that one can find in the Torah magnificent subjects upon which
to reflect, an open admission impossible to imagine by almost any artist born
after the immigrant generation and before hers. In effect, Nathanson wants to
combine her art with religious spirit, to infuse what might seem to be casually
arranged pictorial shapes and objects with strong subjective, religious qualities.

Working with Arnold Eisen, chancellor of the Jewish Theological
Seminary, who wrote his own *midrash* on the series, Nathanson planned to
recreate in abstract forms, exuberant colors, and rapid-fire brushstrokes the
emotional feelings Moses might have felt when he ascended Mt. Sinai the sec-
ond time to receive the new set of tablets and to talk directly to God (fig. 5; Pl.
III). The work illustrated here, *When My Glory Passes I Will Place You*, refers
to the emotionally laden moment when God tells Moses that he cannot see
his face, but he will shelter Moses in a cleft in a rock while his divine presence
passes by (Exod 33:20–23). Nathanson also tried to imagine her feelings if she
had spoken to God. After all, not only would she be in God’s presence but she
would also observe the most generative moment in all of Jewish history—re-
ceiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai. The last panel in the series is titled *They Were
Afraid to Come Close to Him—He Put a Cover Over His Face.* Through its bright
and broad swaths of light greens, yellows, and oranges, it is meant to suggest
Moses’ (and Nathanson’s) excitement as Moses, his face radiant, descends from
Sinai with the tablets.
Nathanson hopes that the panels might prompt the viewer to meditate upon the events that took place on Sinai without visualizing them in the stereotypical form of some bearded guys in robes and sandals who probably, as is too often the case in the movies, speak with affected English accents. Here, Nathanson has taken the events recorded in the Torah and tried to express them as primal, gut-level experiences mediated only through colors and shapes.

Apropos of *Seeing Sinai*, Nathanson has said, “art is an expression from the depths of human experience or of some kind of purity or untrammeled kind of human experience. It is an attempt at stating or alluding to something qualitative about human experience through something in visual art that we see” (unpublished ms.). The religious leader, Abraham Joshua Heschel, evoked a similar feeling when he wrote:

*The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments. In religious experience, for example, it is not a thing that impresses itself on man but a spiritual*
presence. What is retained in the soul is the moment of insight rather
than the place where the act came to pass (6).

In these paintings, it is that pure moment of insight that Nathanson
sought to capture.

Connecticut-based Robert Kirschbaum (b. 1949) is also an abstract art-
ist, but his forms are serene, calculated, intellectual, and no less laden with
spiritual meaning than Nathanson’s more emotional and colorful shapes. For
the last thirty years, his subject has been the Temple Mount and the Temple in
Jerusalem as an ideal form of perfection (fig. 6; Pl. III). He feels that the Temple
is also the most potent symbol of a religion that has largely eschewed represen-
tation and, further, that it stands in the mind’s eye as a shelter for the spirit and
as a model of Heaven. Kirschbaum holds that the Temple represents artistic
creation—and his own creative work becomes the means for his virtual re-
building of the Temple. In other words, the Temple Mount and the Temple are
subjects for broad-based idealization, contemplation, and meditation (Temple,
unpaged).

Figure 6. Robert Klirschbaum. From the 42-Letter Name. 2010. Letterpress relief print, 8 x 5 in.
Courtesy of the Artist.

Kirschbaum holds that, as one passes through the portal and the body
of the Temple in his or her imagination, one accesses higher realms of being.
As he has said, at the core of his images of the Temple there lies the “notion of
the ineffable, an attempt to glimpse the unattainable” (Kirschbaum, Letter to Baigell). He is ever mindful of historian Bernard Goldman’s observations that the portal to the Temple serves as an ideal symbol of transformation, metamorphosis, revelation, rebirth, and regeneration. On the other side of the portal lies the hope of “perfect understanding, transfiguration, and eternity.” Passing beneath the lintel is “an act of consecration” (Goldman 21). In short, Kirschbaum is among those who try to access the mystical stream through Jewish sacred texts.

Kirschbaum traveled in South Asia and was especially taken by the texts of the *Vastusutra* and the *Mayamata* that addressed matters concerned with Hindu religion, philosophy, and especially the symbolism and composition of architectural forms (Boner, Śarmā and Bäumer; Mayamuni and Degens). And as was the case with Wander, it was Jewish texts that became central to Kirshbaum’s religious and artistic interests plus the works and ideas of the Russian Jewish artist, El Lissitsky and the Jewish American, Louis Lozowick.

