

# **THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF JEWISH VISUAL ART**

**LIORA ESTHER ALBAN**

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Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
School of Rabbinic Studies  
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Advisor: Joel L. Kushner, Psy.D

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## Abstract

Visual art has been integral to the Jewish tradition from biblical times to today. The first example of visual artistry and Judaism occurs in the biblical book of Exodus when God instructs the Israelites to build the *Mishkan*, a portable sanctuary that will hold God's presence and travel with the Israelites through the desert. God appoints Bezalel with the special task of overseeing the design and construction of the *Mishkan* and Bezalel becomes the first known artist in Jewish texts and tradition.

Moving forward from biblical times, Jewish art has often further been discussed in the context of *Hiddur Mitzvah*, or the commandment to beautify mitzvot. Traditionally mitzvot should not be merely performed but instead should be performed in intentional and aesthetically pleasing manners. The commandment of *Hiddur Mitzvah* has led Jewish artisans to beautify Jewish ritual objects, texts, and spaces for thousands of years.

The purpose of this project is to learn about the centuries-long relationship between Jews and visual art and to explore how arts education can be integrated into the rabbinate. This capstone report includes a literature review on what the Torah and rabbinic commentaries have to say about Bezalel, the *Mishkan*, and *Hiddur Mitzvah*. It also includes the scholarship of modern educators, both arts educators and general educators, who explain why arts education is integral to the development of a resilient and empathetic society. Finally, this report includes the scholarship of Jewish arts educators who have thought specifically about how art in Jewish spaces can create a stronger and more united Jewish community.

The research of this capstone project included fourteen interviews with artists, curators and arts educators in the United States and Israel. Once interview questions were written and the interviews were performed, I analyzed my findings using a form of grounded theory. A complete explanation of my method of study is included in this report. In the end, the results of the interviews generally aligned with the findings of my literature review while also providing new and unforeseen insights. These insights are outlined in my discussion and conclusion.

## **Acknowledgments**

The research and writing of this project was made possible due to the support of several people. First, I thank my rabbinic capstone advisor, Dr. Joel Kushner who collaborated with me to develop the essential questions that served as the framework for the entire rest of my research and writing. I appreciated his tireless guidance during every phase of this process, from the development of these essential questions to the final editing of my report. I also thank the fourteen artists, curators, and educators who set aside time to speak with me and answer my interview questions about their Jewish journeys and how art has played a role in shaping their personal and Jewish identities. Many of them also put me into contact with others in the Jewish art world who ended up being helpful during my research. They also often provided important guidance on how to think about my research results. Finally, I thank my various professional supervisors who have supported my enthusiasm for Jewish visual art by creating opportunities for me to teach Judaism through visual art and other creative means.

## Overview

Art and Judaism have always been two ways in which I orient myself to the world. I grew up taking art classes, drawing during my free time, and keeping an art journal. As a camper at Jewish summer camps, I always opted to enroll in the art *chugim*, or electives, because art was how I best related to Jewish values and stories. I also knew I wanted to be a rabbi since I was a teenager. When I was in college and exposed myself to new ways of thinking, I began wondering if I wanted to pursue a career path in art history rather than become a rabbi. As I took classes in art history, I was excited at how this discipline allowed me to learn about different eras and cultures through their art. Further, I feared that if I pursued the rabbinate, I would have to put my passion for art aside. Since Jews call themselves a “People of the Book” who celebrate text study, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness above other forms of Jewish engagement, I did not understand how a rabbinate could also contain my passion for visual art.

My concerns subsided during my sophomore year of college when I began an internship at the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life in Berkeley. This collection houses thousands of Jewish art and ritual life objects from Jews in the global Diaspora and the American West.<sup>1</sup> As an intern, I had access to the many gorgeous *kiddush* cups, *mezuzot*, *kippot*, *tallitot*, illuminated manuscripts, and more that the Jewish people have created and

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<sup>1</sup> “The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life,” Collections | The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://magnes.berkeley.edu/collections>.

used throughout history. I learned that due to the commandment of *Hiddur Mitzvah*, of “adorning the mitzvah,” Jews have been creating art since antiquity, mostly for the purpose of honoring or beautifying their rituals and other *mitzvot*. I wondered if objects created in beautiful ways because of *Hiddur Mitzvah* could be considered art. Or rather, was it that Jewish art has to be created for its own sake in order to be art. I also reflected on the fact that Judaica has often represented or been influenced by host culture. A nineteenth century *ketubah* from India, for example, could look vastly different in language and decoration from an eighteenth century Persian *ketubah* or a twentieth century American *ketubah*. I noticed that while the foundations of Jewish tradition have remained intact and similar across different eras and locations, decorations on the objects which people use to perform these traditions often reflect outside circumstances. I spent my time at Magnes learning about how Jewish art tells stories and reveals clues about how Jews have integrated into host cultures throughout history. I came to believe that art has been one way for Jews to access the Jewish tradition while also being immersed and integrated into other cultures. These early experiences led me to develop my first essential question that guided the literature review and interview research of this capstone project: How has visual art historically and how does it currently help Jewish individuals and communities access the Jewish tradition?

My second essential question developed out of my reading of scholarship on the transformative power of Jewish art. During my time in rabbinical school as well as while I pursued my master’s degree in Jewish education, I studied the works of scholars who argue that art and creativity are essential to healthy human development as well as to societal

development. For example, psychologist John Dewey says that a person's inner emotional life changes as the object they are creating changes.<sup>2</sup> For educator Elliot Eisner, art enables people to hone their inner knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Education reformer Ken Robinson writes that art opens peoples' eyes and broadens cultural horizons so that individuals learn there is no one correct way of living.<sup>4</sup> Going into this capstone with knowledge of this scholarship, I wanted to know how the transformational powers of art and creativity could be important specifically in the Jewish community. This formed the second essential question guiding the literature review and interview portion of this capstone: What is the intellectually, socially and spiritually transformative power of Jewish visual art?

I dove into this capstone project because visual art and Judaism have long been the two most powerful lenses through which I view the world. My time at the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life started to provide answers to the questions I had about art and Judaism but also sparked more questions especially as I have continued to read in the field of art educational theory. I believe that art is a powerful tool that can change individuals, the Jewish community, and all of society. As I am poised to enter the rabbinate, my capstone was an opportunity explore this belief academically and ground it in both a comprehensive review of the literature and in qualitative interview conversations with

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<sup>2</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam, 1980), 79-80.

<sup>3</sup> Elliot W. Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica, *Creative Schools: the Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education* (NY, NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 143.

people who were living out the processes I was reading about. Ultimately, a core goal of my rabbinate will be to harness the power of art to enhance Jewish peoplehood.

## Literature Review

The Second Commandment prohibits representations of God but Jews have also been creating art for centuries. The *Mishkan* is the most prominent example in *Tanakh* of visual artistry so this review explored the chapters outlining its design and construction and how it fostered community among the Israelites. Next, I focused on texts that demonstrate how Jewish art has been created for thousands of years within the confines of the Second Commandment. Finally, I reviewed modern scholarship by arts educators about how art and creativity transform Jewish community and society today.

### Jewish Tradition and the Second Commandment

Jewish culture uplifts text, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness as the primary ways of engaging with the Jewish tradition. *Pirkei Avot* 1:2 teaches that these concepts constitute the three pillars on which the world stands. Each morning Jews pray *Eilu Devarim*, reciting :

These are the things that are limitless,  
of which a person enjoys the fruits of this world,  
while the principle remains in the world to come.  
They are: honoring one's father and mother,  
engaging in deeds of compassion,  
arriving early for study, morning and evening,  
dealing graciously with guests, visiting the sick,  
providing for the wedding couple,  
accompanying the dead for burial,  
being devoted in prayer,  
and making peace among people.  
But the study of Torah encompasses them all.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Elyse D. Frishman, *Mishkan Tfilah: A Reform Siddur: Weekdays, Shabbat, Festivals, and Other Occasions of Public Worship* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007), 44.

*Berakhot* is an entire tractate of Mishnah and Talmud related solely to laws and stories about Jewish prayer. It can be argued that prayer services are a primary function of the synagogue in modern times because all synagogues offer some sort of communal prayer experience. Jews call themselves a “People of the Book” and the *beit midrash* (house of study) where we have historically engaged in text study is a key component of most Jewish spaces. Text is the most common way of framing Jewish tradition and its relevance to today’s world. Finally, the promotion of *chesed*, loving-kindness, is also a key component of most Jewish spaces and organizations. In some congregations, caring committees exist to offer support to congregants as they journey the lifecycle. Additionally, many progressive spaces have interpreted loving-kindness to mean all acts that make the world better and they therefore promote involvement in social justice causes. Progressive Jewish communities do this by collecting *tzedakah*, inspiring their members to involve themselves in community organizing efforts, and emulating Jewish leaders like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who devoted their lives to publicly acting on behalf of the world’s betterment.

In comparison to prayer, text, and acts of loving-kindness, visual art has never been viewed as an essential pillar of Jewish life. Modern art historians often reference the passages in *Tanakh* that mandate iconoclasm<sup>6</sup> so twentieth and twenty-first century Jews have inherited the misconception that visual representation is not integral or even part of

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<sup>6</sup> Vivian B. Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4.

Jewish tradition. Looking at the text directly, we see that the *Tanakh* does not forbid the production of all visual images but rather the production or use of visuals created in the image of God or meant to replace God. The Second Commandment comes in Exodus 20 and warns: “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.”<sup>7</sup> Similar prohibitions appear six other times in the *Tanakh* and the most elaborate of them is

Deuteronomy 4:15-18:

For your own sake, therefore, be most careful—since you saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire—not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever: the form of a man or a woman, the form of any beast on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth.

The Mishnah, the authoritative code of Jewish law redacted by Rabbi Judah HaNasi in the third century, confirms that the Second Commandment has been interpreted throughout history to be a prohibition on idols rather than on all visual images. Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4 recounts a famous incident involving Rabban Gamliel III. He used to frequent a public bath that was decorated with a statue of Aphrodite. One day, Proklos, a Greek philosopher, questioned how his behavior fit within the rules of the Second Commandment. Rabban Gamliel responded:

Even if you were given a large sum of money, you would not enter the presence of your idol while you were nude or had experienced seminal emission, nor would you urinate before it. But this [statue of Aphrodite] stands by a sewer and all people

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<sup>7</sup> All excerpts from *Tanakh* come from *Tanakh The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia, PA.: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

urinate before it. [In the Torah] it is only stated, “their gods” (Deuteronomy 12:3) what is treated as a god is prohibited, what is not treated as a deity is permitted.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Rabban Gamliel decides that the passages in Torah that prohibit visual representation only prohibit those treated like gods. According to his understanding of Jewish law, a visual representation by itself is not necessarily a representation of a god. It must also be treated as one. By extension, visual images that are not both a representation and treated as such, can be created and enjoyed. In this case, Rabban Gamliel might enjoy the presence of a voluptuous statue of Aphrodite as art and not as an idol or deity.

