

“Out of Distress I Call to You:” Art as an Urban Vehicle for Radical Amazement

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Abstract

Through compilation of texts and secondary sources (both Jewish and non-Jewish art theory), through heavily project-based research and through my own and others' works of art, this thesis argues that art can be an urban vehicle for what Abraham Joshua Heschel calls Radical Amazement. Both processes of observing/appreciating and creating art may serve as ways of achieving a religious transcendence of everyday life, even in a setting that may seem less inviting to this endeavor, such as cities and cosmopolitan landscapes. This thesis contains four chapters. The first one deals with the theory of Awe and Radical Amazement, and how it connects to Jewish tradition. The second chapter explores the contributions of the theory of art to the issue of the spiritual component of art. The third one discusses how appreciating works of art may serve the purpose of generating Radical Amazement in the observer. The last chapter deals with my own personal paintings, as ways of exploring the process of artistic creativity as a person connected to the notion of Radical Amazement. This thesis gives readers an alternative for the pursuit of Awe that is independent of natural beauty, which may not always be accessible in an urban setting. As such, art can indeed become part of an individual's spiritual practice.

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Introduction

Nothing in nature is static. In fact, if one would use the most powerful technologies, one could see that all molecules vibrate. In other words, the chair in which I am sitting right now, as well as the computer on which I currently type, are not still. They, as well as myself, are made of molecules that are in constant movement.

The nature and role of religion can be compared to a microwave oven. A microwave changes the frequency of vibration of water molecules in our food. By changing the rate of oscillation in the specific system of water, the oven generates heat. Molecules are already in motion. Everything that the food needs to be heated is already present. However, warmth is achieved through the participation of another element (the oven) in the process. The same is true for human experience. It is possible that we can live our lives without awareness of the sacred and the awesome in our lives. But that does not mean that we don't have the potential of warming up our souls. All that the religious person, the *homo religiosus*, needs is a vehicle to transform personal potential into actual.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote extensively on the experience of the sacred and how it becomes manifest through human living. He thought that there were three major ways by which a person can develop one's personal awareness of and relationship with God. In fact, those are not to be seen - as Heschel clearly delineates - as separate vehicles of transcendence. They add to each other, and it is the role of an individual to develop one's experience of life through the three different paths to religious consciousness.¹

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), p. 31.

Learning, action and worship are the three paths that lead to one's spiritual development. Learning relates to the study of Torah and informs what Heschel understood as historical and narrative approaches that generate the awareness of God's acting in the world. Action connects to the performance of *mitzvot* as ways of achieving a constant reminder of God's presence, as well as the capacity and responsibility of humans to address it. The third one reflects Isaiah 40:26, as quoted by Heschel: "Lift up your eyes on high and see, Who created these?".

This third piece, worship, evolves into the conception of Radical Amazement, which will be a major theme as this thesis progresses. For now, it is enough to point to the existence of a human potential of transcendence. It is as if God is constantly asking of humans "Ayekah?" ("Where are you?"), the same question that God asked of the first human being, Adam. The all-powerful God, *yodeah ta'alumot* (that knows mysteries), still makes a point of asking Adam where was he, hoping to uncover his potential of spiritual awareness, driving from the human capacity of listening closely to one's surroundings so that one can hear that same question being asked of oneself.

In the age of ultra-fast communications and digital interactions, humans have not necessarily seen an improvement in the quality of their relationships. Even though the expansion of social media makes one's personal network of acquaintances ever more available and immediate, this does not necessarily improve the quality of those relationships. The result is that, although more easily attained, connections are not maintained as strongly as they have been in the past. We have succeeded in making the self available (at least in its

digital form), improving quantity but not to the same extent quality of actual shared human living.

From this point in the history of humankind, these advancements have also affected the *homo religiosus*. Culture and vehicles of communication are directly connected to the way an individual interacts with the environment, society and the world. The way a person constructs and executes the individual quest for God and transcendence is also affected by the same influence and current state of affairs.

Each person has an inherent capacity of achieving a highlighted sensibility to Awe. However, it is not easy to maintain such an elevated level of engagement with the sacred at all times. The first blessing of the Amidah, traditionally referred to as “*avot*,” refers to God as Abraham’s shield. The imagery of a shield is one of protection. The Biblical narrative portrays an uncertain element to Abraham’s life. After all, he is asked to leave his father’s house, towards a land promised by a God with whom his relationship is brand new.

All of the instabilities of the process are ameliorated by Abraham’s courage and determination. So too do we, as humans, cry out to God. We ask for the courage to question what there is, and imagine what could be. To grasp what exists beyond what the eyes can see, we too must remember our potential, and protect our ultimate spiritual interest: to invite more of mystery into our lives.

Human nature has not changed since Abraham. We still have the potential to move beyond what there is and imagine what could be. What has changed is the vehicles and processes that lead to such a process of transcendence. New times require consideration and reformulation, so that opportunities of engagement with the sacred remain relevant.

Eliezer Berkovits alluded to the sacredness of creating and maintaining relevance between the spiritual and the current state of affairs through the principle of *hora'at sha'a* (i.e. “a need of the hour”). Berkovits explores how is it possible that sometimes the rabbis worked towards uprooting Biblical commandments for the sake of God - *hora'at sha'a* is one example of how such a system is established.

Berkovits demonstrates that when something unique happens that is not prescribed by the experiences of the historical period of rabbinic Judaism, one must not ignore the needs of the specific time in which the unprescribed element takes place². In other words, instructions from the Torah relate to a normal course of events; however, when an extraordinary occasion takes place, it is one's moral and religious obligation to engage with the new happening. A *hora'at sha'a* is still a law, and is valuable and relevant to the same extent as any other commandment. New situations evoke the need for adaptations and interpretations. A Jew is commanded to engage with Torah and with the present - for God's sake.

So too, in our times, we still look into our surroundings in search of purpose and meaning. No matter how frustrating reality may be, or how accelerated the rhythm of life may appear, humans possess the capacity to ponder these big questions. It is of human interest to engage with the present, and see what vehicles exist in the current times that may enhance one's spiritual experience.

The idea of pursuing Radical Amazement in the present day may seem difficult. What does it mean to address the question highlighted by Heschel, “Lift up your eyes on high and see, Who created these?” In order to ask this, one needs to be able to lift up one's eyes and

² Eliezer Berkovits, *Not in Heaven* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2010), p. 103.

look into creation in a direct and engaged way. This enterprise is much easier in an environment that is directly immersed in nature and involved with the work of the land.

However, in urban settings, this exercise becomes much more difficult. Most people who live in any metropolis spend more time surrounded by concrete walls and traffic jams than immersed in creation. It seems hard to pursue sensitivity concerning the spiritual in a space and time that does not allocate opportunities for doing so. As a *hora'at sha'a*, it is important to create new possibilities of engagement with the sacred.

In some ways, this thesis is a response to the cry of the Psalmist (Psalm 118:5): “Out of distress/narrowness I call to You.” The narrowness that we experience is caused by the relatively difficult nature of human pursuits of spirituality in a society that maximizes quantity but not quality, production rather than mindfulness. This condition of narrowness may cause spiritual distresses to the soul.

The immortal spirit, connected to our physical bodies, still yearns and hopes that God will answer to the cry of Psalm 118. Just as in the Psalm, we hope that we too will become closer to the sacred, as a result of our awareness that there is more to life than the narrowness of traffic jams. The challenge is the one of creating new possibilities of direct engagement with the Sublime.

This thesis proposed is meant as a proposal of an urban vehicle for Radical Amazement. In other words, this thesis attempts to create an opening, in a modern context, to the appreciation of that which is beyond our capacity of expression. There are challenges that modern day living present to this accentuated spiritual awareness mode. However, we can resist that by acknowledging our human capacity of achieving transcendence.

The idea suggested here is that art can open the doors of the sacred to us. There are few elements so connected to creativity as art. Therefore, the processes of appreciating and creating art may serve the role of enhancing our experience of the Sublime.

In an urban setting, art may bring our attention back to the process of creation and its appreciation. Visiting a museum or starting a new painting may be ways of inviting the sense of mystery back into our lives. That process needs to be one of direct engagement with the beautiful and exuberant which we must see as part of the reality of our surroundings. Otherwise, the museum and the atelier become un-natural spaces, which end up conflicting with the wish to pursue transcendence. Therefore, even though the process of artistic creation and appreciation is personal, these must be seen in their context: one of spiritual awareness that connects us to the totality of being, instead of isolating us further.

To fulfill this goal, this thesis contains four distinct parts. The first one is the basis for all of the other aspects of the present work: a theology of Radical Amazement. The spiritual can reveal purpose in our expressions. Therefore, in order to deal with artistic processes as spiritual enterprises, one needs first to understand the background and context that validate this project. Otherwise, this would be a thesis in art, but not a rabbinical thesis.

What makes this religious is the presumptions that circumscribe every single word in this document: that there is a God, and that we need to come up with new ways, in the present time, to search and strengthen our relationship with God. In other words, a solid theological basis is needed in order to invite the “Where are you?” question, pointed out by Heschel as primary in our experience of the sacred, into the process of artistic appreciation and creation.

In the second chapter, the issue of the spiritual in art will be worked out in greater detail. The theories of aesthetics can contribute to our understanding of what the Sublime and the beautiful may signify. After all, art is not about the ink and the canvas (i.e. the material), but it concerns that which is evoked by the process. Looking at art theory and its philosophical nuances will allow us to establish a connection between Jewish theological understandings and aesthetics.

After the theoretical relationship between art and Radical Amazement is established, the process of artistic appreciation will be explored. In other words, if art can be a vehicle of spiritual engagement with the world, one needs to create sensitivity in order to let oneself be affected by art. This will be achieved by the analysis of how specific works of art affect humans. In other words, art impacts imageries and content that are raised in one's mind when exploring other artists' productions. As a consequence, it will be shown that letting oneself be affected by works of art can in fact result in opportunities of Radical Amazement.

Finally, my own personal paintings, and all that the process of creativity entails, will serve the purpose of showing how the spiritual can be invited into one's life through art. Not only through observation - but especially through active engagement with the Sublime - one cultivates possibilities of Radical Amazement. The process demonstrated in the thesis is not meant as an exclusively personal one. In other words, the incorporation of my paintings serves merely as a way to denote the possibilities created by a personal engagement with the sacred.

The objective of this thesis is to address a problem: spiritual atrophy. This condition relates directly to the rhythm of life in our society, and the lack of opportunities for

engagement with nature and creation. Regardless of difficulties, and especially because of these hardships, one needs to pursue new ways of engaging with the sense of Awe around oneself.

Art is not, and should not, be seen as the only possibility for inviting more of the Ineffable into our lives. Rather, it serves the purpose of generating awareness of the fact that whenever and wherever we live, we still have, inherent in our existence, the potential of pursuing - and achieving - transcendence. This thesis will be considered a success if it inspires its readers to pursue a life directed to the increase of mindfulness and awareness of all of the great and incomprehensible fragments of the mystery around us.

Chapter 1 - On Awe

Human beings cannot understand the meaning of the sacred without reference to their personal experience of it. In order to trace the sense of the spiritual, one must first ponder the process that creates our relationship to the world. Perception, and how it generates knowledge of the environment, must be considered as the basic level on which a person engages with the surroundings.

Rene Descartes explained perception as a system that transcends the senses themselves. Even though we use our vision and our touch to interact with the world, the personal representation of these meetings exists beyond these senses. Descartes referred the actual experience to a mental scrutiny.³ What we relate as our sensorial interactions with the outside world ultimately refer back to our reason. The way that we conceive, are stimulated and respond have always to do directly with our neuronal faculties.