His suite of prints entitled *The 42-Letter Name* (2009) taken from *The Devarim Series* illustrates, as few other works can do, the serious level of his dedicated and time-consuming research, the profound thought, and the Talmudic ability to connect disparate ideas that several artists have undertaken before commencing a particular work or narrative series. From *The Devarim Series*, Kirschbaum selected forty-two drawings to form the suite that sums up his spiritual connection to the Mount. We see in this double illustration a nine-square, three-dimensional cube and another cube from which individual units have been removed. The cube represents an ideal, completed form—the Temple—and the incomplete cube stands for the fragmented world in which we live. By subtracting one or more squares from the cube, Kirschbaum shows “fragments” of the cosmos, which, when re-assembled would become the whole or complete cosmos, symbolic of the Temple rebuilt in messianic times—an image of perfection and of *tikkun olam*. *The 42-Letter Name*, then, is about hope for the future of humanity.

Now, if Kirschbaum were to arrange the cube or any of its parts in perspective, then his symbolic representation of the Temple would appear less ideal, as if it were in our physical world, in our space. He was probably reminded of Stanley Tigerman’s observations that reconstructions of the Temple, especially those based on Ezekiel’s descriptions (ch. 43), were usually organized around a nine-square, geometrically simple grid in order to remove it “from the particularities of a site. This act of displacement allows exploration without regard for [a] realistic setting” (96).
To solve the problem of preventing the imaginary Temple from entering into our human space, Kirschbaum decided to use axonometric projections for the various cubes that make up the Forty-Two Letter Name. In this kind of projection, receding lines remain parallel and do not meet at a vanishing point. As has been pointed out, axonometry represents “an unrepresentable infinity, . . . axonometry makes one reflect on (and no longer see) infinity” (Bois 172–74). So, all spatial representation as perceived in the real world is eliminated, thus denying the viewer the ability to fathom what is near or far, here or there. Kirshbaum took this idea from El Lissitsky who wanted to abolish any sense of physical location and even gravity in his work. So, the forty-two prints, made up of white lines on black backgrounds, can be read both two- and three-dimensionally which also reflects Kirschbaum’s ongoing search for the invisible God as well as imagining a completed and whole cosmos (equivalent to the full cube).

But why the title Devarim? First, Devarim is the Hebrew designation for Deuteronomy, a book composed primarily of three discourses by Moses, the first one of which is called devarim. A scroll found on the Temple Mount during the renovations sponsored by King Josiah in the late seventh century BCE (cf. 2 Kgs 22:8ff.) has been associated with the Deuteronomic text and therefore with Moses as its author (Mazar 12; see also Deut 31:24; and the discussion of 2 Kgs 22:8 in Berlin and Brettler 770–71).

Second, the word, devarim, is also associated with the Shekhinah, one of the kabbalistic spherot, or emanations of God most closely associated with humans (Matt 224).

Third, as Rabbi Kenneth Brander, dean of Yeshiva University’s Center for the Jewish Future has noted, according to the Talmud, Deuteronomy is considered a Second Torah because Moses presumably wrote it. Rabbi Brander then suggests that because of this connection, Jews, like Moses, must play an active role in their relationship with God. One way is to write a Torah of one’s own in order to repair the world and complete Creation (Brander 18–19). This is precisely what Kirschbaum has done by suggesting in visual terms an idea about perfection, echoing the theme of tikkun ‘olam that, as we have seen above, is a major concern of the artists we are examining in this study.

Fourth, it is held that God created the Foundation Stone over which the Holy of Holies of the Temple was built and then engraved the first letter of each word of what became the forty-two-word prayer from which he created the world (the following is based on Matt, The Zohar: Pritzker Edition II, Section 71a; Patai, Man and Temple 57–58; Alexander 120–25; Idel 89; Tishby
and Goldstein II, 361; Townsend 310). The prayer, the *Ana B’koach*, recited near the start of Sabbath services, is reputed to have been written by Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Qanah in the second century CE (the prayer can be found in Schermand and Zlotowitz 314).