While Jewish tradition promotes text, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness as the primary ways of being Jewish, Judaism also contains plenty of celebration of visual art. The notion that Jews are prohibited from creating or using visual art is a misinterpretation of Jewish text. Texts such as that in Mishnah Avodah Zarah above confirm that the prohibition on visual imagery is about representations of God, and not all visual representations in general.

### **Following the Commandment of *Hiddur Mitzvah***

In her book, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, art historian Vivian B. Mann explains that the field of art history has tended to focus on Jewish prohibitions against idolatry when discussing about Jewish art.<sup>9</sup> However, this ignores the fact that Jews have actually always

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<sup>8</sup> “Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4,” Sefaria, accessed December 17, 2019, [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Avodah\\_Zarah.3.4?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Avodah_Zarah.3.4?lang=bi).

<sup>9</sup> Vivian B. Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, 4.

been commanded to create visually due to the commandment of *Hiddur Mitzvah*. *Hiddur Mitzvah* comes from the Hebrew word *hadar* which means to “honor” or “adorn.” The biblical source for *Hiddur Mitzvah* is Exodus 15:2. Directly following the Israelites’ Exodus from Egypt, Moses chants the Song of the Sea and declares: “God is my strength and might. God is my deliverance. I will beautify my God. The God of my father I will exalt.” In Talmud Shabbat 133b, the rabbis ponder the meaning of this verse and conclude, “Make before God a beautiful *sukkah*, a beautiful *lulav*, a beautiful *shofar*, beautiful ritual fringes, beautiful parchment for a Torah scroll, and write in it in God’s name in beautiful ink, with a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric.” Because of this line in Talmud, Jews have therefore been expected to honor or adorn the *mitzvot* that they perform by doing so in beautiful or aesthetically pleasing manners. One example of *Hiddur Mitzvah* is the Sarajevo Haggadah, one of the oldest Passover *haggadahs* in the world. It originates from 1350 Barcelona, left Spain in 1492, surfaced again in Italy in 1792, and was sold to the National Museum of Sarajevo in 1894. It contains 69 illuminated miniatures depicting biblical events from original creation, to slavery in Egypt, to the succession of Joshua after the death of Moses. “The *haggadah*’s developing text and changing illustrations trace the different ways in which Jews have conceived of redemption through the course of history...Indeed, what the *haggadah* shows is how exile and redemption are intrinsically linked in the Jewish imagination.”<sup>10</sup> Wine and doodles cover the

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<sup>10</sup> David Stern, “Redemption in Catalonia and Bosnia: The Sarajevo Haggadah,” Jewish Review of Books, April 18, 2019,

pages and suggest that this *haggadah* was used extensively for centuries as a tool to help Jews visualize and see themselves in the Jewish story. It makes the seder's lessons come alive for those that encounter it.<sup>11</sup> Artistry such as that on the Sarajevo Haggadah and other decorated Jewish objects have long been tools to help people access the Jewish tradition by helping them to practice Judaism and find its relevance to their lives.

Not only do decorated ritual objects shed light on how Jews have used visual artistry throughout time, but archeological discoveries also show that Jews have visually decorated their physical spaces too. One example of this came in 1932 when archeologists uncovered the ancient town of Dura Europos in present day Syria. During this excavation, archeologists found an assembly room with an ancient Torah shrine and surrounding paintings. With this discovery, modern-day people see that third century Jews read from Torah like today's practice, and that third century Jews faced toward Jerusalem while praying. The paintings in this assembly room also contained figural representations which provides evidence going back to antiquity that Jews have interpreted the Second Commandment as a prohibition on idols rather than a general prohibition against all artistic images.<sup>12</sup> In the tenth century, Nathan the Babylonian wrote about the Talmudic academies of Babylonia. When recounting the installation of a new exilarch, he made sure to include the beautiful visual decoration

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<https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/uncategorized/5279/redemption-in-catalonia-and-bosnia-the-sarajevo-haggadah/>.

<sup>11</sup> Erika Harlitz-Kern, "10 Things You Need to Know about the Sarajevo Haggadah," BOOK RIOT, March 23, 2018, <https://bookriot.com/2018/03/26/sarajevo-haggadah/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Dura-Europos:Excavating Antiquity," Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity | Yale University Art Gallery, accessed December 17, 2019, <http://media.artgallery.yale.edu/duraeuropos/dura.html>.

that went into the event: “At the synagogue, a wooden pulpit had been prepared...they spread it over magnificent coverings of blue, purple, scarlet, and silk.<sup>13</sup> During the fourteenth century, Jewish Spanish Grammarian, Profiat Duran observed:

Study should always be in beautiful books, pleasant for the beauty and the splendor of their scripts and parchments with elegant ornaments and covers. And the places for study should be desirable, the study halls beautifully built so that people’s love and desire for study will increase. Memory will also improve since contemplation and study occur amidst beautifully developed forms and beautiful drawings, with the result that the soul will expand and be encouraged and strengthen its powers...It is also obligatory and appropriate to enhance the books of God and to direct oneself to their beauty, splendor, and loveliness. Just as God wished to adorn the place of his sanctuary with gold, silver, and precious stones, so is this appropriate for His holy books, especially the book which is “His Sanctuary” [the Bible].<sup>14</sup>

Profiat Duran thus explains that art has the capacity to expand and strengthen the human soul. In his view, visual artistry will enhance memory and study so that someone can benefit most from the Jewish tradition and allow their soul to be expanded by its transformative power. Further, he sees artistry as one way of enhancing the word of God and honoring God’s holiness.

### **The Building of the *Mishkan* as Judaism’s First Example of Visual Artistry**

Not only does Jewish tradition celebrate artistry within the context of *Hiddur Mitzvah*, but the Torah also celebrates artistry. The clearest example of this comes during the construction of the *Mishkan*, the portable sanctuary that contains God’s presence and

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<sup>13</sup> Vivian B. Mann, *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, 69.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

travels with the Israelites through the desert. In Exodus 25:8-9, God instructs Moses to tell the Israelites to build this *Mishkan* and gives specific instructions on how it should look. God says: “And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. Exactly as I show you—the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings—so shall you make it.” In Exodus 26, God details the exact measurements and materials of the *Mishkan*, explaining that it will be a tent-like structure made of acacia planks overlaid with gold. Ten strips of cloth made from twisted blue, purple, and crimson yarn will form the ceiling. Additional materials that eventually comprise the *Mishkan* include silver, copper, and precious animal skins. The text describing the building of the *Mishkan* is so detailed that it spans fifteen chapters, more than any other single event in the Torah.

God assigns a special artisan named Bezalel with the task of designing and constructing the *Mishkan*. At his side is an assistant named Oholiab. These are the first named artists in Torah and we meet them in Exodus. Exodus 35:30-34 reads:

And Moses said to the Israelites: See, God has singled out by name Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. God has endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft and has inspired him to make designs for work in gold, silver, and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of designer’s craft—and to give directions. He and Oholiab, son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan have been endowed with the skill to do any work—of the carver, the designer, the embroiderer in blue, purple, crimson yarns, and in fine linen, and of the weaver—as workers in all crafts and as makers of designs.

The Torah explains that Bezalel possesses unique *chokhmat lev* or, “wisdom of the heart” that others, not even Moses, possess. In Jewish text, wisdom is not something a person can earn on their own. Rather, it comes directly from God. For instance, Proverbs 2:6 states, “God grants wisdom” and Psalm 111:10 and Proverbs 9:10 state, “The beginning

of wisdom is fear of God.” Bezalel’s name translates as “in God’s shadow” which implies that Bezalel is in such close proximity to God that God’s shadow encompasses him. These sources suggest that God charges Bezalel with the *Mishkan*’s design and construction because Bezalel and God share a unique relationship and God has endowed Bezalel with particular wisdom (*chokhmat*) that makes him uniquely fit for the task.

At the same time, while Bezalel’s “wisdom of the heart” is God-given, the Torah makes clear that it is not controlled by God. God asks Bezalel to design and construct the *Mishkan*, but does not move his hand for him. Torah often teaches that Moses and Aaron follow God’s exact instructions<sup>15</sup> but the same is never said of Bezalel. Significantly, Bezalel holds the unique feature of artistic autonomy that not even Moses experienced. In his book, *The Artist’s Torah*, David Ebenbach writes:

In this understanding, *chokhmah* means knowing what it is you must do. Does this compulsion come from within the artist, or does it come from without, from the divine? Both. *Chokhmah* is the moment when those things align, when your certainty about your next move is so exactly right that it can only come from honoring your own inner understanding and from honoring the wisdom of the universe that urges and shapes that understanding. They come together in the wise heart, and art—both new and old, individual and communal—is its flower.

During the construction of the *Mishkan*, Bezalel and God work together. God offers divine inspiration which fuses with Bezalel’s creative intuition. Bezalel is the manifestation of the

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<sup>15</sup> Examples include Exodus 7:6: “This Moses and Aaron did; as God commanded them, so they did;” Exodus 40:16: “This Moses did; just as God had commanded him, so he did;” and Numbers 27:22: “Moses did as God commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community.”

alignment of God given wisdom flowing into a human heart and then transformed by human hands. What arises from that union “flowers as art” in Ebenbach’s words.

Bezalel’s name translates as “in God’s shadow” and implies being in close emotional and metaphoric proximity to God. Bezalel’s work is art so not only is the creation of art a way to be *bezalel*, “in God’s shadow” but it is also a way to be a creator, *betzelem Eholim*, in God’s image. Both titles highlight the relationship between God and art. The first hints that art is a way to be close to God. The second hints that art can actually be a way to be like God. Examples abound in Jewish text about how creating art is a way of following in God’s footsteps. The rabbis in Megillah 14a state, “There is no artist like our God.” Midrash Tanchuma Pekudei explains that Rabbi Jacob, the son of Issi believed that *Mishkan’s* construction was modeled after God’s creation of the world. He explains:

Concerning the first day, it is written: *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth* (Genesis 1:1) and it is written elsewhere: *Who stretched out the heavens like a curtain* (Psalm 102:4) and concerning the Tabernacle it is written: *And thou shalt make curtains of goats’ hair* (Exodus 26:7). About the second day of creation it states: *Let there be a firmament and divide between them, and let it divide the waters from the waters* (Genesis 1:16). About the Tabernacle it is written: *And the veil shall divide between you* (Exodus 26:33).