In such a simplistic perspective, one would assume that reason is all that there is; i.e. there is no deeper level of interaction with the environment, and that thoughts and cognition are the ultimate layers of existence and experience. However, Descartes himself added to his theory that the mind is not the sole or deepest realm of human individuality. According to him, what an individual is - and how this same person interacts with the world - also deals with the existence of the soul.⁴

It follows in this system that there are limits to reason, since the soul adds to a person's understanding of his or her existence. During the Enlightenment, Descartes' works

³ Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 21.

⁴ Rene Descartes, *Ibid*, p. 184

were questioned, and the existence of a soul separate from the mind was seen as inconsistent with the mighty kingdom of reason - and reason alone. As part of the process of society's development with all its lure and rhythm, the power of thought became a statement of human potential. Being able to grasp the totality of meaning with one's mind alone reflected a wish to understand the deepest levels of purpose and meaning.

The problem with such a system is not so much that one could hypothetically use one's reason as a vehicle for ultimate understanding, but more that reality - and human experience - challenge such simplistic conception. We cannot explain human life only through neurons and hormones. Are we indeed only matter - put together by chance - void of purpose and the potential of transcendence?

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote extensively on the contrast between the soul and reason. There are - according to him - many more elements beyond concepts, words and names. Much of what surrounds us exists beyond the limits of expression. The order of the nameless is not a consequence of the mind, since it precedes cognitive functions. Instead, concepts are merely artificial constructions that serve to diminish the sense of amazement.⁵

Heschel proposes that an analysis of religion must be made in the context of spiritual experiences. In other words, instead of looking at spirituality through the lenses of scientific procedures, the relationship between humankind and God should be made at a different level. Such examination must consider the natural aspects of religiosity, namely faith and piety.⁶

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 7.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Holy Dimension* (The Journal of Religion, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, April, 1943), p. 117.

The dimension of holiness can only be accessed through an emotional perspective (as opposed to a rational theoretical approach).

There is, according to Heschel, a disparity between the soul and reason. While both are part of reality, and are useful for a person's development as a human being, they have contrasting particularities. Reason serves the purpose of exploring reality, whilst the spiritual connects to the senses and the amazement that comes from facing that which is beyond human expression. The experience of love can be used as an example. There are surely parts of being in love that can be rationally understood thought through. For example, companionship, and the ability to discharge one's natural instincts and biological desires.

But does that help one to delineate every single part of what being in love feels like? Much of this experience is beyond the grasp of the human mind. In fact, sometimes we fall in love precisely with the wrong person. What we feel cannot always be expressed. In fact, the overwhelmingness of the feeling of being loved cannot be described in full details. Any attempts to do so describe a mere fraction of the totality of the feeling. One would not be talking about love in general, but something else: a fragment.

We normally perceive what we know as originating in questions and critical thinking. However, the earlier stage that leads to knowledge is that of wonder. The fact that we can think is by itself enough to generate Amazement. Wonder precedes cognition, instead of being a product of reason. We don't experience awe because we rationally perceive wonder. The dilemma of "the chicken and the egg" does not work here, because mystery exists before the personal experience. If knowledge does not precede wonder, its blurry version,

doubt, is the result of a polarized tension, in which both sides seem to contradict themselves.⁷ What follows is not the questioning of reality by itself, but only the reevaluation of the process of coming up with questions. In other words, reality is not discovered solely through reason. As Heschel writes, reason deals with what is contained in perception, instead of perception itself, since the individual experience transcends his or her cognition.

The experience of reality transcends the limits of cognition. The very fact that we can think generates amazement. The capacity of reasoning is mysterious, and is embedded in that which is beyond human expression. All of the enigmas - including perception and thought - point to the vastness that escapes cognition.

The result is not one of denying the importance of reason, but admitting the existence of much more beyond it. The mystery that surrounds human experience should not be intimidating. Even though one may not understand its vastness, one is still invited by the cosmos to share in its “concealed” or “hidden” actuality.

One of Reb Nahman of Bratzlav’s tales serves to illustrate the discussion so far. In the story of “the loss of the princess”, Nahman describes a dramatic and mysterious situation. In many ways, the story illustrates the tension between what is visible - and accessible to reason - and the deeper level of existence, foreign to the limitations of human experience, and immersed in the Ineffable.⁸

The narrative focuses on a princess, who is exiled by her father, the king. This imagery is characteristic of the Jewish tradition as early as the beginnings of rabbinic

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁸ Nahman of Bratzlav, *Nahman of Bratzlav: The Tales* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 55-61.

Judaism. The masculine royal figure is often associated with God. The princess in the story, therefore, is seen as a product of God. In fact, one of the facets of the divine, the *shechinah*, may refer directly to the princess of the story. The feminine form of the noun could be connected with the female character of Nahman's story, which would therefore refer to God's presence. This divine presence is what is lost.

With the vanishing of the princess, the viceroy - a non-royal, possibly denoting a simple human figure - misses her, and decides to journey around the world searching for her. This longing is of extreme importance to the discussion of that which is beyond reason. Why would the viceroy miss the princess so much? What would motivate his search for her? Perhaps, this has to do with the feeling of lack experienced by the king's deputy.

Such is the experience of the Ineffable: one may get used to the overwhelming sense of sacred and the mysterious around us. One may even get so used to it that the person forgets its importance, and dims the individual awareness of the Ineffable. However, to the viceroy, whose sensitivity was so acute and extreme, the world is never the same without the divine presence. Pursuing the sense of the mystery and the amazement that comes from contemplating it becomes a calling, an exercise, that only a willing person - like the viceroy - is able to pursue.

The story continues with many challenges that keep the viceroy from recovering the princess and bringing her home. According to the text, the viceroy eventually succeeds, but Reb Nahman never told his students how he eventually managed to recover the lost princess. The message is clearly focused on the process, on searching for the hidden and concealed

divinity within everyday life, and not in how successful the enterprise of grasping the Ineffable to its full extent was.

How does one react to meeting and engaging with the Ineffable? How does one proceed when, while walking on the shores of the known and of reason, one discovers the deep oceans of mystery? For Heschel, the response to such an encounter is reverence.⁹ One does not rush to speak of this emotion, this sense of amazement; indeed, expressing it would be limiting. Speech would deprive one of the totality of the experience.

Standing in reverence before the awesome reflects an imperative. The roots of such reverence is that the existence of the Ineffable is not a product of our personal needs. Instead, the mysterious permeates much more than our individual experiences. Our will is not the cause of awe, but its product.

What is being put in question here is the notion that amazement is a mere product of our minds, and that the Awesome does not exist outside of the human imagination. Rather, Heschel argues that the sacred is indeed out there. Once one is sensitive enough to become aware of its presence, there are two possible reactions: either one responds to it, and decides to cultivate an active engagement with the Inexpressible, or one chooses to ignore it.

The constant flow of energy from the divine toward creation can be further exemplified through chassidic theology. The *Nefesh Hayim* writes that there is a vital and existential attribute that constantly emanates from God.¹⁰ Should such energy stop flowing, creation would be void of life, as its ultimate possibility is only guaranteed by God. In fact,

⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Ibid*, p. 26,

¹⁰ ספר נפש החיים, חיים מוולוז'ין. ירושלים: תורה וחיים. פרק ב, 24

the text says that if this flow of energy would stop - even for the briefest of all moments - everything and everyone would turn into nothingness.

The fact that this “influence” is constant is more than a mere statement of divine compassion towards creation. It also suggests that this divine fluid is always present, and always changing. If one experiences hardship in maintaining a constant state of awe, it has to do more with the individual than with the sacred. In other words, since divine energy is ever-flowing, dissonant experiences reflect a difficulty in the individual, and not a weakness in the dynamism of God.

This aspect can be further elaborated through the mystic perspective of the multiplicity of worlds. Existence happens at many different levels, and is experienced according to the stage of development of the divine potential inside each person. These different worlds do not reflect physical environments (except for the lowest of them), but emotional and energetic ones. In fact, these separate worlds represent a much deeper level of being. They exist separately in different dimensions of existence.¹¹

This system reflects merely the limitations of human experience, at least from the lowest of the worlds (*olam ha'assiah*), where “deeds” happen, and physical measures of time and space dictate the interaction between different energetic bodies.¹² In other words, the way that a person understands his or her existence relies on sensorial perception, attributed to the physical existence of a body, that lives in a specific period, and in a determined place. It is

¹¹ Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 1996), p. 1.

¹² Adin Steinsaltz, *Ibid*, p. 13.

hard to transcend such limitations - after all, it takes a lot of energy to change stages and conditions of spiritual awareness.

This process can be compared to the amount of heat necessary to transform a liquid into vapor. The least dynamic of all stages is the solid, where molecules vibrate the least. To break through the pattern, the system must be significantly altered by the introduction of a huge amount of heat (energy); even more so energy must be introduced to transform the already fluid liquid into the agitated state of gas.

The experience from the “world of deeds” can be self-sustainable. In fact, a person may be able to live one’s whole life without any attempts to cultivate the awareness of that which is beyond expression. The responsibility, however, is on the subject, and not on the lack of presence of the sacred. As the story of Reb Nahman of Bratzlav illustrated, the viceroy still has the ability to go after the princess, even though she is seemingly inaccessible.

The ability to pursue meaning and purpose is an inherent part of what characterizes the human condition. Victor Frankl characterized his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* as an attempt to use his experience during the *Shoah* as an example for his thesis: “life holds a potential for meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones.”¹³ This capacity of pursuing meaning also creates the awareness of a responsibility.

Not only is one able to transcend any circumstance for the sake of inviting purpose into one’s life, but one’s potential for transcendence evokes the sense of obligation. Ignoring this calling or capacity is irresponsible. How can one “just” move on with life after

¹³ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. xiv.

perceiving all of the opportunities of engagement that there are? No matter how limiting one's experience may seem, there is always room for that which is beyond the limitations of time and space.

Such capacity, once again, comes from God as the *Nefesh Hayim* wrote. Heschel explained this concept through analyzing Sinai in terms of its timelessness, as it portrays a covenant made by human beings with God, who is infinite and beyond space and time.¹⁴ This connection, albeit complicated to a human mind which is bound to a physical body, reflects a personal potential of accessing a timeless collective narrative. Heschel writes that “to believe is to remember.”¹⁵

Even though the experience at Sinai happened at a specific location and at a specific day, the attachment to the event transcends the actual occurrence. Accepting this collective narrative as a vibrant part of one's personal story means to join in this infinite and constant relationship between God and Jews. The midrash in *Sifrei Devarim* 33:2 famously portrays the giving of the Torah to the Jews only after it was first offered to other peoples. While others refused the Torah, the response of the Israelites was the verse in Exodus 24:7: “We will do, and we will obey.”

This text portrays an interesting perspective on the meaning of Jewish particularism. Since accepting the Torah is a conscious decision, the Torah becomes the response of the Jewish people to its encounter with the sacred. It does not limit all of the experiences of the

¹⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. 12.

¹⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Ibid*, p. 13.

mysterious to this particular one; all that it does is to reflect Jewish experience as a volunteer covenantal relationship, entered through the giving of the Torah and its acceptance.

It becomes then a theological responsibility of Jews to respond to our meeting with the Ineffable. The experience of Sinai demands an ongoing and reverent engagement with the world. Reverence, as Heschel points out, is an absolute mandatory conduct before the vastness of the world and all of the Awe that it generates in us, human beings.