Fifth, there is also the suggestion in the Zohar, one of the principal books of Kabbalah, that the Name consists of the first forty-two letters of the Torah. But this can be understood only through a process of encoding that, lost to succeeding generations, was known only to the ancient “academy.”

When these explanations are conjoined, it is no wonder that Kirschbaum found ample material in the Bible, the Talmud, Kabbalah, legends, and synagogue ritual to create this series centered on the most sacred space in Judaism.

Like Holtzblatt and Wander, several artists have found in biblical figures mirrors of their own concerns and have looked for contemporary meanings in the ancient stories. The lines separating one artist from the other, to be sure, are not sharp, but distinctions can be made. New York-based Tobi Kahn (b. 1952), among the most conservative in attitude, stays closer to the biblical text than others, yet he, like Jill Nathanson and Robert Kirschbaum, while using abstract forms, will give just enough narrative hints to make them understandable.

For example, in 2007, Kahn created panels for the backs of four chairs, entitled *Shalom Bat Chairs*, to be used in the ceremony for naming girl babies (fig. 7; Pl. IV). The panels honor the four Mothers of Genesis—Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel. In the panel honoring Sarah, second from the right, two large blue forms separated by a thinner yellow form signify both closeness and distance between Sarah and Hagar. Sarah is depicted by the figure on the left. Her head is thrown back because, when she found out that at the age of ninety she would have a child, she laughed to herself (Gen 18:12). The red area between her legs suggests blood, symbolizing life and the birth canal for her son, Isaac. The blue color of the two women might also symbolize water, continuity, purification, and the flow of time. In comparison to Hagar’s figure, Sarah’s upright posture gives her a noble, royal bearing, appropriate to her position as the mother of the Jewish people and, with Abraham, the parents of a nation (Gen 17:40).

The spiky, up-and-down, red-brick forms in the Rebecca panel, second from the left, probably symbolize the personal difficulties Rebecca encountered in raising two quite different sons, Jacob and Esau, as well as the personal turmoil involved in convincing Isaac to bless Jacob in place of Esau. After all, when Isaac in his old age wanted to bless his sons, it was she who planned to substitute Jacob for the first-born. The open mouth-like form on the upper
right might suggest Rebecca’s interference in the lives of her sons. And the vertical form rising the length of the painting probably alludes to Rebecca’s desire to keep the boys apart. The triangular, sharp-edged wedge in the upper left could be a stand-in for Esau, reflective of his personality, and the softer rounded form in the lower right might represent Jacob. In any event, of the four paintings, this one elicits the greatest sense of discomfort, an appropriate response by Kahn to the most complicated of the founding mothers.

Figure 7. Tobi Kahn. Shalom Bat Chairs—Rachel, Rebecca, Sarah, Leah. 2007. Acrylic on wood, 41 ¾ x 45 ¾ in. each panel. Courtesy of the Artist.

Leah’s power lay not in her devious actions but in her fertility (the panel on the right). Kahn represents the unloved wife of Jacob who gave birth to six sons by the large womb-like form in the center. The thin line at the bottom that traverses the painting represents an umbilical cord, and the curving forms between suggest amniotic fluid.

And Rachel, Jacob’s beloved (the panel on the left), is represented by one of Kahn’s most erotic creations—if one imagines that the red circle at the bottom is an egg in Rachel’s vagina and the darker blue form descending (penetrating) from the upper right is Jacob’s penis.

Beginning in the 1970s, Richard McBee (b. 1947) has, by comparison, raised issues, asked questions, and brought in collateral material in his narrative cycles devoted to the lives of Queen Esther, King David, Ruth, Jacob, Joseph, Judah, and Tamar. But the biblical episode he has explored most extensively is the Akedah (Genesis 22), the “Binding (of Isaac),” on whose subject
he has made over eighty paintings including a sub-set on the life of Sarah. His sources include the Bible, and midrashic legends as well as the current scholarship concerned with psychological, inter-generational, existential, and ritualistic matters.\textsuperscript{11}

For example, he has projected one image of Abraham as a large, monstrous, zombie-like, inhuman figure who does not communicate on any level with a dwarfed Isaac who tries to catch his attention. The source of this image lies in Julian Jaynes’ \textit{The Origin of Consciousness: The Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind}, in which the author held that before a certain moment in human history people had no sense of self-consciousness or free will, that an outside force controlled their activities. He calls this the action of the bicameral mind.\textsuperscript{12} In this painting, Isaac’s is the cry that cannot be heard, the cry without sound. At the other extreme, McBee invented his own \textit{midrash} concerned with Sarah’s death, based on the daily morning prayer. In the first part of a double-painting, the angel of death approaches Isaac, but as a result of God’s decision to save his life, the angel, in the second part of the painting, veers off, heading for Sarah who awaits her demise.