Rabbi Jacob continues to outline how each aspect of the *Mishkan’s* construction mirrors a day of the universe’s creation. Biblical scholar Nahum Sarna also explains:

As if to reinforce the two themes, the account of the creation of the Tabernacle is also laced with phrases and expressions that unmistakably echo the Genesis creation story...What the literary structure of Chapters 25-31 conveys is that the construction of the work on the Tabernacle is a kind of analogy on the human plane to God’s cosmogonic acts, and, following divine precedent...<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: the Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 213-215.

In Jewish tradition, God is the ultimate creator. When humans create, we imitate God's original creation and like Bezalel, we are in God's shadow and in God's image. When we create we elevate our own status and honor human holiness, as well as God's holiness.

### **The Creation of Art Fosters Human Connection**

While Bezalel oversees the design and construction of the *Mishkan*, this project is ultimately a communal endeavor that both represents and fosters connection among the Israelites. In Exodus 25:2-8, God commands, "Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him....And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." God does not assert that God's presence will only dwell within Bezalel, but rather within *all* the Israelites because it is a representation of community. Not only does God invite everyone to contribute physical materials to the construction, but God also invites all the Israelites who feel able to help in the construction. In Exodus 39:32, the Torah tells readers, "Thus was completed all the work of the Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting. The Israelites did so; just as God had commanded Moses, so they did." Exodus 39:42 reads, "Just as God had commanded Moses, so the Israelites had done all the work." Although Bezalel oversees the building of the *Mishkan*, all are invited to participate, either by contributing physical materials or by contributing unique skill and perspective. They create the *Mishkan* together. Rabbis Lawrence Kushner and Kerry M. Olitsky further predict that this communal experience fostered emotional connection and bonding among the Israelites. In their book, *Sparks beneath the Surface: a Spiritual Commentary on the Torah*, they write:

In the building of the Tabernacle, all Israel were joined in their hearts; no one felt superior to his fellow. At first, each skilled individual did his own part of the construction, and it seemed to each one that his own work was extraordinary. Afterward, they saw how their several contributions to the “service” of the tabernacle were integrated—all the boards, the sockets, the curtains, and the loops fit together as if one person had done it all. Then they realized how each of them had depended on the other. They then understood that what they had accomplished was not by virtue of their own skill alone, but that the Holy One had guided the hands of everyone who had worked on the Tabernacle. They had merely joined in completing its master building plan, so that “It came to pass that the Tabernacle was one.” (Exodus 36:13). Moreover, the one who made the holy ark itself was unable to feel superior to the one who had made only the courtyard tent pegs.<sup>17</sup>

The creation of visual art is not only a way of demonstrating closeness to God. The creation of art can also be a way of building closeness between human beings. Once the *Mishkan* was completed, all the Israelites were left with a single creation that not only held God’s presence but also symbolized teamwork, bonding, and full community involvement.

### **Modern Literature on the Power of Visual Art**

Contemporary scholars have written about the transformational power of visual art for individuals and for community. In his work, *Art as Experience*, the well-known psychologist and education reformer John Dewey writes:

Were expression but a kind of decalcomania, or a conjuring of a rabbit out of the place where it lies hid, artistic expression would be a comparatively simple matter. But between conception and bringing to birth there lies a long period of gestation. During this period the inner material of emotion and idea is as much transformed through acting and being acted upon by objective material as the latter undergoes modification when it becomes a medium of expression...Expression is the clarification of turbid emotion; our appetites know

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<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Kushner and Kerry M. Olitzky, *Sparks beneath the Surface: a Spiritual Commentary on the Torah* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1995), 109-110.

themselves when they are reflected in the mirror of art, and as they know themselves they are transfigured.<sup>18</sup>

For Dewey, the creative process of making art is just as powerful as the finished product itself. He writes about how the process of creation not only transforms the object being created but also that the process of creation transforms the inner life of the person creating. The object and inner life are connected cyclically so that when one gestates, acts and is acted upon, so does the other.

For educator Elliot Eisner, the arts transform people by creating an avenue for them to learn more about themselves and others. Through art, individuals gain increased flexibility and confidence to be independent thinkers and initiators:

Work in the arts invites the development of a disposition to tolerate ambiguity, to explore what is uncertain, to exercise judgment free from prescriptive rules and procedures. In the arts, the locus of evaluation is internal, and the so-called subjective side of ourselves has an opportunity to be utilized. In a sense, work in the arts enables us to stop looking over our shoulder and to direct our attention inward to what we believe or feel. Such a disposition is at the root of the development of individual autonomy.<sup>19</sup>

Eisner believes that the arts not only help people direct their attention inward toward themselves, but they also help people to explore others' experiences and the world:

Aside from promoting our awareness of aspects of the world we had not experienced consciously before, the arts provide permissions to engage the imagination as a means for exploring new possibilities. The arts liberate us from the literal; they enable us to step into the shoes of others and to experience vicariously what we have not experienced directly. Cultural development depends on such capacities, and the arts play an extraordinarily important role in their contribution to such an aim.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 79-80.

<sup>19</sup> Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Eisner goes so far as to say that cultural development depends on the exploration of others' experiences and that art plays a vital role in this type of exploration. When we have a sense of how others live, we understand that there are possibilities beyond the narrow range of our own personal experiences and we gain new ideas that contribute to cultural development.

Education reformer Ken Robinson writes about how schools in the twenty-first century need to transform in order to meet today's challenges. For him, arts are essential to good education because they contribute to intellectual development. In his book, *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education*, he writes:

The arts are about the qualities of human experiences. Through music, dance, visual arts, drama, and the rest, we give form to our feelings and thoughts about ourselves, and how we experience the world around us. Learning in and about the arts is essential to intellectual development.<sup>21</sup>

Robinson believes that the arts are one of the clearest expressions of human culture. They express individuals' "deepest talents and passions." When individuals encounter the arts of other individuals and cultures, they learn about new and different ways of experiencing the world:

The arts are among the most vivid expressions of human culture. To understand the experience of other cultures, we need to engage with their music, visual art, dance, and verbal and performing arts. Music and images, poems and plays are manifestations of some of our deepest talents and passions. Engaging with the arts of others is the most vibrant way of seeing and feeling the world as they do.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica, *Creative Schools*, (2016), 142-143.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

Similar to Eisner's argument, Robinson believes that when we sense others' experiences, our minds expand and accept more possibilities for what life and the world may look like. This openness is essential for students to survive and thrive in a diverse and ever-changing twenty-first century world.

While educators have written about how arts and creativity transform individuals and society in general, Jewish educators and practitioners have attempted to focus this transformational power on specifically Jewish participants and spaces. In 1992, artist and educator Jo Milgrom published *Handmade Midrash* and revolutionized the possibilities for what can and should be considered midrash. Midrash is biblical exegesis and when people today speak about midrash, they usually mean that which was created by ancient rabbinic authorities<sup>23</sup> between the first and eleventh centuries. Midrashim (the plural of midrash) are stories written by these ancient rabbinic authorities to fill gaps or elucidate points in the Torah. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner explains midrash as, "fiction concealed beneath the apparent text of the biblical narrative: what might have happened before and after, above and below the biblical story."<sup>24</sup> In her book, Milgrom created a new type of modern midrash that does not depend on rabbinic authorities. She writes:

Handmade midrash' is a visual theology. It is an approach to biblical narrative that draws on the traditional study of Bible, midrash (rabbinic commentaries), and the cognate disciplines of literature, history, archeology and linguistics.

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<sup>23</sup> Jacob Neusner, *What Is Midrash?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1987), xi.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *God Was in This Place & I, I Did Not Know: Finding Self, Spirituality, and Ultimate Meaning* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2016), 17.

However, it moves beyond these to form a new synthesis with comparative symbolism, art history, and psychology—to create a new discipline.<sup>25</sup>

Milgrom offers workshops that encourage participants to explore biblical texts and react to them using handmade creative play. This play includes rending cloth, tearing paper, and using other materials to create unrecognizable symbols or figures. According to Milgrom, “the process lifts the participant out of logic and sequential time, drawing on imaginative life to relate to a biblical passage with forms that surface in the mind’s eye, even before one can think of the associated words.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, for Milgrom, the creation of something physical and visual can transform the way that individuals interact with Jewish text beyond the verbal alone. Art may allow one to step beyond the literal and engage with Jewish texts in unexpected yet fruitful ways.

In *Expressive Kavannah*, artist Edna Miron-Wapner also describes the power of blending Jewish tradition with creation. For her, art creation can be spiritually transformative. She writes, “When in the midst of my artwork in my studio, I often feel a divine presence as I enter into a state of flow and a heightened sense of reality...I am interested in the qualities and acts of Godliness rather than in philosophical or religious discourse on God.”<sup>27</sup> Miron-Wapner also offers workshops that encourage participants to explore Jewish texts through creative means. In her words, these workshops are a way for

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<sup>25</sup> Jo Milgrom, *Handmade Midrash* (Berkeley, CA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992), ix.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Edna Miron-Wapner, *Expressive Kavannah: Creativity, Meaning and Healing*, (2019), 9.

“people to look at themselves and some of their most important questions and discover what's meaningful for them.” She hopes that others can step beyond intellectual discourse on God or on Jewish values and instead feel divine presence and learn about themselves through creativity.