The position of the inhabitants of the “world of deeds” is only limited if they are ignorant of the possibilities of transcendence. Psalms 118:5 portrays exactly this existential tension. “Out of distress/narrowness I called to You; You responded me by expanding me towards Yah!” This narrowness represents unique challenges and opportunities. Narrowness of time and space may pose itself as an unbearable obstacle. However, a person who is unhappy with one’s limitations is able to question what there is and imagine what could be.

Indeed, the positive aspect of human limitations is that it offers a unique opportunity of engagement with the sacred. The narrow can become wide, as routine can be transformed as a vehicle for Amazement. Out of distress the Psalmist calls to God. What does the author expect? Closeness, approachability. The sense of Awe allows one to pursue opportunities of transcendence and spiritual development.

According to Heschel, what makes human interactions vehicles for Awe is that the likeness of God is concealed in a person’s essence.¹⁶ This state of connectivity evokes much more than the experience itself. This fact is what represents its spiritual potential. Everything is, according to Heschel, in relationship with God. Therefore, having an undivided interaction

¹⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 74.

with both inanimate and living beings brings forth the awareness of a divine essence, that transcends individual beings. In fact, cultivating the sense of awe is a powerful antidote to the sense of spiritual atrophy that may be experienced in a world where amazement is not a priority.

Out of narrowness, human existence shapes itself. The fast rhythm of human life can be one of the obstacles to the generation of active engagement with the sacred. After all, one does have priorities, and it is common to feel that one does not have time for that which is not of one's immediate interest. However, a person is always able to make time for priorities. The issue of the world of fast-food and fast-transit lanes is not that there is no time for transcendence, but that we do not perceive the nourishment of the sacred as a priority.

Another possible obstacle is the diminishment of the sense of responsibility. In fact, individuality is frequently as an esteemed at a higher value than the sense of collective duties. If all that a person cares about is herself, it is hard to perceive how is it that she can affect her surroundings. Without this conception, without the understanding that there is more around an individual than oneself, how can one perceive the value of the Other? In a sense, cultivating a sense of awe can also advance one's inherent striving for social interactions. Responsibility comes from the fact that we are not alone, and the state of amazement shows us how much there is beyond what we can see and understand.

Another challenge in maintaining a high level of mindfulness is seeing the mind and reason as the deepest of all levels of understanding of life. In fact, the pursuit of the logical should not be to the detriment of the emotional. If all that there is lies in one's mind, how is it that we can step outside it and be aware of the amazing fact that we can think? As Descartes

himself declared, “I think, therefore I am.” Existence precedes thought. There are great gains to be made from observing the vastness of the world, and how much more meaning can be added through the engagement with that which is beyond one’s reason.

Because of all of the aspects that make it hard to strive for the sacred at all times, it is especially difficult to engage with the ultimate sense of purpose at all times. However, narrowness should not keep one from striving for its transcendence. In fact, the Psalmist is not content with limitations. The further the distance between us and God, the more we can work towards transcending those obstacles. To some extent, narrowness has a unique spiritual purpose: awareness of what is, and the capacity of transforming it into what should be.

There may seem to be a separation between the physical world and the realm of the spiritual. Heschel writes extensively about this issue through portraying the tension between time and space. According to him, humans often use quantifiable measures to analyze our experiences, mostly because things have some kind of “magnetic” attribute intrinsically to their essence.¹⁷ Because the “world of deeds” is where we spend our lives and engage with the world, we use space as our reference for understanding our surroundings. However, there are other higher worlds, and there is still a huge amount of spiritual energy even in the “world of deeds.” The difficulty is how to transcend the obstacles posed by physical space, in order to invite the sacredness around us to play a larger role in our lives.

That physical narrowness has the role of inviting for transcendence; the capacity of raising one’s awareness of the sacred is what classifies the religious endeavor. The realm of

¹⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord’s* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), p. 13.

time, instead of space, is where the “genuinely precious” dwells. Heschel uses the Biblical narrative of the stone tablets to establish this paradigm.¹⁸ Even when Moses breaks the first version of the tables, the Word itself still exists. This is exactly what makes it possible for a second version of the tablets to be made.

The same could be said of the Temple. The midrash portrays the painful yet transformative moment when Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Yehoshua were walking around the ruins of the Holy Temple.¹⁹ R. Yehoshua exclaimed, ‘Woe to us, that the holy place, which atoned for our sins, is destroyed!’ R. Yochanan replied, ‘My son, do not grieve because of this, since we have another atonement for our sins; it is acts of kindness, as is said: ‘I desired righteousness, and not sacrifice.’

What this midrash represent is a change in paradigm. The destruction of the Temple could have meant the end of the relationship between Jews and God. However, what ben Zakkai expresses is that the essence of Judaism is not in stone and concrete. The destruction of a building does not represent the end of worship, but the need to reframe how this process develops itself. Righteousness and prayer become substitutes for animal offerings.

The existence of the eternal Law (in the story of Moses) and of the covenantal partnership between God and Jews transcend physical manifestations through a specific object or actual place. Inanimate beings are limited to the space that they occupy. However, sacredness is not limited by physical boundaries. In fact, the religious essence in reality is one of time.

¹⁸Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Ibid*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Avot De’Rabbi Natan, chapter 4.

This concept refers back to the creation of the world as understood by Jewish mysticism. Before the creation of anything and the initial contraction of God, there was only existence. There were no fragments, no beings; there only was existence by itself. All that existed was the *Ein Sof*, the Endless. The idea of beginning and ending only make sense in a post-*tzimtzum* existence. Beforehand, all was God; all was eternal.

Through the contraction of God, there was a beginning. From that moment, from the first specific point in the spacetime continuum, the world needed something to occupy the empty space. Once eternity contracted, a vacuum existed. It may be that the creation of vessels was not necessarily a response out of God's will, but out of God's necessity. Perhaps God was lonely, and wanted partners in creation.

Of course, these fragile containers were unable to absorb the all-powerful and mighty Divine energy. Once God's power entered these vessels, they fractures and broke. Energy started to flow out of the containers. The dichotomy created is that we are able to feel and receive these Divine sparks, but are unable to retain all of the warmth generated in our souls at all times. The result is the inherent brokenness that characterizes the world of deeds.

The issue of God needing humankind is also very important in order to understand the role and importance of personal actions. Heschel wrote that the way to define Jewish religion is based on the awareness of the covenant between the people of Israel and God.²⁰ The nature of this relationship is two-sided, for it represents an agreement between two parties.

God's responsibility for watching over God's people is one of which we constantly remind ourselves through our liturgy. As Creator and giver of life, the Holy One is directly

²⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Between God and Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 140.

implicated in the maintenance of life in creation. However, human beings have a great responsibility too, in terms of fulfilling their covenantal obligations. It is through life that human beings pursue divine ends and are able to fulfill them. Otherwise, divine potential would never turn into action, were it not for those that occupy themselves with the process of transcendence and spiritual awareness.

The sense of life is by itself a symbol of the partnership between individuals and God. The holiness of human living, for Heschel, is based precisely on this covenantal agreement. It is through one's everyday routine that a person fulfills his or her responsibility, in terms of using an individual life to honor the surrounding sense of sacred. God reached out to Israelites to establish their agreement. The potential of human life is the one of connecting heavens and earth.

Heschel further explains the tension between Creator and creation as the way in which human beings behave and are able to exist in the *olam ha'assiyah*. In order to address "mundane" needs, we exploit nature in a destructive sense to our benefit.²¹ After all, we do need to fulfill our biological needs. On the other hand, there are other needs that are not contained in what would be considered physical needs; Heschel considers these other types of necessities as "religious."

The way he describes this set of aspirations is through the urge for the lasting, for reverence. The possibility of a covenant is only guaranteed by the connection between God's need for human actions, and humans need to be needed. The sense of Awe is not a creation of

²¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Ibid*, p. 142.

the mind, but an echo of the eternal quest for meaning and purpose; the deepest of all yearnings is the true source of Amazement.

The idea of “Radical Amazement” implies one’s sensitivity to this underlying and basic spiritual need. The existence of the Sublime meets human aspirations for transcendence. Through this process, an essential partnership is established between the human and the sacred. In fact, Radical Amazement is a personal response to the mindfulness of the holy in and outside of oneself.

Whilst sometimes biological necessities are seen as the basic ones, Heschel points out to a broader definition of wants and requirements. The *homo religiosus* is characterized not only by its natural body, but by a deep spiritual yearning. Radical Amazement is not as much of a choice as an inherent process. One may choose to silence the still small voice whispering in one’s ear: “Transcend! Transcend!” However, the potential for becoming aware of the magnificent already exists.

Wonder generates consciousness around spiritual needs, but does not create them. Radical Amazement is the human response before the mysterious and concealed aspects of life. When a limited being, characterized by its existence in the “world of deeds,” faces the ultimate infinity, the sense of obligation and connection come to the surface. Such encounters between Creator and creature demand a deep response, one that clarifies higher levels of existence. Radical Amazement becomes the vehicle that increases human awareness of all of the mystery surrounding everyday existence.

The role of religion is to serve as connector between God and the world.²² Spiritual awareness is a way of bringing forth God's presence into one's life. This relates back to what Heschel calls the "holy dimension," which serves as a bridge that makes it safe for humankind to transcend the abyss of existential quests.

The necessity of mindfulness serves both God and human beings. On one hand, it raises the need for people to invite the holy dimension into their lives, and therefore fulfill God's need for human action. Religion manifests God's investment in humankind through God's covenant with creation.²³ What happens in the world affects God directly.

On the other hand, spirituality also serves humans, as it enables individuals to transcend their scary and sometimes meaningless routines. The yearning of the soul precedes any understanding of reality. In noticing the importance of reverence, a person is able to invite more of the surrounding mystery to play an important role in his or her life, altering the rhythm of everyday life. Radical Amazement serves as an antidote against the potential spiritual atrophy that our daily lives may create in us.

The process of religious development can be referred back to the mystical system of various worlds. As seen before, the lowest of all worlds, where we and all that we know as creation lives, is called the "world of deeds." The highest of them all is the "world of emanation." In that world, all that exists is the energy which is the source of God's existence.²⁴ There is only unity and eternity.

²² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Holy Dimension (Op. Cit.)*, p. 120

²³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Ibid*, p. 124.

²⁴ Adin Steinsaltz, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose (Op. Cit.)*, p. 9.

It would be impossible for a human being to live in the world of emanation. If one's soul were to develop so much, and acquire the same energy as God's essence, it would simply merge into God. However, an awareness of the potential for spiritual development can lead one to generate a much deeper level of mindfulness. There are other worlds in between the world of deeds and that of emanation.

The question before us regards the approachability of the Ineffable. So far, we have exposed the existence of the holy dimension. We have also expressed Awe and reverence as appropriate responses from the self before the vastness of God's presence in the world. Furthermore, we have discussed how Radical Amazement is the way by which such experience of Awe is expressed.

On the other hand, we have limited capacities as humans. Reason and language are simply not enough to communicate and relate to all that there is beyond our existence in the "world of deeds." Those boundaries could be seen as obstacles impossible to circumvent. However, the place of Amazement is not one of alienation. Rather, it represents the possibility for action, for a direct response before the mystery of all. What we still have to define and discuss is ways to transcend those limitations, and practical ways by which our actions may responsibly reflect our spiritual awareness. Through this analysis, we will be able to determine what is it that humans can do, in the presence of God, to change the cosmos and affect the infinite flow of energy out of the finitude of human existence.