\textit{Figure 8. Richard McBee. Sacrifice. 2003. Oil on canvas and collage, 20 x 24 in. Courtesy of the Artist.}
In other works, McBee explores the complexities of the relationships between the key figures as well as the psychological state of each individual. In *Sacrifice* (fig. 8; Pl. IV) the altar is at the left, and at the center a jumble of brush strokes that suggests the tumultuous emotions raging in Isaac’s mind as he tries to balance the intentions of his father with his rescue from a near-death experience. On the right, Isaac crouches, his arms and ankles still bound as if he had just tumbled to the ground. The questions McBee raises are these: given Isaac’s traumatic experience, will he ever regain his mental equilibrium and will he ever lead a normal life? Will he always be “bound” in one way or another? When McBee began his initial explorations of the Binding, he said that he was confused by the story. After some thirty years of further reading and study, he says he is still confused, but at a deeper level. He wants to know why God would subject the first Israelite family to such punishment?

Sarah is a popular figure among contemporary artists. New Jersey-based Siona Benjamin, a woman of color, a feminist, and a student of Judaism who was born and grew up in Mumbai, India, often paints women as outsiders. One of her more telling works, completed in a style based on the delicate contouring and bright colors of Indian and Persian miniatures, is entitled *Finding Home #61: Beloved (Fereshteh)* (“fereshteh” is Urdu for angels). It portrays the insider, Sarah, and the outsider, Hagar, embracing each other despite the relevant passages indicating, to the contrary, their enmity toward one another in Genesis 16 and 21. Benjamin hopes that this enmity between the women, obvious surrogates for Israelis and Palestinians, will end soon, but the male figures in the right and left margins suggest that the artist knows otherwise. Those on the right, Palestinians intending mayhem, extend a friendly hand but have bombs attached to their bodies. Those on the left, well-intentioned Israeli amputee-soldiers, will be unable to stop the expected carnage. So, the subject here is both what might be—peaceful co-existence—and what is—continued warfare.

New York-based artist Carol Hamoy, a pioneer feminist, has created works in praise of women in the Bible, sometimes with great seriousness and sometimes with tongue-in-cheek. But whatever the subject, she remains among the more dedicated feminists. A few of her comments will make this point very clear. On one occasion, she wrote, “My work is about life viewed through an acquired feminist lens. Rarely are a wife, mother, daughter, or sister mentioned in Torah. Jewish women’s historical importance is not emphasized in our tradition. My work is an effort to change that tradition and make visible the invisible part of the children of Israel” (Cover, *Bridges*). In a statement concerning a work with that exact title, *The Invisible Part of the Children of Israel*
(early 1990s), composed of one hundred dresses made of transparent vinyl and suspended in close formation from the ceiling along with more than fifty text pages listing the names and/or accomplishments of almost four hundred women mentioned in the Torah, she wrote, “We cannot rewrite Torah (nor do I expect we should), but we have an obligation to inform our daughters (and our sons) of the important parts our foremothers played in Jewish history” (unpublished statement). Hamoy understands that personal freedom and justice pertains to all humanity. In 1991, for instance, she wrote, “The issues I address in my work are without gender. It is the sibling, not just the sister who interests me; the child, not just the daughter. Although I illustrate my personal experience as a woman, I want my art to speak to anyone who has ever been a parent, child, sibling, lover, or friend” (Carol Hamoy: Voices 9).

Figure 9. Carol Hamoy. Queen Jezebel. 1993. Mixed media, 18 x 7 ½ x 4 ½ in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Hamoy’s Queen Jezebel (1993), although not one of her more complicated works, does make an important feminist point (fig. 9; Pl. V). Jezebel, a Phoenician who dominated her husband King Ahab during his reign from 874–53 BCE, broke many laws and encouraged the worship of idols (1 Kings
She was so hated that the Israelites refused to bury her. Instead, she was tossed over the city walls and devoured by dogs except for her skull, her feet, and her hands (2 Kgs 9:35–37).