In 2010, Rabbi Miriam Terlinchamp created a capstone report as part of her requirements for rabbinic ordination at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. She, like Miron-Wapner, wants people step beyond intellectual discourse on Judaism and God and instead explore our tradition through more creative means. In her report, *Jewish Art as a Spiritual Practice*, she writes, “Art frees us from being a ‘people of the book’ and helps us become a ‘people of Torah,’ allowing truth to come from a variety of sources rather than from text alone.”<sup>28</sup> She believes that midrash and visual art share many of the same strengths, stating, “When we look into midrash as a tool for accessing knowledge, the same strengths as visual art begin to appear: connecting people to tradition, accessing wisdom in different ways, exploring identity, and enacting *hidur mitzvah* in a text format.”<sup>29</sup> Terlinchamp further believes that art not only frees individuals and helps them explore their personal identities but that it also fosters community:

Art may push the functional limits by serving as a tool for education and the creation of community. If the whole community is involved in the creation or commission of art for their environment and collective use, then art is the agent that brings them together. It is the way of nurturing new relationships and bringing together people who might not naturally gravitate towards one another.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Miriam Pauline. Terlinchamp, *Art as a Jewish Spiritual Practice*, 2010, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

For Terlinchamp, art is not only about creating an aesthetically pleasing finished product. Art is also about creating opportunities for people to work together in ways that might not otherwise be possible. The art product itself is secondary to the goal of community-building.

In 2012, David Ebenbach wrote *The Artist's Torah* and provided a new model for how Jewish text and creativity can complement each other. In the introduction to the book he writes, "I discovered each *parasha* has something distinct to tell us about creativity and the life that surrounds and supports creativity."<sup>31</sup> The book describes how creativity is inherent to Judaism, even when this point may not be obvious. Ebenbach was able to find the topic of creativity in every crevice of Torah and explains why he thinks creativity is important:

This book is about embracing the creative opportunity. It is about taking our heritage seriously, about understanding the calling to art, with its aspect of curse and its aspect of blessing. On the one hand, artists see what is broken in relationships, in work lives, in political and social systems, and everywhere else in the universe around us. On the other hand, seeing these truths (along with the equally real truths of beauty and compassion and holiness) allows us to express them, so that others might know that they are not alone in their understanding of the world. This is the calling of the artist—and it *is* a calling, in every sense of the word. It means calling things what they are, and calling out the truth, loudly, across the empty spaces that separate us from one another, so that others might hear it. It is a calling that every one of us is able to hear, and to receive.

For Ebenbach, creativity is essential to understanding text in its fullest sense. He commented on the Torah through the lens of creativity not only because this would shed light on the text but also because he wants readers to understand the importance of valuing

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<sup>31</sup> David Harris Ebenbach, *The Artists Torah* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012), xvii.

creativity and art in all aspects of life. He believes creativity is essential to the success of humanity. Creativity, including visual art, reveals holiness and beauty, challenge and pain. Art allows people to realize that they are not alone in the human experience. I think that this understanding may bring people together and inspire people to work with others to build the world they want to see.

Modern Jewish and non-Jewish scholars believe that art holds transformational power. It can transform individuals, build community, and better society. For Dewey, Eisner, and Robinson, art is important cultural and intellectual development which lead to stronger societies. Focusing on their own heritage, Milgrom, Miron-Wapner, Terlinchamp, and Ebenbach believe that art can specifically transform Jews and Jewish community. The writings of these thinkers assert that art is a powerful and important tool for making people better and bringing people together.

## Methodology

### Overview of the Project

I began this capstone in January 2019. The project began with a proposal that included two essential questions to guide the three stages of the project. From that point to now I have engaged in a literature review on the relationship between Jews and visual art, conducted interviews with subject matter experts in the field, and analyzed the data collected through my interviews using grounded theory.

### Reviewing Relevant Literature

Initial research was completed through a literature review of biblical, rabbinic, and contemporary texts on the relationship between Jews and visual art. I began with passages in *Tanakh* that prohibit the production of representations of God. I read the Second Commandment promoting iconoclasm and also read related verses in Torah. I included commentaries and responsa related to Jews and visual representation and confirmed that visual art and Judaism has often been discussed within the confines of the Second Commandment. Being aware of other passages in *Tanakh* that celebrate visual culture, I reviewed Exodus 15:2 that speaks about beautifying God and serves as the foundational textual proof for *Hiddur Mitzvah*. From there I read relevant commentaries on *Hiddur Mitzvah* including historical surveys on Judaica because *Hiddur Mitzvah* has often been the impetus behind the creation of Judaica. I also read the passages in *Tanakh* that discuss the design and construction of the *Mishkan* and delved into rabbinic and contemporary commentaries on the significance of the *Mishkan* and how this event in biblical history

continues to impact how Jews view the relationship between creativity, community, and holiness.

As I conducted the literature review, I took notes on my findings and quotations from the *Tanakh*, responsa, and commentaries that I thought would be pertinent to my project later. I recorded these notes onto a single document and grouped them based on theme. From these themes emerged questions that I would later ask my interviewees. The semi-structured interview included questions that I would ask everyone as well as specific interview questions based on type of interviewee. Artists, curators, and arts educators each had their own set of individual questions.

### **Method of Research**

Working with my advisor, I developed a pool of potential interviewees who were active practitioners in the art fields that related to my essential questions so that this included Jewish artists, curators of Jewish art, and Jewish arts educators. I developed a list of twenty-nine possible interviewees and ended up contacting eighteen interviewees. I began by reaching out to a small portion of these interviewees in June of 2019 emailing them with the purpose of my project and the two essential questions I hoped to answer. Once interviewees agreed to be interviewed and an interview time was scheduled, I asked them to sign a consent form that notified them of the confidentiality of the information obtained through their interview. Throughout the summer of 2019 I continued reaching out to interviewees and conducting my interviews. Each interview was conducted either in

person or via video call and I recorded the interviews so that they could later be transcribed and analyzed.

In total, fourteen interviews were ultimately conducted. The interviewees' ages ranged from their twenties to their eighties. I interviewed eleven females and three males. Thirteen live and work in the United States and one presently lives and works in Israel. I interviewed four arts educators, eight artists, and two curators. A limit of my research is that my interviewee pool consists of predominantly females (11/14) who might share particular experiences and worldviews because of their gender. Another limitation of my research is that the significant majority of my interviewees (13/14) live and work in the United States which again, could be providing a limited sampling of experiences and worldview. Finally, the small sample size and the ratio of each type of interviewee, arts-educator, artist, and curators may create a particular skew to the results.

### **Approaches to Analysis**

All interviewees were completed by September 2019 and I then transcribed the interviews. I utilized an automated transcription service, Rev.com<sup>32</sup> that transcribed the interviews with eighty percent accuracy. Once each interview was transcribed using this service, I read the interviews and corrected transcription errors.

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<sup>32</sup> "Transcribe Audio to Text: Transcription Company & Website," Rev, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.rev.com/>.

After the interviews were all transcribed and collected into a single folder, I began my analysis using a version of grounded theory. This means that meaning units and ultimately theory are “discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to a particular phenomenon.”<sup>33</sup> I created a spreadsheet that contained columns for all of my interview questions. Next, I inserted the answers from all of my interviewees into the corresponding columns. I then color coded the answers based on recurring theme. Once a color was applied to each answer, I collected all of the answers into a single document organized by color coded theme. I then read through all of the quotes in each theme section and established meaning units based on themes that arose in a majority of my interviewees. The process was iterative, meaning that I constantly moved between interview transcriptions and changed the color codes and later meaning units based on findings as they arose. In the end, certain questions that I thought would bring fruitful answers turned out to be less relevant to the meaning units with which I ended up. Conversely, unanticipated meaning units ended up arising from questions to interviewees that I did not predict.

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<sup>33</sup> Japhet Eke Lawrence and Usman A Tar, “The Use of Grounded Theory Technique as a Practical Tool for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis,” (University of Kurdistan-Hawler, 2013), 30.

## Results

Fourteen interviews were conducted over a three-month period including eleven female and three male interviewees. Each interview started with quantitative questions like age, interviewees ranged from 20s to 80, before exploring open ended qualitative questions that would provide answers about the interviewees' thoughts, lives, and careers. Thirteen lived and worked in the United States and one lived and worked in Israel. Interviewees included four arts educators, eight artists, and two curators. The majority of my interviewees (10/14) were not formally trained for their later artistic work.

In total, eight meaning units emerged from my findings:

- 1) Creative Childhood Environments Encourage Creativity Later in Life
- 2) The Second Commandment Has Impacted But Not Blocked Jewish Visual Art Creation
- 3) Visual Art is a Form of Midrash
- 4) Visual Art Is a Method for Exploring Personal and Jewish Identity
- 5) Visual Art Fosters Social Connection
- 6) Jews Can Be Both a "People of the Book" and a "People of Creative Expression"
- 7) Creating Visual Art Can Be a Spiritual Practice
- 8) Creating Visual Art Can Be a Holy Endeavor

### **Creative Childhood Environments Encourage Creativity Later in Life**

Ten out of the fifteen interviewees grew up in environments that encouraged creative exploration and inspired them to explore visual art later in life. Sometimes, this creative exploration specifically included the exploration of visual art. For instance, one interviewee said, "My mother was artistic and my father was an architect so I always say I grew up in a museum. Even as a child, they used to take me to museums so that, that really informed, I think, my taste in art that's very ingrained in me." Another interviewee

explained that whenever she was upset as a child, her mother would ask, “Have you made art about it yet?” She added that this was, “annoying to me as a nine-year-old and now [it is a] very profound teaching to me about the fact that the answers exist either within me or that within myself, I can find a way to kind of access and call in the answers.” A different interviewee said that she began attending Saturday art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago when she was six years old and three years or so later she confidently announced to her parents that she wanted to be an artist. Her parents encouraged this path as she recounted:

They took me very seriously. It wasn’t some childish resolution...my parents had already been taking me to the Art Institute. I had met a number of artists because my parents had friends who were artists and Jewish. It wasn’t as far-fetched as it might have been for some other child to say. It was just a passion when I was really young, you know, like eight or nine or ten.

Another interviewee explained how the creative exploration of her childhood not only focused on art but also on play. While growing up, this interviewee’s mother owned a children’s play center and the interviewee would be there after most school days playing, writing creatively, and making art. It was not until college that she had a formal place to express herself through art, yet her mother’s play center was the incubator where creativity was fostered and it provided her later inspiration to study the visual arts.

The majority of my interviewees were encouraged to get creative from an early age. They learned to view creativity as something fun and as a healthy outlet for personal expression. As they grew into adulthood, they continued orienting themselves to the world through art and creativity. Creativity became their passion and, for many, their profession.

### **The Second Commandment Has Impacted But Not Blocked Jewish Visual Art Creation**

Interviewees often mentioned the Second Commandment which prohibits the use of visual images that represent God but does not completely reject artistic creation.