Heschel describes three ways by which humans follow through with their pursuit of spirituality: worship, action and learning.²⁵ The last category refers to the study of sacred

²⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man (Op. Cit.)*, p. 31.

texts. Through an in depth engagement with the sources, one is able not only to internalize the role that God has in the religious narrative, but to make the relationship between the person and tradition the center of one's life.

“Action” refers to the performance of *mitzvot*. Commandments are what tradition teaches that God expects of human beings. Through the fulfillment of such commandments, humans take care of their spiritual needs, as well as God's ultimate *pathos*: the need for people's actions, to satisfy God's goal in the world.

For Heschel, worship connects directly with the idea of Awe and our relationship to the sacredness around us. The establishment of Radical Amazement is directly related to this aspect too, for if it were not for our reaction to the mystery, no cosmological changes would be made. Therefore, reverence is of extreme importance, as it connects creation to its Creator.

The verse in the Bible that, according to Heschel, refers to the worship aspect of the human pursuit of spirituality is from Isaiah (40:26). The text reads: “Lift up your eyes and see; Who created these?” An obvious way, then, of experiencing Radical Amazement is through the contemplation of nature, which raises our awareness of its Creator and Provider of purpose and existence.

It is not hard to imagine and relate to this idea. When one decides to spend time in nature, perhaps hiking in the mountains, or observing the waves breaking in the ocean, the feeling of overwhelmingness is not uncommon. How can one describe one's feelings observing the virtually infinite number of different colors in the sky during a sunset? Or the emotional response to noticing how little one is, before the magnificence and grandeur of one's surroundings?

A practical take on Heschel's theology would invite more opportunities for encounters with the Ineffable into a person's routine. Establishing a routine of exposure to nature may be a way of developing this spiritual sensitivity. Another way would be to pay attention to what is before one's eyes, and slow the pace of life to allow a deeper pondering of the origin and essence of existence.

Heschel is very cautious, though, lest nature not be worshipped by itself. That is, the risk of finding such impactful experiences in inanimate objects is that one may start to adore the environment instead of God.²⁶ It is very important that Radical Amazement is established in relationship to God. After all, the verse in Isaiah does not end with encouraging an individual to lift his or her eyes and see. The question "Who created these?" must follow.

Therefore, the observation of nature is a vehicle for Radical Amazement, but not an end by itself.²⁷ In other words, the amazing sunsets and beaches that we experience serve the purpose of inviting into our routine a highlighted sense of Awe, but the ultimate reason for this enterprise is to invite the awareness of God's presence into our daily lives. The purpose is not to ponder on nature for its own sake.

The challenge is that in an urban setting, it may not always be so easy to find inspiration in the environment. How does one build the practice of hikes and sunset contemplations into one's routine? After all, life in our society has been characterized by its fast pace. Maneuvering traffic jams may seem much more important than these exercises.

²⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Ibid*, p. 90.

²⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Ibid*, p. 94.

Furthermore, not all urban contexts may contain the most amazing pictorial natural settings. There may not be beaches around, and the beautiful tones of green, yellow, red and etc. may be replaced by a blend gray. In other words, reality may pose limitations to one's capacity of experiencing Radical Amazement in a city.

The endeavor before us is to rescue the potential for transcendence, and apply it to contexts that are possible in our society. Regardless of the degree of grandeur in nature, there are ways of inviting the sense of Awe into our daily lives. It may be more challenging to figure out the "how to's," but obstacles do not make it impossible; just more difficult.

The basic idea of the verse in Isaiah is to see, and to use our sight as a way of gaining inspiration regarding the origin of creation. Perhaps an analysis of the process of creation from different lenses will be able to inform us of the potential for transcendence that each of us carries. Though the realization of creation is an on-going process rather than a stagnant event, one is able to contemplate one's role in it, as well as encourage oneself to ponder the ultimate question: "Who created these?" "What is the basis for all purpose - for all that is?"

It is therefore of extreme importance to study art as a vehicle for urban Radical Amazement. Most cities have museums, and most people are able to create. Originality, or the capacity of changing what is, characterizes a human being. Exposure to art, and active participation in its process, can illustrate all of the Awe that exists in life. Art can be a way of inviting more colors into the world, not for their own (or the artist's) sake, but for a higher purpose: the cultivation of spiritual mindfulness. To establish such relationship between art and religious process, we must first expand on art theory and how it relates to the sublime.

Chapter 2 - On the spiritual in Art

A good starting point to the discussion of the spiritual in art is Abstract Expressionism. The fact that one can express through paint or ink what seems to be otherwise inexpressible seems particularly interesting in its interface with the spiritual and the idea of Radical Amazement. “Radical” reflects back to something deep, intrinsic to an individual’s existence, rooted in a profound realm of the self. Abstract Expressionism cultivates a similar perspective and function.

David Anfam argues that what makes this kind of art remarkable and original is its capacity to be at the same time striking and extremely personal, focused on the artist’s creative process.²⁸ What is interesting about this definition is that the complexity of the work of art has two different poles. In one hand, the artist is able to express what lies beyond his or her ability to communicate. However, the observer is also impacted by it, and is able to articulate different interpretations.

Perhaps the most defining aspect of Abstract Expressionism is the core of what one could articulate as the goal of art; namely, the invitation by the artist to the expression of deeper feelings. The artist shares something of an extreme personal nature, intimate and delicate. In turn, the observer is invited to do the same, to react to what the artist has created.

According to Anfam, action and reaction walk hand in hand in this bilateral process, one participating actively with the other. A person would not be able to react without the work of art. On the other hand, to be “art,” a piece needs to be observed. Without someone to look at it, there is only an object.

²⁸ David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), p. 8.

The works of art themselves represent complex systems that are at play within the artist. Through painting, a person expresses a specific time, one's own identity and how one perceives one's relationship with the world.²⁹ Everyday life tends to happen in a way that separates what happens in our surroundings from our personal experience. However, art questions that there is such a separation to start with.

Who we are, and how we perceive the world, are intrinsically connected to each other. Like a photograph, a painting also expresses a specific moment, in which a person, interacting with brushes and ink, portrays this relationship between what lies inward and how that projects into the outer world. Art calls us to be responsible for our identities and the implications of our individuality in society.

Abstract Expressionism as a method questioned the safeguard of form, according to Anfam.³⁰ In other words, what this kind of art questioned was the usage of pre-modeled and hand-crafted shapes, for their own sake. What Abstract expressionists provided was a unique and personal existential content, based on the handling of ink, but coherent and transparent about the complexity that exists in human expression.

How can an expected shape, a form that is standard, be able to illustrate all the intrinsic feelings that people experience? There is much beyond our capacity of communication, and art can serve the purpose of highlighting this tension, and inviting more of that which is beyond reason into our daily lives. This may be the inspiration for Abstract expressionists who isolated themselves from their public lives in order to produce art.

²⁹ David Anfam, *Ibid*, p. 17.

³⁰ David Anfam, *Ibid*, p. 107.

Sometimes, to notice more of one's own feelings, one needs to diminish the influence that routines can have in terms of dulling one's sensitivities to the personal. That is the purpose of art; to reconcile the emotion to its lack there of.

Abstract Expressionism used shapes, but not for their own sake. Forms were used to represent more than their physical appearance. Furthermore, the simplicity of a square or a circle, for example, alludes to deeper levels of emotion and meaning, beyond the actual boundaries between two different shapes. What better way of denoting complexity than by using the most simple and essential forms? In fact, the simple is present in everything (lines are everywhere, even in complex pictures), which is why it is a terrific way of approaching that which is beyond the grasp of reason.

Anfam points out the way that some artists used their work to critique how a person assimilates automatic, unthinking reactions into one's own identity.³¹ Much of the Abstract Expressionism endeavor was to question such behavior, and denounce the way by which people get used to make generalizations. Furthermore, this process is degrading, since it takes away the capacity for unique expressions.

The tension between matter and being are present in this type of art. In one hand, the artist has no other instrument than ink, brushes and canvases. But on the other, these physical objects are used to create metaphors. Many of these metaphors relate to the reason behind the artist's artistic process: to generate awareness. The artist does so by using and expressing the deepest and most personal of all feelings. However, one of the goals is to direct his or her

³¹ David Anfam, *Ibid*, p. 110.

energy outward, toward creating a society that questions its set standards for behavior, and invites more of the realm of the individual into the public square.

Before further discussion, it is important to build on the concept of art. In order to evaluate how exposure to art may generate Radical Amazement, it is interesting to define what we mean when talking about art. Such conversation will highlight especially the differences between “mere things” and “works of art.”

The contrast between those two is similar to the tension between the physical world and the spiritual world. Both are real, in the sense that they exist. However, the way to achieve awareness of their existence differs. In one hand, things are sensed through vision and touch. Art belongs to the emotional realm (and later on, we will discuss how the emotional becomes the spiritual).

One of the most important thinkers to analyze art through these lenses is Arthur Danto. To establish the difference between things and art, he first introduces an anecdote to illustrate his point.³² One walks into a museum and notices several paintings that look physically the same: a red square on a white canvas. These works of art have different motifs, such as Israelites crossing the Red Sea or the representation of Red Square in Moscow.

After being at the museum, a person may feel disappointed at the fact that those paintings all looked the same, and paints his or her own art, even refusing to name it. That individual may be thinking: “This is nonsense. I too can create so called art, then.” The question is: are all of those paintings art, even if they are physically the same? Are they all

³² Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 1-3.

original and different pieces? And what about the painting of the person that, annoyed by exhibition, decides to paint a plain red square on white canvas and call it art?

Danto's response is that all of these are pieces of art and Danto would not be reluctant to expose it in his personal exhibition. He does criticize that last work, since it does not necessarily have the narrative richness of "Israelites crossing the Red Sea" or a minimalist portrayal of Moscow³³. However, it does have some narrative - as other red squares may not have. It represents a response by the person who painted the red square.

This characterizes the difference between art and mere everyday things. Art has an abundant story, and expresses feelings. Even if the painting reflects a simple landscape, it still portrays the artist's impression and reaction to what she or he sees. Things exist because of what they are physically made of, while art transcends the commonplace, the ordinary function and purpose.

This can be further exemplified by Marcel Duchamp's sculpture entitled "Fountain." Physically, Duchamp's work is no different from any other urinal ever made. However, the fact that it is placed in a museum makes it art. Urinals have a specific purpose, which Duchamp extracts from his piece by taking it out of the restroom.

By losing its functionality, "Fountain" transcends its physical composition. The level of indignation that the responses to Duchamp's work had illustrates exactly how it is that it becomes art. Art is about using the commonplace, using "mere real things" in order to evoke emotion and feelings. Artists are those who question what there is, and make others do the same. They expose something intimate and personal, and is able to create reaction and

³³ Arthur Danto, *Ibid*, p. 2.

responses by those that expose themselves to their art. Art is not about the ink or the canvas, but about how those are used to transcend their physical existence.

Danto refers to the process of interpreting art as of extreme importance in the work's existence as art. He defines "interpretation" here as the process by which another person, besides the artist, offers a theory as to what the art is about.³⁴ The complexity of this process, according to him, is that one's interpretation must be connected and justified through the painting itself; otherwise, it is detached from the work of art as an isolated product of a person's cognition.

However, what fuels art is its capacity to generate reactions in those who expose themselves to it. The sustainability of a painting lies in its capacity to attract people's attention and somehow connect emotionally to the one appreciating the piece. Through this relationship between the artist, the canvas and the aesthete, art fulfills its purpose and destiny: to invoke feelings and transcend the commonalities of everyday life.