The great Talmudic scholar, Adin Steinsaltz, has called her “perhaps the most perfect representation of the force of evil in the whole of Scripture” (211; see also Patai, Hebrew Goddess 42). But Hamoy will have none of that. Legends indicate that she joined both marriage and funeral ceremonies of strangers, that she was quite capable of empathy for those celebrating happy occasions as well as those mourning the deaths of loved ones (Ginzberg IV, 189). In our own day, entertaining newly-weds by dancing at their weddings is still considered to be a good deed (a mitzvah). Of all of Jezebel’s varied activities, it is this one that Hamoy honored by representing her as a pair of gaudy dancing slippers.

There are several works that will become canonical representations and at least two, by virtue of their creators’ ambition, imagination, and—well—audacity will be considered central to that history. These are Ruth Weisberg’s The Scroll (1986) and Archie Rand’s The Chapter Paintings (1989).

Weisberg’s The Scroll is ninety-four feet in length and is meant to be experienced in the round as if it were an open Torah scroll that envelopes the viewer. It is based on the themes of Creation, Revelation and Redemption and encompasses biblical history, Weisberg’s personal history, religious events, twentieth-century history, midrash and is—above all else—a very nervy thing to have done. Probably nothing like this had ever been attempted before in Jewish American art and some scenes would not have appeared before the advent of the Jewish feminist movement in the 1970s.

Although I will discuss a few images to give some sense of its scope, I will illustrate only one scene. Near the beginning of the creation section is an image of an angel touching a baby in utero. According to midrashic traditions, the souls in the womb have complete knowledge of Torah and do not want to be born because they will forget everything at birth. So an angel has to speed the birth process. Then there is a circumcision scene for boys followed by the bat mitzvah of Weisberg’s daughter, presided over by a woman rabbi. These are ritual and life cycle scenes. Then we see children, some awaiting their fate in Europe during the Holocaust and others dancing in a circle because they survived the Holocaust and will be leaving soon for Israel. This is contemporary history. Next there is a scene of children being enfolded by a Torah as an older generation watch from afar (fig. 10; Pl. V). This is partly inspired by modern religious ritual Weisberg has staged of a community holding open and feeling enveloped by the Torah, a scene reinforced by the structure of the entire piece.
Finally, Weisberg’s work addresses the theme of Redemption. There is a collection of concentration camp clothing juxtaposed with a distant vision of the Jerusalem that the camp inmates will never see. Weisberg has also included Israelite tents in the desert that suggest the exodus from Egypt that also alludes to a moment in Jewish diasporic history. The juxtaposition of these two images evokes two different, but in this context equally heartbreaking, passages from well-known sources. First, the last lines of the Haggadah recited at the end of the Passover meal, “Next year in Jerusalem! Next year, may all be free!” might have been in the thoughts of many camp inmates, but such a happy fate would not come to pass for them. And, second, because it is common to recite certain psalms in moments of crisis, many in the camps might have had in mind, especially in their misery, the lines of Psalm 137 that are said before Tisha b’Av, the day set aside to commemorate the destruction of the Temple: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion. . . . If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my palate; if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour” (Ps 137:1, 5–6). Here, Weisberg has intertwined past and present history with biblical allusions.

Figure 10. Ruth Weisberg. The Scroll (Detail). 1986. Courtesy of the Artist.
In some sections, *The Scroll* is obviously antithetical to orthodox and patriarchal beliefs and modes of thought. Where women were stereotypically portrayed, say, lighting the Sabbath candles, Weisberg has placed them in rituals once assigned only to men. Like the other artists considered here, she has given emphasis to autobiography and modern religious practices while also acknowledging traditional and “official” texts. Her sense of self-definition therefore is primary in choosing images to portray. Fulfillment, then, lies less in adhering to unquestioning religious belief than in filtering that belief through her own values. Think about it! Creating *The Scroll* was an immense challenge—taking on thousands of years of Jewish history and memory and then joining them in a narrative sequence with certain personal life experiences and celebrations, past and present events, a cycle of birth, life, and death, historical triumph and tragedy, and legend and fact. Like the sacred document that gives this work its name, there is nothing quite like it.