Referencing the Second Commandment, one interviewee said, “There is a complicated sort of relationship because we are a people who do not believe in idolatry. So our use of visual and emblematic things to tell our story is sort of rare in a way.” Another said, “A lot of Jewish art is Judaica, used in rituals, and not seen as ‘art.’” Speaking about the general public, and other interviewee said, “Generally, people don't think, you know, there was a lot of visual art in Judaism, which of course it's wrong.” Indeed, even the interviewees had a complex relationship with the Second Commandment, both understanding aspects of it but also being influenced by it in ways that suggest that they have also participated in the larger general misunderstanding about the commandment.

Although the interviewees acknowledged that the notion that Jews do not or should not create art is ultimately a misconception, their answers on this topic were vague, indicating a self-consciousness and some awareness that they are ignoring a misconception that has persisted particularly since the nineteenth century due to Western scholarship on art history. A fourth interviewee directly addressed the issue referencing the Second Commandment but then explained that she no longer worries that she is defying Jewish law [the Second Commandment] when she creates visual art. She stated, “The Second Commandment, yes or no...I finally just sort of just, I dropped it or I don't think about it.” She realized she can be Jewish and create art since Judaism does not completely reject all

art, but rather the creation of idols. For her, these two aspects can work hand-in-hand without conflict.

Given that the sample size of this project was small, more research on this topic is needed. Because interviewees were aware that they are defying accepted Jewish conceptions about Judaism and art yet not defying Jewish law, it is possible that this is the case with the majority of Jewish artists but unknown at this point. From this survey and for these artists, it seems that misunderstandings about the Second Commandment have affected but not necessarily hindered their Jewish art creation.

### **Visual Art is a Form of Midrash**

Eleven out of the fourteen interviewees explained that art is their way of accessing the Jewish tradition. The interviewees acknowledged that there are many ways besides art that one might connect to Judaism—text, prayer, music, and more—but art is their way. One interviewee stated, “I am not a rabbi. I don’t have a pulpit. I don’t have any other way to, to...Through my art is how I can express these ideas.” Another stated, “I think among the many things that are transformative, visual art is certainly one. Music is certainly one that moves many of us. Dance is another...There’s just a lot.” A third said:

I don’t have any musical ability. I can’t sing. I don’t know Hebrew very well. I’m not a good reader. I don’t like synagogue prayer. So art is my way to participate in being Jewish...It is my way of being Jewish. I’ve finally accepted it. It’s as bonafide a way of being Jewish as anything else.

Many of the interviewees see Jewish artists as a way of following in the footsteps of prolific Jewish commentators and scholars. Instead of adding to the corpus of Jewish

thought through text, these artists do so through their art. Repeatedly, interviewees referred to Jewish visual art as a form of midrash, or again, biblical exegesis. Referring to his style of work, one artist said, “I believe it is a midrash...I start with text and explore the text. I figure out what I want to focus on, what is important to me, and what it means to me...It is a story about a story which seems to me to fall into the broad definition of midrash.”

Another interviewee added a similar perspective with, “Midrash to me is really at the core of Jewish study and of Jewish ideas. It's the idea that nobody has the answer and we can all come up with our own interpretation, you know? And I just, I just love that idea because I think that, to me, is also a parallel with visual art.” Finally, a third said that learning she could create midrash in her own way felt like a revelation and explained, “It was open to me to comment just as much as, you know, Maimonides or Rabbi Akiva...Obviously through my art is the way I'm most qualified to comment or to make observation.” For these artists, Jewish visual art is the format that they had found to explore and interpret Jewish ideas, texts and identity in new forms and directions, in their minds, just another way of creating midrash of their tradition.

Eight out of the fourteen Interviewees explained that they have always oriented themselves to the world through visual arts. Many felt liberated when realizing they could orient themselves to Judaism in this way too. For example, someone stated, “Art is my whole life. It, it's my go-to subject or my go-to thing to do. I read aggregators everyday with art news from all over the world. You know, I don't read it all, but it's, it's my, my everything. It's my way of accessing the world.” Another person articulated how she felt when she realized that she could comment on Judaism through the art that has always

animated her life: “I think for me that was probably a watershed moment, realizing that with my art I could comment on the text...That was quite powerful. That was quite a wonderful discovery.” Speaking about the values or texts that this person chooses to comment on through their art, another interviewee stated, “I sort of store it up and it comes back to me...I have to say something about it. It’s urgent. It’s pushing me. It’s telling me that it needs to be said in a different way. It needs to be said in an art form because that’s the way that I speak.”

Jewish tradition promotes midrash, or exegesis as a way of exploring texts and ideas and traditionally in the past, midrash has only been conducted using text. However, the interviewees also see themselves as participating in this tradition and the majority of them see their work as a creative form of midrash. They have always understood and engaged with the world through art and creativity, and have learned to also engage with and comment on Judaism in that way as well.

### **Visual Art Is a Method for Exploring Personal and Jewish Identity**

Nine out of the fourteen interviewees spoke about the ways in which visual art has allowed them to discover previously unknown parts of themselves. In speaking about the process of art creation, one said, “It transforms the relationship that a person has between the practice, the concept, the item and themselves.” She later added, “Art allows us to explore different understandings of self that you may not be able to do on your own. It has the opportunity to be personal and private enough for relationship between you, your conscious yourself, and God in a way that public interaction does not have.” Another spoke

about how her relationship with art taught her that, “answers exist either within me or that within myself, I can find a way to kind of access and call in the answers, which I really see as like a spiritual process. And that art making is a pathway for doing that.” One artist spoke about how she feels when getting into the flow of her creative process explaining:

Part of what happens I think when you are an artist is that you get very, yeah, you need to go into that space. You can tell it becomes a need. It's such an important place to be in connection with yourself and whatever you're making. It is for me a little beyond the verbal discourse. Maybe if I was a writer, I would translate it into words more, but basically you want to go downstairs and go work. It's the wellspring, you know. It's work. If you really lose yourself in it, paradoxically you do not lose yourself. You find yourself.

Another added a similar perspective with, “I think it allows people to reach deeper into themselves, to do things that are not necessarily verbal, to be able to reach places within themselves. So through art...it has been able to allow them to be more full open as human beings.” One artist spoke about a personal experience in which her work was on display at the San Francisco Jewish Museum. Looking back at the experience, she thinks that her artwork helped an assimilated viewer connect to his Jewish heritage. The artist explained:

I'll always remember this, there was a man. Keep in mind that this was happening in the San Francisco Jewish Museum which has a big history of assimilation with the Jewish community. That gives you a sense of who this person may have been. I remember him saying to me how emotional this impact, the impact was for him and seeing this scene, seeing this....But I will always remember him saying, “I don't know what it is. Like it's impacting me so much” ....It's so, it's so powerful.

The interviewees spoke not only about how art helps them learn about themselves in general but also how art helps themselves and others learn about their Jewish identities. They believe that this process works both for artists who create art and also viewers of art.

“I think art certainly helps bring people to a deeper sense of their Jewish identity and practice,” said one artist. In speaking about his *ketubah* artwork, the person added:

I think for a lot of people who may not be sure of their Jewish identity or practice or how they connect to Jewish ritual, I think the *ketubah* is a way... I was trying to find a way to bring two people together and get them to express their Jewish identity in a way that was not just verbal, but also visual.

A curator reflected, “Many Jewish artists who were really quite secular have been able to acquire knowledge, to experience, to relate to, to connect” to their Judaism through their art.” An arts educator explained how she wrote her capstone project in college on the creative process and exploring how, “this process could be used to hold and process the emotional component of intellectual work.” She said, “It was sort of through that work that I sort of came back into my Judaism.” Thus, by exploring the power of visual art, she and others unintentionally also explored and returned to or had greater awareness of their Judaism.

### **Visual Art Fosters Social Connection**

Interviewees frequently explained that art is one way that they learn about life, varying life experiences, and feel resultant empathy with those life experiences. By opening themselves to new ways of thinking and living, they learned that there is no one correct way to exist and they have more compassion and openness toward difference. One interviewee said that the arts are, “critical in developing empathy and the idea that there is more than one answer...There is no one right way to do anything and cultural differences can both be true.” Another added a similar sentiment with, “Art gives us the ability to experience things we have not seen in ourselves or understood to be possible.” A third added that art has the

ability “to catapult us into different times and places and emotional states and skin colors and races and genders and sexualities.” One interviewee explained that art that focuses on Jewish characters and stories can help people to understand and relate to Jewish stories.

Then, the tradition comes alive and feels relatable in new ways:

Viewing and interpreting artistic renditions of the stories, the characters, the heroes that are familiar to us allow us to access them in a different way and so we can see different possibilities of what a particular character could have been like...When you look at different renderings of Sarah or Esther or Vashti, to be able to understand there are other or there potentially could have been other sides of their personality [besides] what we see in the text—because our texts give us really only a limited narrative from the perspective of the women in the Torah, for example—[you] understand other sides of the story. And that's why we have such a rich history of interpretation and commentary and so artistic renderings allow us to do that as well.

Further, art can be an agent that opens people up to others and builds relationships.

One interviewee said, “I think that art is a social experience, or it can be.” Another expressed how transcending the literal takes pressure off of social differences and allows people to open themselves up to shared humanity:

I think the process of making visual art or viewing visual art is transformative for me because it does transcend language and the boundaries that that can create. I love that when I travel, I go to a museum and I have the same experience in the Jerusalem Museum that I have at the MET in New York. I don't need to know the language. I see and I feel and I question and I'm able to pick apart something that transcends all of that.

When people do not have to define everything according to language but can instead express things visually, then language can no longer create boundaries or limitations.

Everyone, regardless of language or background can participate in the visual and through the communal act of creation can bring about social connection. One interviewee shared:

I think what's important about it is that it allows people to be in parallel process with one another, held in the same space, able to witness what one another is

feeling and saying without having to actually like engage with one another. And I don't think we have enough spaces for that to happen... I think the value it did for me or what I think it did for community was it allowed us to open to the shared humanity of each other in a way that was being, was much more difficult or, or being blocked by having discussions with one another.

Visual art, both the viewing of and creating of, helps individuals develop empathy and this results in social connection. Visualizations of Jewish characters and stories illuminate the Jewish tradition. Visual art does not create the same barriers often caused by the limitations of language. When people create together, that shared experience brings people together. Art has the power to unite in unique ways.