Arthur Danto further elaborates on what he considers to be a key aspect in delimiting what is art. The most pertinent concept to art is expression.³⁵ Of course that there are other ways to achieve a deep sense of expression besides art. However, art cannot be devoid of this element.

The purpose of art is to convey what is hard to voice. As a matter of fact, the function of aesthetic experiences is to use physical matter to express what is beyond our capacity to do

³⁴ Arthur Danto, *Ibid*, p. 119.

³⁵ Arthur Danto, *Ibid*, p. 165.

in everyday life. This is why the purpose of art transcends the physical functions of things. Matter is used as a way to portray what lies beyond our capacity of speech and writing.

The intersection between these concepts and Heschel's thought is very clear. The order of the sacred does not exist far from the physical world, since our souls abide inside bodies that regulate their relationship with the world through senses and cognition. However, the *homo religiosus* sees beyond this limitation, and is able to perceive more of the Ineffable.

Artistic sensibility is a similar enterprise, as it cultivates sensitivity to a world of emotions. While still connected to the physical, art transcends it. Aesthetics puts into question the notion that commonplace aspects cannot invoke a deeper sense of reality, rooted in subjectivity and emotions.

Another important contributor to the discussion of the spiritual in art is Immanuel Kant. In "Critique of Judgement," Kant also establishes the tensions between the beauty that is found in nature and the beauty related to a human's aesthetic judgement.³⁶ He calls "free beauty" the one that is connected to nature.

For him, beauty refers to a sense of perfection. Even if one does not know the functions and physiology of flowers, for example, one tends to appreciate their beauty. Free beauty is self-subsisting, in the sense that it exists beyond the human attribution of its qualities - it is natural.

On the other hand, and much more interesting to our discussion, Kant calls the attention to another type of beauty, that is intrinsically connected to human judgement. Kant even goes further to declare it dependent, specifically on the cognitive responses of people.

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 60.

In this realm, there is the need for a concept of the beautiful, that is not natural but created by the people who are involved in its interpretation. In art, the latter is the sensitivity used for aesthetic appreciation.

Through this process, Kant also differentiates art from ordinary things. The usage of the canvas is directed at the conception of the beautiful that the artist and the spectator carry within themselves. This aspect also refers to the personal nature of art, as it refers not to what is given as beautiful by their mere existences (such as flowers or natural landscapes), but it also depends on people's subjectivities.

This concept reinforces the notion that art has less to do with the actual painting than with the process of artistic creation and, later on, appreciation. The beautiful in art exists only as much as it provokes emotional responses in those that appreciate it. Otherwise, art becomes void of meaning and - consequently - purpose.

Kant, however, challenges the idea that the beautiful and perfect are the only key players in aesthetics. Calling attention to the sublime, he refers to the fact that even art that is void of form (and hence, a perfect shape) can be part of an aesthetic experience.³⁷ The sublime, then, transcends the idea of the beautiful.

In the realm of the sublime, there are two fundamental aspects that are connected to each other and part of the work of art. In one hand, art needs a representation of limitlessness. In other words, the subjective reactions from appreciating a painting, a sculpture and etc. denote the sense that the experience transcends the object being seen and the person admiring it.

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Ibid*, p. 75.

Art evokes what is beyond the limits of the individual and the material. It denotes a much higher and deeper level of existence, in which the feelings and emotions brought forth by the piece of art are not defined completely by the specific moment that a person sees the piece. Rather, the aesthetic experience transcends time and space, and reflects back to what lies deep within the person.

On the other hand, for Kant, the sublime also evokes the sense of totality. This aspect refers to the absence of the sense of a fragmented experience. There are no colors, ink, canvas, lighting (as in a museum) - none of these exist independently during a person's aesthetic contemplation of art. This implies a feeling of relationship with the entire piece, before which a person is completely present and focused. Nothing else matters at that moment, besides the overwhelming and transcendental feeling of ecstasy and completion.

Kant did not refer to the sublime as spiritual. However, there are many attributes that make the sublime an interesting concept in the discussion of art as a vehicle for Radical Amazement. The fact that art inspires at the same time both limitlessness and totality parallels the dual nature of a human: a physical being that also contains a soul and spiritual identity.

Kant also delineates the separation between reason and the sublime. The emotion that is involved in the process of aesthetic appreciation invokes the world of emotions. In cognition, there are judgements of values. Things are either good or bad. But with art, the mind may feel either attracted or repelled - and often, both at the same time.³⁸

³⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Ibid*, p. 76.

In cognitive terms, there are positive and negative experiences. However, the nature of the sublime makes it able to transcend these limitations, as it also creates an experience that is not easily expressed. In fact, the sublime refers to that which is beyond the human capacity of understanding and expression. The experience of the sublime relates to an overwhelming feeling of fulfillment.

In this too Kant and Heschel present very similar perspectives. Both relate to the experience of something beyond the normal everyday life, in a way that brings forth all sorts of emotions. The elements of limitlessness and totality are very important to understanding this concept. The sublime - just like the Awesome - depends on the totality of the presence of a person in the moment. One's attention cannot be divided in order for the person to feel this sense of sublime.

Way too often we get caught in routine experiences that keep us from contemplating the deep world of our feelings. The idea of the "free beauty" in Kant is one that we can much more easily relate to, as it does not require special attention on our part. We easily default to our reasons as the sole guides of our experiences.

Kant writes that natural beauty exists only externally to ourselves.³⁹ In other words, appreciating natural beauty takes much less effort, as it does not depend in our personal judgement. Rather, the common sense prevails, and we are not responsible for the work of cultivating our own aesthetic sensitivity.

However, we are also depriving ourselves of a whole different set of experiences, that could significantly enrich our emotional development. It does take more effort, as it involves

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Ibid*, p.77.

developing a whole different set of sensitivities that may seem more foreign to us. The personal aspect of art, intrinsic in both its creation and contemplation processes, can make it a very intense emotional experience.

The most important notion is that humans have the capacity of cultivating their capacity of aesthetic appreciation. The gains from this process go far beyond the development of emotional skills. The sublime is such an important concept for the discussion of the spiritual in art because it generates awareness that our cognitions are limited, because there is so much beyond them. The realm of the sacred exists in our daily lives only as much as we are able to contextualize our minds, and invite more of the sublime into our routines.

Wassily Kandinsky was the one who coined the term “spiritual” as intrinsically connected to the world of the arts. Seeing the work of the artist not only as emanating from contemporary feeling, Kandinsky saw art as the potential of echoing and mirroring those feelings. However, art also relates to a deeper level, similar to prophetic strength.⁴⁰

The idea is that the intersection between art and spirituality lies in the source of the artist’s endeavor. The perspective of an ongoing revelation fits very well here. Venturing into the world of art, a person steps up as God’s partner in creation. Through each stroke of a brush, more of God’s presence is brought into the world.

The change of perspective is that Kant saw art as a way for a person to be exposed to the sublime. For Kandinsky, the artist becomes a vital part of the sacred. The process of creation is mysterious, and an individual becomes part of the mystery. More of the realm of

⁴⁰ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), p. 4.

the spiritual becomes real when the process of artistic creation takes place. For him, art is a spiritual and internal experience, rather than a response to some external sublime process.

Kandinsky compared this idea with that of a triangle. A person is on the very top of the geometric form. The lower the segment of the triangle, the broader, deeper and wider is the sea of mysteries.⁴¹ Art is represented by the process by which a person dives deeper into the triangle, moving from a position of narrowness into one of expanding one's perception toward the sacred.

There is a certain movement in this triangle, by which a person moves around from one place in the spectrum toward another. "Materialist creed" is one example of how a person is pushed further up, in the direction of a place with more limited - and less spiritual - perception.⁴² According to him, it is easy to become blind to all that there is out there in terms of experience.

Art is a revolution, in the sense that it is a reaction to this movement. Art is a choice of going the other way around, diving deeper into that sea of mysteries. Art is represented by one who exclaims: "What else is out there to be felt?" in the face of the materialist aspects that drive our society.

The role of the abstract in the arts is precisely the one of questioning such limited understanding of life. Kandinsky says that in each manifestation of the arts, there is a seed. Through it, one is able to grow toward the non-material and mysterious.⁴³ This growth takes

⁴¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁴² Wassily Kandinsky, *Ibid*, p. 10.

⁴³ Wassily Kandinsky, *Ibid*, p. 19.

the shape of spiritual development, as one becomes more aware of one's role in the metaphysical world.

These multiple forms add to each other in this process. Wassily Kandinsky uses music as an example to show that for centuries, artists have striven to express their own soul, instead of merely replicating natural phenomena. The spiritual form that art can acquire affects not only the artist but the ones who appreciate art. Through the sharing of one's soul, the whole world is affected. More of the non-material is brought into existence. And once it exists, it becomes part of reality. Kandinsky argues that there are more realities than the person at the very top of the spiritual pyramid, as explained above, is aware of.

In terms of painting, which was his area of expertise, Kandinsky points to the many different functions that colors have. They allow one to transcend the bridge between reason and material, on one hand, and the spiritual on the other. He argues that colors have deep and intense moving component to the sensitive soul.⁴⁴

He calls this effect "psychic," as it affects the human mind. Excitement, pain, sourness, joy and hope are a few of the influences that colors exercise over people. Color affects one's soul, causing spiritual vibrations that connect mind to spirit, and produce radical repercussions in the individual who gazes at them.

Colors also affect each other. Kandinsky writes that the notions of warmth and cold are transmitted by colors.⁴⁵ The way that colors dialogue with each other also have effects in the work of art. A canvas is able to convey much more than feelings; it also conveys

⁴⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, *Ibid*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Wassily Kandinsky, *Ibid*, p. 36.

movement. The consequence of all of this is that ink is transformed from a material object into a vehicle of spiritual motion.

There is not a significant separation between form and color. In a painting, the totality of the work of art is the product of both of them.⁴⁶ This is yet another criticism by Kandinsky of the materialistic society that we live in. Instead of highlighting the fragment, separating one from the other, the totality is more important because it reflects how every piece affects the other. Individualism is met by the transcendent power of spiritual movement, that inspires a connection between the artist, the spectator, and the world.

Painting starts with a revolt against nature. What is meant by that is that the artist is restless before common sense and the environment, and is in search of a higher meaning and purpose from the way that he or she relates to the world. Kandinsky portrays how even the way that a person uses one's eyes reflects that. These organs are not only seeing the outer world, but are being tested by the artist and spectator themselves, conveying a deeper experience of perception.⁴⁷

Part of the difficulty in inviting the spiritual into the world of the arts has to do with the way that, as a society, we relate to them (the arts). Kandinsky argues that we are always ready to look for specific meanings in a picture, as opposed to being open to all that it has to offer us.⁴⁸ Our pre-determined minds wish to take the "easy" way out, and see what the painting has to offer before we actually engage with it.

⁴⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, *Ibid*, p. 36.

⁴⁷ Wassily Kandinsky, *Ibid*, pp. 46-47.

⁴⁸ Wassily Kandinsky, p. 49.

This takes many different forms. Many times, one looks at the name of the work of art before actually looking at the piece. Museums are great at informing us of the name of the artist, the period in which the artist composed the work, its technique, name, and context. Kandinsky also points out to the fact that there are “art experts,” and that way too often we read what they say about the painting before we take our first glance.

Part of what makes art personal is the capacity of transcending these preconceived notions, and embark on our own personal experience with the art before us. Since this process is so intrinsically personal, considering that it touches our soul, and has touched the artist’s soul, it is important to be open minded and willing to risk the sacred struggle that we may face once we dive into the colors, movement, textures and richnesses that are before us.