There is at least one citation that should be pondered in thinking about the significance of *The Scroll* as a statement about both contemporary Jewish art and contemporary Jewish thought. Social observer Hilary Putnam has held that Judaism can be spiritually enriching when it substitutes reinterpretation for “slavish adherence . . . for all genuine appropriation of tradition involves continued reinterpretation, and tradition that is not constantly reappropriated and reinterpreted becomes fossilized” (115). *The Scroll*, then, is one of the most important visual statements both in the entire history of Jewish-American art and as a statement of contemporary Jewish thought.

Much the same can be said for Rand's *The Chapter Paintings*, which consist of fifty-four paintings for each of the Torah portions or parashot read over the period of a single year. Rand, drawing upon his considerable knowledge of Judaism, took an entirely personal approach to the central Jewish text. As with Weisberg’s *The Scroll*, nothing like this had previously been attempted. In the section devoted to the death of Sarah, Rand painted the entrance to the cave in which she is buried, depicting it basically as an unobtrusive opening in the side of a hill without an exalted entrance or flanking trees that might allow the viewer to recognize the importance of the person who is, after all, the mother of the Israelite nation. What might Rand have been thinking? Probably, he was commenting on Abraham’s questionable relation with his wife, passing her off twice as his sister and taking their son, Isaac, to be sacrificed without telling her (Gen 12:13; 20:2; and 22:2–3). And, according to various midrashic accounts, after Sarah’s death, Abraham went back to Hagar and together they had six more children (Ginzberg I, 274, 292).
There are several other artists in addition to those mentioned here who should be included in any comprehensive history of current Jewish American art. In addition to the few, brief overview comments I have made at the beginning of this essay, there are at least three different ways to think about all of these artists. First, at the individual level, there is no single explanation to account for the turn to Jewish subject matter. Some artists come from religious backgrounds, some do not. Some always felt a Jewish connection; others sought it out as adults. Some turn to Jewish themes occasionally, others constantly.

Second, world events might also have prompted artists to turn to Jewish themes. For example, Israel’s successes in the Six Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973 gave Jewish Americans a new sense of pride in their religion and culture. They provided artists with the psychological strength finally to feel comfortable as Jews in America. The civil rights movements of the 1960s, although primarily associated with African-Americans, also inspired Jews to assert themselves, to come out, as it were, as Jews within mainstream culture. Beginning in the 1970s, the Jewish feminist movement encouraged women artists to explore their religious heritage, to question traditional patriarchic versions of biblical history, and to re-study and re-evaluate the ancient sacred texts. Another vital factor might have been negative responses to the strong assimilative tendencies after World War II and to the often demeaning ways assimilated Jews were portrayed in American popular culture by figures such as Philip Roth and Woody Allen (Rubin ch. 4). Finally, the rise of the multi-faceted Jewish Renewal Movement in the 1980s, with its concerns for spiritual regeneration and renewed Jewish identity, had a major impact.

Third, and less tangible, there are issues relating to the artists’ relationships to Judaism in general. Their connections to the ancient texts are not the same as in past generations. Whatever artists might know of the religion and its history, I seriously doubt that any today would state as Ben Shahn did in 1963:

At that time [as a youth in Lithuania], I went to school for nine hours a day. And all nine hours were devoted to learning the true history of things, which was the Bible. Time was to me, then, in some curious way, Timeless. All events of the Bible were, relatively, part of the present. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were “our” parents—certainly my mother’s and my father’s, my grandmother’s and my grandfather’s, but mine as well (5).
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I also doubt that contemporary artists feel as if they directly descend in a continuous line from these biblical figures, but obviously they do seek some legitimate sense of continuity with the past. Reattaching one’s self to that line in a decentralized and autonomous American Judaism cannot be done by imitating the ways past artists created scenes with Jewish content. As Arnold Eisen has observed, one’s Jewish identification is now quite personal. “It is primarily in private space and time that American Jews define the selves they are and want to be,” and that each person decides which rituals and practices to observe.\textsuperscript{13} Artists today who find Judaism central to their art find their own point of entrance and go on from there—again, whether it is psychological, feminist, existential, or whatever, and whether it involves biblical individuals or something general or more specific in the religion, there is no overall game plan, let alone a mutually understood and unstated tradition to be taken for granted. Identification is personal and quite diffuse.