### **Jews Can Be Both a “People of the Book” and a “People of Creative Expression”**

The artists, educators, and curators working with visual art that I interviewed all acknowledged the intertwined relationship between Judaism and text. In fact, many of the people to whom I spoke were first introduced to Judaism through books or have found books to be integral to their artistic work. In speaking about how she became interested in Judaism, one interviewee highlighted the importance of books for her. “I poured over them and poured over them and really tried to give myself as much Jewish education as I could. I discovered themes. There were lots of symbols...That's the way that I really started.” Another explained, “My avenue [to Judaism] was through books.” A third said, “I’ll read Jewish books if they’re supporting what I am trying to do. So, for instance, when I was doing the...series, I went and...read commentary and stuff like that because I wasn't going to glean everything from the texts, not being a scholar.” A fourth said, “My work has ended up being...very consumed with books and with combining images and texts—my own texts, but

also sometimes combining my images with other people's texts. I'll collaborate sometimes with writers and their books."

Two interviewees specifically talked about the importance of poetry in their Jewish journeys. In speaking about her first foray into Jewish art through calligraphy, one artist shared, "I'd like reading the, you know, the poem...the poetry and translation and I loved being able to do the letters." Another talked about the poetic medium of Psalms: "In the early days, I used to read Psalms a lot. I'm not a linear reader so much, you know, of text and so sometimes it would just be in relationship to the book and I would just open the page and wherever it was, I would delve into what that was."

However, while the interviewees valued text and books, many of them also acknowledged the limitations of the title, "People of the Book." They thought that text and visual art can and should be used together to help people understand Judaism in new ways. One interviewee stated:

I think the arts have often been marginalized...as an adult I discovered that there were other ways of understanding, viewing and expressing what's in those books...I think what the arts provide is, is a way of interpreting our tradition that can build bridges to our contemporary experience in ways that the letter might not alone be able to. [I] wouldn't want to completely get rid of "People of the Book" but, in the spirit of our tradition of interpretation and commentary, to continue to build more scaffolds of commentary around it that is more creative. So, you know, if we want to stick to this book priority, maybe engagement with the arts can actually help us continue to engage with that legacy.

Another interviewee stated, "Well, you know, I think ["People of the Book" has] given us a little bit of short shrift, if you will...I certainly am a big advocate of literacy...But again, I still think that it needs to be opened up." A third interviewee talked about literacy and creativity as two strands of the Jewish DNA:

I talked about these almost, like our DNA strands. We have intellect and intuitive imaginative and both are essential. I think we have, for lots of very good reasons over time and because of survival and all kinds of things, overdeveloped the intellectual side and sort of let the intuitive imaginative side sort of lag. We're being called upon now to strengthen that strand and weave those two together.

Their message was that Jewish books and Jewish visual art need not be antithetical to one another. Instead, Jewish books do and should bolster the use and creation of Jewish visual art. Similarly, Jewish visual art can elucidate points made through text. Interviewees felt that art and text are both important and equally valid access points into Judaism.

### **Creating Visual Art Can Be a Spiritual Practice**

Some interviewees explained that art is their spiritual practice. One stated, "I think religion when it was truly observed, whether [it is] Judaism or another, you know, it has intended to provide meaning for people. Religion has done that and art has done that and sometimes they've done it together and sometimes they've done it apart." One interviewee referenced the nineteenth century American Jewish painter Mark Rothko and said, "You can almost *daven* to those things. I know people do." A third interviewee added that her art practice and her spiritual practice developed in tandem: "So that was I think...the beginning of the development of my spirituality and seeing my art as part of that." In speaking about her creative process, a fourth interviewee stated, "I really see [it] as like a spiritual process and that art making is a pathway for doing that." Another explained:

In a way, art is like, like a religion. It's like religion. You sacrifice for it. It contains and restrains your behavior. For me personally, I don't travel without the implements, you know, the, the implements of it. You know, like some people wouldn't go out without their, they wouldn't travel without their tefillin or without their prayer book. I don't go anywhere without my drawing pencil and my sketch pads.

In other words, for many, spirituality in the traditional sense or format does not draw them into Judaism. They may not enjoy praying in traditional worship services or meditating or singing spiritually. Instead, their art is their spiritual practice. In the words of one interviewee, art is her, “guiding force.”

### **Creating Visual Art Can Be a Holy Endeavor**

Many of the interviewees believe that their creative work is holy in that it follows in God’s footsteps and elevates humanity. One interviewee explained:

You are putting a piece of yourself into everything you create. We are *betzelem Elohim* and that is because God puts a piece of God’s self into every creation. When you create something, it is a piece of yourself that you are putting into the world. And if we are holy and in the image of God, that is because God puts a piece of God’s self into the world. If we are holy then everything we put into the world is holy.

Additionally, an interviewee expressed that creativity is a wonderful capacity given to humanity by God:

Creating—creating a child or creating meaning or creating literature or visual arts or a musical composition—you know, you're reenacting creation. You are evoking it...That's wonderful that human beings have this capacity. It is one of our absolutely best characteristics that we are makers, meaning makers...all these different forms of making that convey meaning, significance, holiness.

One curator thought that “artists are connected to some kind of a divine spark.” She continued by adding, “I think that they see things we don't see. I think that they understand things in ways that we who are not artists don't understand...They are our channel in a way to that kind of a way of seeing the world... I think it is kind of divinely connected.”

Supporting the idea artists are connected to divine spark, another interviewee added, “I

sort of look at my creativity and my art talent as my, you know, by a gift from God, if you will. I mean, it's the most spiritual thing that I can think about in myself." A fifth interviewee her thoughts on the holiness of artistic creation with:

We talk about *Bereshit Bara Elohim*, the first three words of the Torah... God created. God is first and foremost the creative force of the universe. It is from that initial act that all of the world and our lives unfold... We are created, Torah teaches, *betzelem Elohim*, in the image of that divine creative force. So God is a creative force of the universe and we're in that image. Each and every one of us are endowed with creative capacity. And not only is it a deep need that we have as humans to be in touch with that creative capacity, but it is, I think an important pathway for connection to the divine when we can access that place in ourselves.

The interviewees thus expressed that art is one way of becoming close with God or fulfilling the holy potential that God gave to humanity. These interviewees expressed the belief that God intentionally endowed humanity with the creative capacity. They therefore implied that using this creativity is one way of fulfilling God's intentions for humanity. Art is not only a way of visually representing or highlighting the holy. Instead, the act of engaging with art, either through creation or enjoyment, is holy in itself.

## Discussion

Two essential questions guided this capstone project: 1) How has visual art historically and how does it currently help individuals and Jewish communities access the Jewish tradition? 2) What is the intellectually, socially and spiritually transformative power of Jewish visual art? Through my literature review and interviews, I learned that visual art has been helping individuals access the Jewish tradition for centuries and continues allowing for access today. I learned that visual art is a powerful tool for transforming individuals, communities, and societies in intellectual, spiritual, and social ways. Although visual art has traditionally not been viewed as essential to Judaism, this is a misunderstanding of the relationship between Jews and visual art. Visual art has been and will continue to be integral to the Jewish tradition.

Due to my time interning at the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, I already had some experience in the field of Jewish visual art before I began this project. Because I worked with the vast collection of Judaic objects that the Magnes Collection houses, I knew that Jewish communities have always seen the value on art and aesthetics. At the same time, I was aware that art history scholarship beginning in the nineteenth century often pointed out the Second Commandment—that speaks to the Jewish ban on images that represent God—and promoted the misconception that Judaism does not value visual art. This perspective was often promoted by nineteenth century Western and often Christian art historians that did not fully understand or respect Jewish tradition. With my literature review and interviews, I confirmed that the nineteenth century art history perspective on Jews and art is untrue. However, I also noticed that although the Second Commandment

has not completely hindered Jewish visual art creation, it has impacted Jewish visual art creation. This is evidenced by the passage in Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4 in which Rabban Gamliel III is questioned as he uses the baths in the presence of the statue of Aphrodite. Here, like in nineteenth century art history scholarship, a Greek outsider misinterprets the Second Commandment. He tries to suggest that Rabban Gamliel is doing something wrong or profane. In contemporary times, many of my interviewees mentioned the Second Commandment while speaking about their artistic work. This mentioning may indicate an awareness that they are defying a common misconception that Jews do not create or enjoy visual art. My research tells me that although visual art is acceptable within the confines of the Second Commandment, it has led many Jewish people throughout history to be confused or fearful of visual art creation by Jews or on Jewish themes. Perhaps this fear has altered Jewish engagement with visual art and has kept it from being as prolific as could have been possible until our current time period.

Before beginning this project I knew some information about Bezalel, the first known artist in Jewish tradition. I understood that God appoints Bezalel with the task of designing and constructing the *Mishkan* because he and God share a special relationship and this relationship imbues Bezalel with special skill. Through my literature review I examined the name, Bezalel, and asked myself what it means for Bezalel to be “in God’s shadow.” I also wondered about the linguistic connection between Bezalel and *Betzelem Elohim*, or, “in God’s image.” Perhaps creating art can be a way of getting close in both proximity and relationship to God. Perhaps when we get this close to God, we mirror God’s holiness. Enjoying or creating visual art, therefore, becomes a holy endeavor. For example,

one curator thought that artists have some sort of “divine spark” and implied that part of God’s holiness is in the artist and the art pieces that they created. Additionally, one of the artists whom I interviewed referred to her skill as a “gift from God.” Interviewees conveyed the notion that God gave humanity the ability to create and wants us to create. When we act on the creative spark, we fulfill a potential that God intended for humanity as God intended for Bezalel in biblical times. Creating art is one of the most holy endeavors in which a person can engage. Art elevates humanity and brings us closer in proximity and relationship to the Divine.

As I learned about the building of the *Mishkan* through my literature review and interviews, I also better understood how art creation can be an endeavor that fosters community. This point was confirmed as I read about the scholarship of modern educators like Ken Robinson who wrote about the power of art to help people understand others and be more empathetic to difference. The interviewees again supported this point, explaining how art can be one method of helping people step into the shoes of others and encouraging them to work with others to build community. Tellingly, one interview stated that the arts are “critical in developing empathy and the idea that there is more than one answer...There is no one right way to do anything and cultural differences can both be true.” Others claimed that art is transformative because it allows people to transcend language and bond over shared experiences regardless of background. This point was summarized with when one interviewee referenced her own personal experience in a communal art-making space, stating, “it allowed us to open to the shared humanity of each other in a way that was being, was much more difficult or, or being blocked by having discussions with one

another.” By working with others in the creative process or seeing a visual representation of a Jewish story or character’s experience, we have a better understanding and acceptance of those others, even if they are different from us. This understanding may help people feel connected to a larger purpose or to shared desires that all of humanity shares. This empathy and fostered sense of belonging may inspire people to work with others and can lead to a stronger and more unified community or even society.