According to Kandinsky, if art fails to fulfill its spiritual role, the chasm between the metaphysical and the material remains unbridged.⁴⁹ The problem with that connects to the important relationship between art and the sacredness of the world. By failing to bridge that gap, the level of spirituality in the world is diminished.

The need for art has three different poles. First of all, the world needs art, because it needs spiritual awareness and movement. Secondly, people need art, so that they can establish a level of sacred mindfulness that is able to empower them, and expand their emotional and spiritual depth. Last but not least, the artist needs art. Once he or she has the urge to create, depriving oneself of it is almost an impossible task.

The question of “*aiekah*” is also relevant here. Through cultivating a good spiritual listening skill, one is able to hear “where are you?” being asked of oneself. That question

⁴⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Ibid*, p. 54.

carries with it incredible potential for fulfillment and engagement with the sublime. Not accepting routine as a “mere thing,” as Arthur Danto would say, opens many different doors that lead toward transcendence.

The goal of the artist and of the observer is the same: to increase one’s spiritual awareness. Even though they are on different sides of the equation, either creator or appreciator, they have the same inherent potential of having their souls moved. As a consequence of this movement, they both are able to carry the whole world with them, as they embark on this sacred journey through the ocean of mysteries.

Chapter 3 - Paintings from other artists

In this chapter of the thesis, I decided to explore whether an observer of art might also be able to to create Radical Amazement opportunities. I wanted to see if the role of a spectator could be withdrawn from the passivity that is often attached to it. Art is a complex process, that involves both the process of creation and appreciation. In order to do so, I spent many hours in different museums, wandering around. The only objects that I had was a camera to take the pictures, a journal and a pencil.

I simply walked around the museums, until I found a painting that struck me. I do not think I can describe what I mean by this, except that it meant that something deep inside of me wanted to stop for as long as it took, look at the work of art before me (it may be that Moses had a similar experience when he was drawn to stop and look at the burning bush), and then write on it. The following are paintings that spoke to me in a particularly meaningful way, and the subjective reactions they had on me, specifically in how I interpret the sacred - in those paintings, but in everyday life as well.

Paul Gauguin, *Still Life with Three Puppies* (1888), Museum of Modern Art (NYC)

The essence of life that slowly seems to dry out nurtures the puppies. Although warm colored, the fruits have been uprooted and are dead. Death is put at a corner - life is at the center. The pure white source of energy (suggested in this painting by the milk that the puppies drink) has abandoned the dead fruits. The animals are thirsty for life. Melancholic, their sight is focused on the endless drink - although on their limited vision, they are



desperate for nourishment. The picture seems to initially lack security; the breath of life seems to quickly be fading away.

How long will the source of energy still be there? How deep can they stick their tongues out of their mouths? How long will drink be available? Hopelessness and hope are one. Life searches for its Creator, for the Ultimate source of Nourishment and Absolute Warmth. But sometimes, a living being does not see this

continuous ever-lasting love relationship. The intrinsic search for meaning, characteristic of what has life, is sometimes met by a wall, by the awareness and feeling of finitude.

The three cups represent an even deeper notion of truth, according to which there will always be a cup to be blessed. This eternal existence of opportunities of amazement rely on the existence of someone to be aware of grandeur. That is, a *kiddush* cup is eternal. However, it serves no purpose if there is no one to bless through it. This is the purpose of life - to be a vehicle of praise and admiration. The purpose of a living being is to bless through everything that this being enters in relationship with. The purpose of life is to, like the puppies, drink

from the source of energy, but never loose track of the ultimate place that life has of praising the Source.

Vincent van Gogh, The Olive Trees (1889), Museum of Modern Art (NYC)



Everything is connected; existence is intertwined. The roots of the trees, soil, mountains and sky are in relationship. Different tones of green and blue are mere products of sensory limitations. All is unity - division is a consequence of cognitive corporeal boundaries. The movement in the painting points inward and outward, up and down - all in a simultaneous awesome ballet. Existence is an awesome dance.

God's breath is represented through God's cloud. The spiritual - the eternal - permeates all of God. All of existence, together, screams in praise: "Thank you for creating me! Thank you for love! Thank you for connectivity! Thank you, thank you!"

The blues and whites of life point out to the mystery, to the ineffable, to that which is beyond human capacity to express. It permeates everything, it dwells everywhere. All that is contains the depth of the presence of the Holy One, blessed be God. All that a brush can do is to be a vehicle for awareness of the unity and totality.

All atoms have the same origin. Each of my cells is composed by atoms that could, in days past, have been part of a rock (maybe the stone tablets?). Maybe they were part of Moses, or maybe of Aristotle. They all came from the infinite universe, from outside what my eyes can grasp, into the inside, that are too far beyond what I can see. Everything comes in and goes out.

What holds my cells together? What makes the group of atoms that compose me be myself? Am I rock? Am I Aristotle? What is the purpose of the present, once we understand that matter comes always from the past?

My answer is Divine energy. My soul connects me to all of the souls. My energy carries properties of all of the energy. All energy is one. My soul too, like the mountains and trees of the picture, cries out to God: "Thank you, thank you!" The little that my body represents, in the immensity of infinite existence, joins with van Gogh in praising existence, with all the whites, blues and green that surround the whisper that we call reality.

Andre Derrain, *Bathers* (1907), Museum of Modern Art (NYC)



Shame and pride are both inherently part of the human condition. A person lets either one of them to take over and be in charge of one's life. Shame tries to minimize what there is to be proud of; a person forgets his or her humanity. Pride may lead one to forget of others' humanity.

Pride looks back, only to itself. It forgets that there is much more to life beyond the individual. The egoistically proud person becomes self-absorbed and self-sufficient. What good would it be for pride to be judge by others? And for shame, what good would it be for it not to be judged by others?

The source of the Sublime is not in pride or shame, but in questioning where these - and all other feelings - come from. The person and feelings in the picture are surrounded by

nature. On the background, the rest of creation positions itself as the basis for everything else. Existence supports itself through the connection between what we see as human products (such as feelings) and the rest of the world. However, individuals and their conscious selves are part of a totality that transcends perception. The background of holiness, present in all that breaths and that is breathed, lies within and outside all that is.

The human tries to grasp and hold fast to the mysterious origin of life. Sometimes, it is easier than others to engage with the Awesome. The woman in the left seems to have no legs. However, she has merely forgotten her ability to walk. She has been alienated from her capacity to march on. The way that we represent ourselves is not what makes us who we are. We have a Divine inner capacity of become what we wish to become.

This source of strength and roots of change is natural and all-encompassing. The background is always there. Shame and pride may have forgotten that the cosmos exist, and that they are only artificial fragments of an eternal unity. One must be aware that humans are not self-sufficient.

We are not alone in the universe. We are part of the cosmos. Each of us has an ultimate purpose that transcends ourselves. Why? “And God breathed life into the human.” That is the ultimate source of purpose and meaning. A simple breath.

“All that has life [or “*is breathed*”] shall praise God!,” the Psalmist says. The background - and all that inhabits the universe - has the purpose of serving the Source of Breaths. We must engage with the surroundings to learn more about ourselves. There is a lot of pain in human living. But there is also infinite hope. The warm colors of the picture represent the hope that comes from the acknowledgement of life, of present life. Warm

colors represent the heartbeat; no matter how much pain there is, life still carries, with its pulse, the idea of infinity and rhythm. In all moments, a Divine and sacred warmth permeates energy. One needs only to become aware and cultivate one's relationship with the Ineffable. That is the purpose of religious life: the transformation of potential into actual; the elevation of all into spiritual. One's capacity to serve relates to an individual choice of engaging with mystery.

The product of existential tensions looks up: "I raise my eyes towards the mountains... Where will my help come from?" The search for meaning is fundamental; but one needs to look in many other places than merely up in a person's spiritual quest. We should look all around. Our hands are not tied around our backs, even when they appear to physically be.

Where does, then, our help come from? From the Holy One, blessed be God. The One Eternal Mystery. The Ultimate Background. The Source of Infinite Warmth. If humans are not alone, then God too reaches out to creation. God is desperately calling for us, at all times: "Transcend pain! Transcend limits! Be! Be with me!" The question is: will we respond, or will we cover our eyes?

Francis Picabia, *I see again in memory my dear Udnie* (1914), Museum of Modern Art (NYC)

One searches for amazement in the outside or external to the self. The Awesome can be felt in nature and its mountains, beaches and the like. Internal processes too are just as much expressions of the Ineffable as that which is beyond the boundaries of a human body.



So much of the Awesome is in memory and cognition! Reason itself is enough to bring forth the feeling of the Sublime. Colors, smells, textures and tastes that exist in our memory are each proof of how existence is not a simple unilateral experience.

Our understanding is limited and limiting. What seems to be a bicycle handlebar, on the top of the picture, suggests a higher

Presence, guiding the flow of life. Imaginary life is life nonetheless. Subjective reality is reality nonetheless. All evoke transcendence.

Thoughts and memories are part of our contribution to God's creation. Our personal cognitive realities add on to the infinitude of existence around us. The Holy One gives us the capacity to think, and we give back to the Source of life the fruits of our imagination.

The importance of engaging with the world through not only our actions but also imagination is that each thought is an expression of our partnership with the cosmos, for good and for bad. Hence, reason generates responsibility. God demands responsibility.

Flowers blossom in our minds. The fertility of the soil underneath these flowers is the original circumstance: God's ongoing process of nurturing creation. Our lives are holy because they actively add to the unity of everything. Big is our responsibility! Great is our joy!

Liubov' Popova, *Painterly Architectonic* (1917), Museum of Modern Art (NYC)



Each experience that one has is a layer, that is added on top of a multi-layered column of experiences. All of these geometrical shapes shown in the picture, piled up and together, form an individual's identity. Each form carries its own smells, textures, tastes and looks. They each have not only their own distinct shape, but also different colors and areas.

Some are white, representing purity. These experiences may even be smaller ones. A person may have only a few, and small, moments of clear sense of total transcendence. In my everyday life, not all experiences denote God's presence. That does not have to do with a hypothetical eclipse of God's presence. Rather, it relates to the limited way in which I live and understand life. Radical Amazement is an antidote for the limitations of the physical experience of the body. Therefore, it relies on senses and corporeal experiences precisely to evoke what exists beyond the physical and its limitations.

What one understands of reality is nothing but a fragment of totality. The white transcendental pieces may look small, but the first layer, the absolute experience, is white. The biggest of all pieces in the puzzle is the white background, without which there would be no puzzle. That background is white. It may seem invisible, but only because it transcends the capacity of the eyes to see. The Awesome precedes any personal experience.

That original geometric form is both accessible and inaccessible. On one hand, it shapes and influences every single breath that I take. On the other hand, absolute existence precedes my self-identity. It was before I was, and will be after I am gone.

Every one of these forms and experiences is very important. If one of the layers should be harshly and abruptly removed, the whole system would collapse. In some sense, even painful experiences are necessary for the consolidation of our identities and relationships with the universe.

The most important piece is the basis: God's underlying and eternal presence. Without this basis, and its permeation into personal experiences, there would be no possibility for existence; let alone nourishment and purpose.

Mark Rothko, *No. 10* (1950), Museum of Modern Art (NYC)



Sometimes, my vision gets blurry. It seems to me that I am seeing out of focus. I need my glasses to see, and I need my eyes before I have a need for glasses. In other words, without eyes, I would not have defective sight, which would not create a need for an instrument to perfect my capacity to interact with what is visual.