At a fundamental level, these artists know that it is not possible to reverse the processes of assimilation completely; nonetheless—perhaps for this very reason—they desire to understand better the sources of their religious beliefs and culture and how to fit these into their contemporary lives. They want to reclaim some lost memories but on their own terms and within traditions of their own invention and adoption.\textsuperscript{14} It is as if, while looking to the future, they simultaneously feel the need to find and make a connection to the very distant past. Paradoxically, but very Jewishly, they acknowledge change but seek an unchanging and stable anchor.

Several artists have indicated to me their concerns about the attrition if not outright loss of their culture through assimilation and intermarriage. As a result, they have become part of a broad movement to build a recognizably modern Jewish-American culture distinct, but not entirely separate, from the majority culture and in no way beholden to the now second- and third-hand memories of their eastern-European ancestors. As instances of the desire to establish a modern Jewish culture commensurate with their decentralized Jewish American experiences, they might reconnect through an interest in klezmer music and trips to destroyed European ghettos to search out family documents. They belong to Jewish Community Centers (JCCs); they attend Jewish Studies programs in colleges and universities, and study the Yiddish language.

Most importantly from the perspective of the history of Jewish art in America, artists are forging their own versions of Jewish culture in America based on their own contemporary experiences. In the ways they find and interpret their subject matter, they reveal not a superficial Jewishness but rather a
commitment to and a profound respect for Judaism and what it means to them as artists and as individuals. As a result of their efforts and of what they have so far accomplished, I really do believe—and we need to acknowledge it—we are living in the golden age of Jewish-American art.
Notes

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1. I make this assertion based on four books and numerous articles I have written on Jewish American art and two anthologies on modern Jewish art I have co-edited in the past decade and a half. See, for example, Jewish Art in America; “The Scroll in Context”; and my articles on Jill Nathanson, Richard McBee, and Archie Rand listed in the notes below.

2. Much of the material that follows is based on roughly twenty years of written correspondence, interviews, and conversations with dozens of artists all over the country. I want to thank all of the artists for their patience in answering my questions and then my further questions based on their answers.

3. For further information on Rand, see Baigell, American Artists 201–16; and Baigell, “Archie Rand” 57–79.

4. For an illustration see, Baigell, American Artists 121. This can be found on the web, for example at: http://books.google.com/books?id=rw1nkKfW_3sC&pg=PA133&dq=Baskin+Moses+woodcut&source=bl&ots=W6ToG4xuqp&sig=ufjKloXuFwdpwqsLxTaspW64dEg&hl=en&sa=X&ei=LZH8T9v_Oqqg2gWzz6XYBg&ved=0CEwQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=Baskin%20Moses%20woodcut&f=false.

5. A horned Moses is a typical Christian depiction hearkening back at least as far as Jerome’s translation in the Vulgate in the fifth century CE. It is based on a literal understanding of qaran in Exod 34:29 (typically translated “was radiant” but often taken, particularly in Christian circles, to mean “was horned,” based upon the assumption that it is a deverbal form of Hebrew qeren, “horn.” The actual meaning of qaran, which only occurs here in the Hebrew Bible, is unclear but possibly could mean that Moses’ skin became toughened/disfigured like horn. See, e.g., Propp 620–23.

6. For an illustration, see Baigell, “Archie Rand” 71.

7. See, for example, Ruth Weisberg Prints pl. 4; Myers 16; Heightened Realities 16–17, 25–26; Ukeles 234–37; and The Mikvah Project.

8. For a brief discussion of spiritualism in contemporary Jewish art, see Baigell, “Spiritualism and Mysticism.”

9. The “academy,” refers to the tannaim, teachers and sages who flourished from about 10–210 CE.

10. One might imagine that Mt. Sinai, where the theophany occurred, should be considered a more sacred space, but, of course, the problem with this is that the physical location of Sinai/Horeb is not made clear in the Bible and remains unsettled from ancient times until today.

11. Baigell, “Richard McBee’s Akedah Series”; McBee’s works, mentioned here, are illustrated in this article. See also Sarah’s Trials: Paintings by Richard McBee.

13. Eisen 127, 128. For other statements on the matter of accessing tradition by personal choice, see Cohen 26, 81, 89.

14. This is really the subject for another essay, but see Hobsbawm and Ranger; and Yerushalmi.
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