At the beginning of this project, I sensed not only that art transforms and ultimately builds community or society but that it also transforms individuals. My literature review pointed me to John Dewey, who writes that the process of art creation is also an inner process of self-examination and transformation. Through creation, he writes, “the inner material of emotion and idea is as much transformed through acting and being acted upon by objective material as the latter undergoes modification when it becomes a medium of expression.”<sup>34</sup> Elliot Eisner says that art creation “enables us to stop looking over our shoulder and to direct our attention inward to what we believe or feel. Such a disposition is at the root of the development of individual autonomy.”<sup>35</sup> My interviewees too spoke about how their artistic work has transformed them as individuals. Nine out of the fourteen interviewees specifically noted that visual art has allowed them to discover new aspects of themselves. For instance, one interviewee stated, “Art allows us to explore different understandings of self.” Another described how art has allowed her to find herself, stating,

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<sup>34</sup> Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 79-80

<sup>35</sup> Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, 10

“If you really lose yourself in it, paradoxically you do not lose yourself. You find yourself.”

My project provides support for the idea that art is not purely about creating beautiful finished pieces. As the literature review and the interviewees confirmed, the creative process itself holds value because it forces the creator to look into themselves, examine their feelings and values, and then express these feelings and values. It forces interaction between inner self and outer world and in doing so, it opens opportunity for a creator to examine how their thoughts and actions interact with everything that surrounds. The creative process requires self-reflection and inner discovery and changes people so that they act differently in the world.

This project has made me more fully aware of how the commandment of *Hiddur Mitzvah* has inspired Jews to create visual art for centuries. I also realize that in contemporary times, Jewish artists often create art that speak about their Jewish values or about their Jewish understandings of texts. Even though this art is not created for *Hiddur Mitzvah*, it is also art in its own right. Not only that, but this art is also a valuable tool that allows people to appreciate and relate to Jewish traditions in unique ways. For example, the Sarajevo Haggadah visually depicts monumental events throughout Jewish history. This may have allowed readers of the Haggadah to vividly imagine Jewish history and even place themselves into moments in Jewish time that were experienced by their ancestors. One interviewee stated, “Viewing and interpreting artistic renditions of the stories, the characters, the heroes that are familiar to us allow us to access them in a different way and so we can see different possibilities of what a particular character could have been like.” In other words, visuals make text come alive in profound ways that make the text more

compelling and relatable. In the fourteenth century, Profiat Duran even claimed that visual artistry aids contemplation and memory. He thought that beautiful books and beautiful study halls make people want to study. My interviewees elaborated on this point further, expressing how art provides a unique avenue into the Jewish tradition. For example, one interviewee stated that her art is as, “bonafide a way of being Jewish as anything else.” For her, art is her way into Judaism. Another interviewee saw his art as being an entry point for others. He stated, “I think for a lot of people who may not be sure of their Jewish identity or practice or how they connect to Jewish ritual, I think the *ketubah* is a way.” The *ketubah* therefore is one example of a piece of text that people create in order to fulfill an aspect of Jewish law and mark a meaningful transitional moment in their lives. The tradition of *Hiddur Mitzvah* has compelled Jews for centuries to do this in an artistic manner.

Before embarking on this project, I knew that midrash is a traditional and lauded way of engaging with Jewish text. This project taught me that visual art can be its own form of midrash. Jo Milgrom wrote about visual art as midrash in her 1992 book, *Handmade Midrash*. She articulated a new path whereby the visual art workshops she offers draw upon traditional midrash methods while creating something new and transformative for participants. She writes that her workshops “move beyond these [traditional Jewish engagements with text] to form new synthesis...to create a new discipline.”<sup>36</sup> Many interviewees spoke specifically about how they view their art as midrash, just as was written by Milgrom. In speaking about his work for example, one interviewee stated, “I

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<sup>36</sup> Milgrom, *Handmade Midrash*, ix.

believe it is a midrash...I start with text and explore the text. I figure out what I want to focus on, what is important to me, and what it means to me...It is a story about a story which seems to me to fall into the broad definition of midrash.” Another interviewee explained that she sees Midrash and visual art as one in the same because both are new interpretations of text. Many interviewees spoke about how they naturally view the world through an artistic lens and so they felt liberated when they realized they could explore Judaism through this lens that feels most comfortable in their lives. One interviewee saw herself as adding her own commentary to the Jewish tradition through her art, much as other Jewish leaders have been doing for thousands of years. Whereas Maimonides, Rabbi Akiva, or other great rabbis added through the medium of text, she is adding something equally invaluable through her art.

One surprising finding from my interviews was that most of my interviewees uplifted books as an important aspect of their creative work. I expected that since artists connect visually to the world, text would be less important to them but I was incorrect. My interviews taught me that Jews can be both a people that maintains its connection to text as well as a people of creative expression. Many of my interviewees were first introduced to Judaism through texts that included both encyclopedic and introductory books on Judaism as well as books on psalms and Jewish poetry. In talking about books, one interviewee exclaimed, “I poured over them and poured over them and really tried to give myself as much Jewish education as I could.” Another credited books as her initial avenue into Judaism. One artist spoke about how she still uses books during her projects if they support the work that she is trying to create. My interviewees made me realize that that Jews will

forever be a, “People of the Book” But that through this tradition, another path emerges, that of “People of Creative Expression.” In the words of one of my interviewees who spoke about the Jewish intellectual and creative traditions, she stated, “We're being called upon now to strengthen that strand and weave those two together.” While I think that I felt this in my own heart, it was validating to hear the same sentiments from the interviewees. We can be both a, “People of the Book,” and a “People of Creative Expression.”

All aspects of this project point to the importance of visual art creation in Jewish tradition. My personal experience and the literature review made me think about this importance but then my interviews provided firsthand examples. When visual art is included in Jewish spaces, new people access Judaism, engage spiritually and ritually, learn Jewish texts and values, dive into themselves, and build community together. Visual art is a powerful tool for enriching Jewish community and society at large.

## Conclusion

This capstone project began because I have a desire to fuse my passion for visual art with my passion for Judaism. My initial research and interviews confirmed that Judaism and visual art have existed in tandem for centuries and that Jewish individuals and communities come alive in profound ways when visual art is part of the Jewish experience. This project has given me new language to both understand the connection between and benefits of art and Judaism, and a greater ability to share that understanding with others. I now have a much stronger foundation for understanding and explaining why I want visual art experiences to be a central component of my rabbinate.

Moving forward, I aim to highlight the understanding that Judaism and art have always existed in tandem. My personal experience and the research of this project point to the fact that people tend not to think that the two can comfortably exist together. Although interviewees did not speak about seeing themselves as modern version of Bezalel, creating holy space through artistry, I see contemporary Jewish artwork as following in a long tradition that begins with Bezalel and continues today. Many of my interviewees did not even know who Bezalel was or did not understand that as Jewish artists, they were engaging in the holy creative work that made Bezalel so special and close to God. When we leave Bezalel out of our lists of Jewish heroes, this negates the gifts that he brought to the Jewish tradition and it teaches that art, or really anything beyond text, prayer, or loving-kindness, is not a viable way of being Jewish. As one of my interviewees stated referring to art and other modalities, "I would love to see...diversity in the way that we approach Jewish learning and teaching." One need not be like the rabbis of the Talmud or Maimonides who

contributed to Jewish tradition through text. If one does not connect to Judaism or to the Divine through prayer, there are other pathways. Promoting loving-kindness or even translating this as actions of social justice is not the only way of making one's self heard in Judaism. I want to make known that there are many access points for Jews to encounter their tradition and all are equally valid. Further, these methods can enrich the Jewish community and make their tradition relatable for greater numbers of people. Part of my rabbinic calling will be to share and elevate art as one of those bridges to Judaism. My work will serve as a model of how Judaism can be accessed and explored in ways that match all human passions, talents, and interests.

I had the opportunity to test this goal as I offered an arts-based workshop for college students during the 2019 High Holiday season at Berkeley Hillel. This workshop was titled, "Writing the Books of Our Lives," and served as an alternative to a traditional Rosh Hashanah morning service. I framed the workshop with an opening teaching that explained that the High Holidays are a time to think about the metaphoric "Book of Life." Jewish tradition teaches that through *teshuva*, repentance, *tefilla*, prayer, and *tzedakah*, good deeds, people can earn themselves a spot in this "Book of Life" and enjoy a prosperous new Jewish year. After the initial teaching, I provided materials and guidance for students to create their own art journals in order to creatively express their fears, concerns, desires, and more for the year ahead. The students who participated in this workshop did not consider themselves artists, yet they were willing to engage with Judaism through artistic means. This workshop became an example that creative expression through art and Judaism can successfully exist hand in hand. It showed that traditional Jewish teachings, in

this case on *tshuva*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*, need not only be explored through text. For students who did not wish to attend a traditional prayer service, it showed that art can open space for spiritual transformation too. There is no one right way of being or doing Jewish. Students had an opportunity to do the reflective work of going into themselves and setting action goals through what they discovered during their own creative processes. As one of my interviewees stated, creation, “is such an important place to be in connection with yourself and whatever you're making...If you really lose yourself in it, paradoxically you do not lose yourself. You find yourself.”

Art in Jewish spaces not only helps individuals in personal ways. Art in Jewish spaces also strengthens Jewish community. In her capstone report as part of the requirements for ordination at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Rabbi Miriam Terlinchamp wrote about the socially unifying power of art to bring people together. Through my rabbinic internship at Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles, I have offered arts-based classes and workshops to children and adults. During one recent workshop, elementary students and their parents joined together to create a communal “helping hands” collage. Each student decorated a hand. Each finger on each hand contained one commitment to help one of the communities to which they belong. When each student and their parents had created their hand, they added it to the larger collage. In this way, their art represented how they joined as one and were a part of their larger communities.

The purpose of the “helping hands” collage was not only to create the finished collage. The purpose was also to bring people together through the creative process. As with the building of the *Mishkan* in which all Israelites were invited to contribute materials

or their skills, all of my students and their parents were invited to contribute their ideas and creative energies. They did this through their thinking about their communities and their resultant creation of their hands. One hand alone would not have made a collage. Everyone was necessary in order to build something greater than themselves, together. The finished collage now hangs at Leo Baeck Temple and reminds onlookers of the power of creativity to unify. David Ebenbach wrote about the power of art to make people feel less alone in their understanding of the holiness and beauty, challenge and pain of the world. After the research of this project and through my own personal experience, I too understand that art fosters human understanding and unification.