So many instruments, so many human-made layers between my perception and the outside! I see the sky, I see God above it. But I see all out of focus. I have forgotten that I can feel

without seeing, that I can experience without relating. I experience through instruments, without reminding myself that they are only material objects. Sometimes, they come between me and transcendence. How painful it is to live artificially! I try - I try really hard. I squeeze my eyeballs against my eyelids. I feel, sometimes, helpless. I want to see! I want to see it all. Sometimes I can't. I am stuck in the blurriness of the yellow. I am stuck a human, a *beynoni*.

However, as in the painting, there is a layer of white underneath me. A layer that was before I was. Maybe my soul belongs to a world that is below, underneath what I understand as my physical existence. The origin of my soul goes back to its divine origin. This totality of energy, from which my soul is a mere part, comes before my sense of personal and individual. The fact that my soul explores reality through a body is what makes it hard to keep a constant sense of Amazement. However, this first white piece, the totality of all totalities, is still there.

I don't think that my physical limitations ultimately matter. My soul has a deeper and eternal existence, and I can transcend and transpose the obstacle of the sensorial experience. Perhaps blurriness doesn't mean that much after all. Pain is important, but only as much as comfort and happiness - they serve the purpose of helping me understand that my blurriness doesn't mean that all that there is is blurry. Comfort and happiness inform me of a sense of greatness as well - after all, the experience of the beautiful and of love are great ways of accessing the sense of Radical Amazement. However, difficult moments also denote just as much of the Sublime as good and comforting experiences. There is Awe in what is hard and scary as well.

My eternal soul has a connection with infinitude that my reason wants to understand. It wants to comprehend and apprehend all of the mysteries, but eternity is not comprehensible. The finite cannot comprehend the endless.

Blessed are the blurry yellows. Blessed are those in existential pain. They know, or at least they are sometimes aware, that there is mystery beyond the shores of the known. One needs to search for more colors in order to achieve a grasp of the Holy One. However, one

must be aware that there are no colors to express what lies beyond our capacity to experience.

Blurriness may be incapable of achieving complete focus. However, at least it knows enough of totality to strive for it. Even in a world that is broken, one can still search for God. Awareness of the Awesome offers a reason and gives purpose to fix the fractures of existence and reality.

Leon Polk Smith, *Accent Black* (1949), Metropolitan Museum of Art (NYC)

The blood that flows through the body generates warmth. The flow of blood from the heart into the limbs and back seems to be a self-sufficient and exact process. It is true that the bodily functions are by themselves cause for much wonder. The fact that the organism works is a miracle that we experience individually with the passing of each second.

On the other hand, each person will one day experience the end of such accurate and smooth functioning of the body. That is, in an individual's life there will be at the least one moment when this balanced system flickers irregularly. The amazing functioning of our bodies is not in our control. We live then with wonder and fear; wonder in testifying how great it is that everything works properly, and the fear that comes from attesting to our physical fragility.

The blood is seen in Jewish tradition as the connector between the spiritual and the material. The Torah itself (Bereshit 9:4) argues this to be the case. In that passage, God blesses Noah and his descendants, giving them the option of eating also animals. However,



Noah is not allowed to eat an animal *be'nafsho*, with its soul. On that verse, the Torah teaches that this is a synonym to *damoh*, to its blood. The fluidity of blood is in relationship with the concept of the soul, dynamically breathed into the human by the Creator of the winds. We want to hold fast to our lives; we want to make sure that our blood flows appropriately. On the other hand, we know that mystery and its power surpasses any human

undertaking.

We are left in crisis. Crisis can be good, because it leads one to question what there is, and imagine what could be. In some sense, tension is positive, for if it were not for tension, there would be no movement. Tension evokes the need for a response; this can be shown through stretching a rubber band. Pulling each of its extremes to opposite sides, one creates tension. This tension comes from the fact that the object has the capacity of moving back towards its original state (force, in physics, called “resilience”). Once there is tension, there is also a potential for action. When there is a stressor, one can think through what is the person’s role in the process and move, take a stand.

The fragility of human existence evokes in us the potential for reaction. The sacredness of human life rests in both our impotence and our miraculous existence. Therefore, blood has more than the purpose of nourishing our limbs. Our souls cry out to us, through their rushing in our veins. We are called to engage with mystery.

As I stand looking at this picture, my heart pumps blood through my bodily systems. I am not even aware of that at all times. How many more wondrous elements are unknown to me! The geometry of the body is the boundary between the physical and the spiritual.

The artist questions this in this painting. Yes, the geometrical forms impose their figures into the frame. But the fluidity of the red transcends any aspect that would be thought to be fixed and unchangeable. Such dynamics transcend the physical. The boundary between physical and spiritual delineates the realm of the physical, but not of the metaphysical. The metaphysical inhabits the body and its surroundings.

Before a white canvas, one has infinite possibilities. Any and every pigment in the paint exists uniquely, and can therefore form endless shapes and forms. We stand before God in a similar way. We too are possessed of brushes with which we can create a more colorful world, adding our own efforts to creation.

In some sense, we are not much; we are dust and ashes. But dust has its purpose too. It has the potential of choosing its path, and responding to its ultimate purpose. Everything exists to praise the Holy One. We may not be able to express the Ineffable; in fact, that is the definition of the term. We can still relate to what we do not understand. We can still engage with mystery, and all of its unknown hidden ways.

Vasily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 27* (1912), Metropolitan Museum of Art (NYC)



I remember more than I remember. I witnessed Sinai, I stood right there. In some ways, I still do. I saw the clouds and the thunder. I don't know this, but I feel it. I feel it in every cell of my body. All that I have is my soul, which was witness to revelation. My soul was there, my soul has never recovered from it. How could it? Such an Awesome experience! The collective history of the Jewish history is my history. Sinai has changed me for forever.

I have never seen a red heifer. But I feel it. I feel its ashes purifying my existence. I see the fractures of the world. I see my own fractures. Perhaps this is why there are no red

heifers anymore. So much brokenness! Would there ever be enough ashes to purify all that needs to be healed? I feel all of the pain. Every single bit.

I stood at Sinai. My soul will never forget it. I saw the sea parting before that. I feel, I smell, I touch. I feel the warmth and love even when I am cold and lonely, though I am never completely cold and lonely. I smell the sea, I touch the dry ground in Awe.

I close my eyes, and I fly. I can fly beyond reason and what I know. Fly as I did before, and as I will do again. Fly from my brokenness and limited self. I look up to God. I look up to the ineffable; to all that there is.

I see the red heifer. I do not need my eyes to do so. I need only my soul. My soul remembers. My soul bears witness. I see each ray of light and energy. When I forget to let me should see it, then, and only then, I do not see it. I forget that I can laugh. I can - I can laugh. Somewhere in my soul lies the memory of Sinai, the memory of memories. I remember. I feel.

Paul Gauguin, *Haere Mai* (1891), Guggenheim (NYC)

The number of different colors that exist in a sunset is incredible. There seems to be an infinite number of tones of pink, purple, blue, yellow and green. The colors of the sky are overwhelming; no human creation will ever be as amazing as the natural world.

If the number of colors that I can see is by itself so extensive, how many more colors are there that I don't see! There must be an infinite number of tones beyond my eyes'



physical capacity to see. There is so much amazement out there, beyond the boundaries of human cognition and understanding.

What we can see is what is closest to us. In this case, a village and some animals. We assume that there are many more trees and houses elsewhere. However, all that we can see is what is next to us. The rest is simply assumed to exist. Beyond the village, there lies an infinity of textures and colors, regardless of the artist's capacity to reproduce them.

In some ways, this painting portrays the nature of human living. Each of us inhabits one of these houses, under the infinite sky of the overwhelming Sublime. It is as if we were guests, *ushpezin*, sitting in a house that is itself part of the totality of the cosmos. We live inside God. We are guests of the Endless. We are invited to live by the One who is beyond the overwhelming.

Each person carries a bit of those infinite tones of color and sparks shattered through all that is. In the spectrum of eternal and finite, and of holy and impure, everyday life takes place on the lowest of the levels. One has the potential of elevating one's spirit further up, in order to unveil concealed colors and textures.

In order to do so, we must see beyond what we can see. And the aware self is no longer capable of looking only down and close. Transcendence relies on questioning the exclusive focus on what is close and underneath us. The process focuses on paying notice to the Holiness that each of us, however unaware, carries with us at all times.

Frederico Herrera, *Pan de Azucar* (2014), Guggenheim (NYC)

God is called rock in liturgy and tradition. Rocks symbolize strength and stability. Rocks symbolize transcendence. Jacob dreams on a rock, and is able to see celestial movement. The commandments were first written in stone. When we search for our Rock, we mean the pursuit of stability and potential of infinite growth that we have, and that is given to us by God.

Without God, the pillar and column of the universe, that allows us to stand and to hold ourselves together, we would not be able to exist. The Rock is the most fundamental aspect of all that there is. With the existence of the cornerstone of the infinity, there are firm grounds for life to take place.

This rock is rounded in its top. Such shape is likely the product of erosion through the ongoing action of the wind and rain. God is affected by other parts of God. The Rock is impacted by the process of the blowing and gathering of the winds. The whites and greens of



the picture are also important. They are too part of what the Psalmist called the rejected stone, made into a round-edged stone.

Patience here is a virtue. Time needs to pass by in order to allow for change. A rock is

only a rock by itself; with its surroundings, it becomes a system. The Rock of the Rocks is beyond colors. That Rock, perfectly smooth, stands alone. The Rock invites us to hike and explore it. This painting calls me to take a stand, to help the winds to blow and affect the Eternal One.



Mark Rothko, *No. 3/No. 13* (1949), Museum of Modern Art (NYC)

One of the biggest contributions that art provides to personal living is that it expresses how we are not the only ones affecting the environment, but that we too can be affected by it. I imagine the artist holding fast to his paintbrush and striking the canvas. At the same time, I must

imagine how he, in turn, is affected by the painting as he goes on. It is a remarkable notion that the paintbrush is not only being held, but it actively influences the person who holds it. This is relationship building at its best; mutual and strong.

As I imagine Rothko painting, I ponder on my spiritual development. I search for meaning in my life. I believe I am the one responsible for providing purpose to my actions. I fail, sometimes, to recognize that the sense of purpose transcends my personal existence. Ultimate meaning does not come merely from inside my mind; if anything, this painting expresses how limited is my capacity to understand.

The cosmos affects me. The sense of meaningless comes from obstacles to my capacity of relating to the world. To some extent, I am the creator of those blockages. I am responsible for seeing challenges as difficult, instead of using the energy around me to transcend any limitations that I may artificially conceive.

A personal quest for meaning meets a reality that can be interpreted as difficult. Two opposing forces, such as these, cancel each other out. We are left with a problem. The painting continues to cry out, against any obstacle: “Feel me!,” “Feel yourself!” The apparent absence of meaning is just apparent. Reality is much more complex than a linear understanding of cosmic forces.

Lack of meaning is an opportunity to search for the Sublime. The Sublime is there; and it relates to us even when we more fiercely attempt to deny it. Will we respond? Or will we ignore it, and blame some other factor like time or reason?

The red and the purple used by Rothko invite one to pursue warmth and purpose. The painting projects outward, explicitly illustrating the nature of what we mean by human. That is the basis for all that we classify as religious: an engaging response to mystery.

Personal strives direct the individual towards meeting the universal One. The issue of responsibility comes from accepting that we are being affected by the reds, greens, purples, whites and blacks. A religious response addresses directly the deep murmur of the Awesome: *Hineni*, here I am.