Judaism and art both challenge people to be better and to make the world a better place. Judaism demands that Jews monitor their actions and constantly reflect on how their actions demonstrate holiness in the world. Leviticus 19:2, the verse placed in the exact center of Torah, tells readers, “You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy.” The artistic process helps people find, demonstrate, and experience holiness too so that they can be inspired to act holy in the world. The interviewees shared this sentiment by noting that artists contain a spark of the Divine or that God intentionally created human beings with creative holy potential. Moreover, creation allows people to look into themselves, determine who they are and who they want to be, and to express their ideas and identities. It forces people to constantly be examining themselves and asking themselves if they and the world around them are living up to holy potential. In my rabbinic work, I aspire to show that both art and Judaism are about transformation through process. Both inspire transformation from what currently exists to what can be possible.

Workshops and other Jewish programmatic offerings like that at Berkeley Hillel and Leo Baeck Temple can transform the inner lives of individual Jewish people, particularly those that relate to the world or are curious about exploring the world through creative means. For them, art may be the specific place that allows them to experience their holiness. Without arts opportunities, they may never understand themselves or Judaism to their fullest potentials. I plan to widen the understanding of what it means to engage with Judaism through art with the support of what this capstone project has given me. I know that this will make Judaism come alive for some in new and unforeseen ways and broaden and enrich the Jewish community.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Questions

#### Project Introduction Shared with Each Interviewee at the Start of Each Interview:

Art has been celebrated in Jewish text and culture for centuries. The role of a rabbi or Jewish educator is to help Jews find personal meaning in Judaism. As someone whose clearest pathway toward this meaning is through the visual arts, I want to understand how art has played a role historically in helping Jewish people to access the divine and find personal relevance in the Jewish tradition as well as in our current contemporary context. I will examine how this is true for both viewers and creators of art through my own research on how art is treated in biblical and rabbinic texts and by interviewing artists, curators, and applicators in the Jewish art world. In the long term, I hope that this will provide a pathway for how I can employ visual art in my future rabbinate. My project will be guided by the following essential questions:

1. How has visual art historically and how does it currently help individuals and Jewish communities access the Jewish tradition?
2. What is the spiritually, intellectually, and socially transformative power of art?

#### Interview Questions:

- Tell me about yourself and your background.
  - Did you have some sort of formal art education?
    - If so, what was it?

- If no, where did you gain your skill and knowledge?
- Did you have some sort of Jewish education background or were you self-taught?
- How did you come to this path? [of being an artist/educator/curator/thinker]
  - Did you always want to go down this career path?
    - If no, how did it evolve?
- How long have you been working at your craft?
- How would you define yourself professionally?
- Has visual art **historically** helped individuals and Jewish communities access the Jewish tradition? Y/N
  - If yes, how has visual art historically helped individuals and Jewish communities access the Jewish tradition?
  - If no, why not?
- **Currently**, is visual art helping individuals and Jewish communities access the Jewish tradition?
  - If yes, how is visual art currently helping individuals and Jewish communities access the Jewish tradition?
  - If no, why not?
- What do you see as the transformative power of art?
  - Are there unique aspects to this particular genre [art versus a different field like science] that make it transformative?
- What is the **intellectually** transformative power of Jewish art?

- What about the power for Jewish art to be **spiritually** transformative?
- What about the power for Jewish art to be **socially** transformative?
- Is Jewish art transformative in ways I have not asked about?
- Why is using art (making, curating, educating with) a “Jewish thing to do?” Or, not?
- *I want to read you a quote and hear your thoughts on it:*

“Aside from promoting our awareness of aspects of the world we had not experienced consciously before, the arts provide permissions to engage the imagination as a means for exploring new possibilities. The arts liberate us from the literal; they enable us to step into the shoes of others and to experience vicariously what we have not experienced directly. Cultural development depends on such capacities, and the arts play an extraordinarily important role in their contribution to such an aim.”<sup>37</sup>

- What Jewish texts inspire your work?
- Jews call themselves a “People of the Book.” How has this impacted Jewish engagement with art?
  - If you could give Jews a different title that is more conscious of Jewish engagement not just with text but with other creative outlets, what would that title be?

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<sup>37</sup> Elliot W. Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 10.

- What does the concept of *Hiddur Mitzvah* mean to you?
- Has the concept of *Hiddur Mitzvah* helped you to explore art?
  - If yes, in what ways?
  - If no, why not?
- Midrash Tanchuma Pekudei 2:3 *tells us*, “Rabbi Jacob the son of Assi stated, ‘The creation of the Tabernacle is equal to the creation of the world itself.’”
  - How is creating or engaging with art a uniquely holy or “God-like” thing to do?”
- How can art allow people to explore their Jewish identity?
- As final question: Is there something that I have not asked you that would be important for me to know?

#### **Specific Questions Artists:**

- How do you define yourself as an artist?
- *I want to read you a quote and hear your thoughts on it* [also have available on a sheet or have emailed in advance.]

Still, Jewish creation in art has been very vital in this century, and the important thing is that while Jewish artists have not been creating as Jews, they have not been working as non-Jews either. Their art has been the closest expression of themselves as they are, including the fact that they are Jews, each in his individual degree.” (Harold Rosenberg, “Is There a Jewish Art?, *Commentary Magazine*, 1966)

- What do you think about what Rosenberg puts forth?
  - How does your Jewish identity impact your art?
- The biblical figure Bezalel is a rare type in that he is an artist **and** craftsman responsible for shaping the *Mishkan*, or the holy tabernacle that contains God's presence.
  - Has Bezalel ever had any associations or influence on you and your work?
  - If yes, how so?
- In Exodus 31, we learn that Bezalel has a unique and divinely inspired gift for making metalwork designs.
  - How do you partner with the divine while creating your work?

#### **Specific Questions for Curators:**

- *I want to read you a quote and hear your thoughts on it* [also have available on a sheet or have emailed in advance.]

“Instead of continuing in the masquerade of conforming to the model of the American painter by acquiring the mannerisms of European art, American Jewish artists, together with artists of other immigrant backgrounds—Dutchmen, Armenians, Italians, Greeks—began to assert their individual relation to art in an independent and personal way. Artists like Rothko, Newman, Gottlieb, Nevelson, Guston, Lassaw, Rivers, Steinberg, and many others helped to inaugurate a genuine American art by creating as individuals.” (Harold Rosenberg, “Is There a Jewish Art?”, *Commentary Magazine*, 1966)

- After they have shared their free response to the quote, then ask your question on it:
  - How do art museums that represent one particular identity group (say Jews for example) help all people of all backgrounds access and reflect on their identities?
- What are your goals when choosing artwork for a particular exhibition?
- As a curator, how do you hope that your curation/curatorial decisions will affect the experience of a Jewish person who enters your exhibit?

**Specific Questions for Educators:**

- What is current right now in Jewish art education?
- What is working in Jewish art education?
- What is missing in Jewish art education?
  - How would you go about addressing X (whatever they identified as missing)?
- How can we address peoples' anxieties about creating art in Jewish spaces?
- How do you think Jewish arts education impacts adults specifically?
- How does Jewish arts education bridge generational gaps?

## Appendix B: Consent to Participate Form

### HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION SCHOOL OF RABBINICAL STUDIES JACK H. SKIRBALL CAMPUS, LOS ANGELES

#### CAPSTONE PROJECT

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

**DESCRIPTION:** This is a capstone project on Jewish art and its influence on Jewish identity. The researcher, Liora Alban, MAHL, MAJE is exploring how visual art helps individuals and communities access the Jewish tradition. She is also interested in the transformative power of Jewish art.

I am being asked to participate in an interview conversation for this study because of my experiences and/or knowledge that may provide useful information about the subject area under investigation.

The identity of all participants will remain confidential - no names or other identifying information will be disclosed unless permission is expressly given. The researcher, Liora Alban, and her thesis advisor, Dr. Joel L. Kushner ([jkushner@huc.edu](mailto:jkushner@huc.edu)) will be the only ones to have access to the interview material. Unidentified quotes may be used in the final thesis but no personal identifying information will be included, again unless specific permission has been granted.

**To grant permission in advance for a quotation to be directly attributed to you, please sign below.**

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**FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:** Liora Alban, fifth-year rabbinical student in the Rabbinical Program at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion at [Liora.alban@huc.edu](mailto:Liora.alban@huc.edu) or 818-426-1698. You may also contact her thesis advisor, Dr. Joel Kushner, Director, Kalsman Institute on Judaism & Health, HUC-JIR at [jkushner@huc.edu](mailto:jkushner@huc.edu) or 213-765-2140.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** There are no known risks in participating in this study. Benefits include contributing to scholarship about Jewish art, education, and identity.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT:** Interviews may take place in person, on a video platform such as Zoom, or on the phone. Please block out an hour for the interview conversation although in practice

the time has ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes depending on what a particular interviewee has to share.

**AUDIO/VIDEO RECORD:** I understand that my conversation will be recorded. The recording will be heard/seen by Liora Alban and her thesis advisor, Dr. Joel L. Kushner. I understand that at my request, I can also review the recording of the interview conversation.

**PAYMENTS:** There will be no payment for participation in this study.

**PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS:** I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw my consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. I have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. My individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study unless my specific permission has been given to share my identity.

**QUESTIONS:** I have talked with the researcher about this interview and have had my questions answered.

If I have any questions about my rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, I may contact the researcher, Liora Alban, MAHL, MAJE at [liora.alban@huc.edu](mailto:liora.alban@huc.edu) or her thesis advisor, Dr Joel L. Kushner, [jkushner@huc.edu](mailto:jkushner@huc.edu), or the director of the School of Rabbinic Studies at HUC-JIR, Rabbi Dr. Dvora Weisberg at [deweisberg@huc.edu](mailto:deweisberg@huc.edu) to discuss problems, obtain information, or offer input. Mailing address: HUC-JIR, 3077 University Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90007, or call toll-free at 800-899-0925.

By my signature below, I acknowledge that I have read this two-page form, and am agreeing to participate in this research interview which will be recorded. I have also received an extra copy of this consent form for me to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Study Participant

DATE\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Study Participant (Please Print)  
If participant is under 18, a parent must sign:

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

DATE\_\_\_\_\_