Jackson Pollock, *Stenographic Figure* (1942), Museum of Modern Art (NYC)



The capacity of expression is truly a marker of humankind. We are able to use words to communicate. Once a word is uttered out of one's mouth, it starts swimming in a sea of words and expressions. Although one is not able to listen to them anymore, words continue to wander around, permeating every possible open space. Our surroundings are full of words, that like air molecules are affected by our movements.

Responsibility is the consequence of the ability to express oneself. Being able to produce these eternal elements, one needs to see oneself as partner in creation with God. In some sense, words are our offerings to God. Once they leave our mouths, they ascend to the heavens above, impacting the world while they travel. Just as a priest had to be so

meticulously careful with Temple worship, we too must use caution when interacting with the noisy society that we live in. The way in which a person conveys his or her message needs undivided attention by the subject of the expression.

The Divine attribute of *malkhut* emanates from below, from creation. A king with no followers would be nothing but a lonely person. So too does our capacity of expression interface with the One with whom we ultimately communicate. Every word uttered by a person alters God. We need to understand the impact that we have on God, as well as our need for the Holy One, who knows secrets and speaks every language.

It only takes a couple of lines to paint a human figure. It only takes a few letters to affect the universe. Prayer is the way by which we respond to the eternal calling from God, that is often ignored. Each letter provokes structural changes in the organization of energy around us. So long as prayers substitute for Temple worship, words are our offerings. Like our antecedents, we too hope that our gifts will be accepted by the Sublime.

This painting questions the notion that the visible is all that exists. In fact, what we can see is nothing but a designated, specific, set of lines. Our senses are too limited to apprehend all that there is. We are limited due to our physical experience of an eternal and ultimate existence. However, God has given us freedom too, such as the capacity to respond and engage with what lies beyond expression: the Ineffable source of life.

What good would revelation be without people to receive it? Happy is the one who sits in the house of God. Fearless, that individual listens to the Endless. God needs us; otherwise, God's kingship will have no direct impact on the world in how we take on our

lives. Now that God has asked of Adam “where are you?,” humankind has the obligation to respond - over and over again.

Chapter 4 - Personal Paintings

This part of the thesis is composed of my personal paintings. In order to observe the relationship between Radical Amazement and art, I have embarked on my own process of creativity. Seeing the process of raising one's spiritual awareness as fundamental in the feeling of Awe, it was necessary to invite myself into the process.

Some of these paintings reflect back to the previous chapter, where I exposed myself to other artist's works. There are motifs that appear in both chapters, as for example, the red heifer, and part of this has to do with the interrelationship between the roles of creating and observing. In fact, one of the goals of this thesis is to remove the passivity out of the spectator, and see art as a vehicle to invite more of the sacred into one's life, regardless of the position from which one is exposed to art. The following are 8 paintings, all acrylic over canvas. Some of them used different set inductions, processes and techniques. These diverse procedures are highlighted when relevant.

Painting no. 1

The beginning of the universe marked the original moment in which energy became accessible to a being outside the Ultimate and Infinite Being. From that time on, energy started to spread out, reaching the brand new corners of the universe, and all that started to exist in this vacuum of totality. This process happened from the inside out, from a center of gravity to the spreading and expansion of cosmic energy.



That, however, was not the end of the story. In fact, the narrative continues until today. Life is always renewed, God is the “*mechadesh be’chol yom ma’aseh bereshit*,” the One who renews every day God’s original creation. This energy permeates always all that is, and expands from that original source, from the epicenter of spirituality, from the Endless, into everything, and into everyone.

These divine sparks are everywhere; some of the places, like the bottom right corner of the painting, may seem darker. Other places, such as the upper left corner of the painting, may seem lighter, more illuminated. However, those little sparks, those little connectors between creation and Creator are everywhere.

It is no surprise that this image also resembles the moment of conception. The big cell in the middle, the egg, waits for the beginning of cell division that would characterize life. The seeds, the male cells, are supposed to penetrate the egg's outer layer, adding its chromosomal matter to the one already found in the inner portion of the cell. That is life at its beginning. Now, there is much more besides the sperm. There are also other sparks, other particles of energy of other colors.

Conception is not about two cells, it is about much more than that. Divine energy surrounds all that exists, and permeates all breaths that we take, and all that we see. What seems to be only physical is the home of the spiritual, if only we develop our sensitivity to open ourselves to this Godly potential. From conception to the beginning of creation, God is part of every process and every being. God handiwork inspires us to open our eyes and say: "Who created these?"

This painting needed to be the first one in my process of searching Radical Amazement through painting. This is the beginning, here is where it all starts. Two cells, that are much more than two cells. One initial moment, that is much more than just a moment. It is the beginning of life, the beginning of spirituality.

Life and spirituality can be separated only if one forgets of this powerful connection between the two. It is time to reclaim the sacred, to invite more of these sparks into my daily life. This is the beginning, this is the invitation. "Where are you?" is asked of me, and "Hineni," "Here I am" is my answer.

Painting no. 2



The experiment here was to create an underlying layer of paint as a basis, and then paint over it. The bright yellow coat of ink is visible only to the willing eye. There are some shades of yellow, but it is still virtually impossible to notice that the bright yellow is beneath all of the canvas.

The bright yellow (see the left hand of the triangle for the detail), hard to observe, represents the *shefa*, the flow of divine influence. It is represented by yellow as ways of denoting energy and the richness of such influence in everything that exists. Without that first

coat of ink, this painting would not be the same. It may be hard - or even impossible - to sense the *shefa* at all times, but without it, this painting would be different; it may be that it would not even exist.

The red triangle represents the human. Our blood is what gives us the possibility of maintaining our vital nourishment, and the pulse of our hearts is - and has also been for the rabbis - a quantifiable way of measuring life. The triangle points upwards, because the potential of transcendence is inherent to human beings. The existence of our souls create the possibility of us reaching higher. Of course, “up” serves only a metaphorical purpose, since, as pointed out above, *shefa* is everywhere.

The white represents the layer between the red triangle and the flow of divine energy. Through inviting more of the white into the triangle, the redness is noticeably affected by this Godly energy. The process of painting represented the same; with the red ink fresh in the canvas, I gradually incremented the white, creating so many different tones of pink. What the pink represents is the potential for the subject to be affected by the Endless, if only one is willing to transcend the boundary between soul and reason.

There are sprinkles of white even in the red that seems to be unaffected by the surrounding spirituality. What this represents is that, even in parts of the subject that are not yet ready to accept the cosmological invitation of “Where are you?” with a strong “Here I am,” God is still present. Unawareness of the divine does not imply absence of the divine. It merely represents an obstacle posed by the red triangle (the person), and not by God. The white is still there, in strong and powerful tones.

The goal of the *homo religiosus* is, then, to become pink. The most important spiritual enterprise is marked by this painting: establishing a bridge between the body (and its nourishment) and the soul, that also has wants and needs. This is not easy, and one is not necessarily ready to commit to this hard work at all times; but just as the blurry boundary between the reddest of the spots in the painting and the surrounding white, the spiritual wants to come in - all it takes is an invitation.

Painting no. 3



This painting was the fruit of a different exercise. The first step was to create a smooth background, with the help of a sponge, to give to the canvas a sense of life and movement. After that, I simply held a brush and started to move my hand freely throughout the space. The goal was to create images that resonate with a consciously determined background, but that are ultimately generated in a state of mind that is beyond focus or consciousness.

The exercise was interesting, and led to images that resonate extensively with me. What is a human shape - how many different traces and lines are the minimum requirement in order to invoke a human face? Although this has been explored to a greater extent in Plato's allegory of the cave, the notion of a specific original shape or form, that exists in the world of ideas, is relevant to the discussion. However, it interests me here for a different reason.

I am not interested in the human per se, but with the relationship between creature/creation and Creator. What means to be human transcends a face, and is beyond physical bodies. These spiral forms in the painting connect what seem to be three human shapes.

The lines are interrupted; this communication is not complete. However, the spirals provide the painting with a degree of movement. Through this movement, the limits of the self become blurry. It is as if everything were in dialogue, reaching out to someone else. Individual existence matters, but a big part of its value comes from the potential of relationships with everything else that is.

Heschel wrote that wonder and awe come before thought. If the spiral forms in the painting were mere thoughts, they would exist constricted by the boundaries of the person.

But wonder transcends the self. Wonder is what follows from the individual's awareness of the infinitude that surrounds him or her. Awe is created by the notion that there is something beyond ourselves; our thoughts are by themselves proof of the existence of mysteries beyond our grasp.

In fact, I would summarize this painting as the awareness of those mysteries. In the bottom left corner, two figures interact in a blurry surrounding. It could be that they are speaking words of Torah, studying sources and imagining what it would mean to live in the time that they were written. The blurriness represents that even reality, even a first hand experience, has something that is unclear, something that is beyond reason. There is so much involved in living and breathing that brings forth the order of the spiritual! When two people engage in meaningful relationships (especially if guided by text), they perceive the blurriness, the sacred around them.

It could well be the other way around. The "present day" person could be the big face at the center of the painting, and she or he could be studying the discussion between the two smaller figures (maybe even rabbis) in the corner. In some way, once we hear or read a story, it becomes our own. It becomes part of who we are, and of our identities.

We engage with our sources through our glasses, through an instrument that distances ourselves from the text. Not that we have an option - my body restricts the experience of my soul. I interact with the world through my senses.

That is also not exclusively bad, since this way I am able to explore what is beyond my senses, as in the picture. The spiral forms connect all stories, all generations, into one

narrative. Who we are, where we have been and which way we decide to go are all interrelated processes.

The flag in the top of the big figure's head represents the most important part of this painting. We are all sailing, and we need the flag posts to guide our trajectory. The problem is that we too often emphasize the role of the boat, and forget that even though it provides us with safety, it is through our will - and movement - that we are able to sail around in the endless sea. If we do not consciously decide to engage with the sacred, and to use ourselves as boats in this journey, then we are forgetting what Antoine de Saint-Exupery wrote: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

Painting no. 4

Yizkor. I remember. I haven't met all that came before me, at least not in my own life. However, I feel like I know them. I feel like I connect to all generations that came before me. Some of the most exciting elements of being Jewish is to remember. We remember Sinai, even though we don't have a first account memory. But it is part of who we are. My soul was at Sinai, although I may not remember. Beni was not at Sinai, but my soul was. My essence, what gives life to me, witnesses the original revelation.

It follows then that I carry beneath me, in my spirit, parts of all that came before me. I carry elements from the first soul, from Adam. After the first human being, his original soul was shattered, broken into pieces, and defused throughout generations. I carry inside of me a lot of history - history that transcends my self, and informs my spiritual identity.



As in the picture, there is a fire that burns inside of me. Sometimes, I forget about it, and keep it in pilot mode. But the potential is there. The source of energy, that was once part of the Ultimate Source of Being, is there. It came from that original soul, it came from the beginning of beginnings. And it still lies beneath me.

Like the olympic torch, it is passed down from generation to generation. Like the olympic torch, it is new, but it carries all of the heat transmitted by the original flame. This fire of mine is not only mine, for it would not exist without all of the previous sources of heat and warmth that came before me.

Just as in the painting, my soul is composed of many different traces. It is as if each of those traces represented a different part and element of my collective narrative, that informs my personal one. Enclosed in the limits of my soul, like the flame in the picture, each of these particles moves around, and interacts with the other ones. Alone, these sparks would only be sparks. But together, they compose the totality of my being.

I remember. I remember so many moments of our history in which there was fire and destruction. But fire also represents hope. A flame represents potential for growth, as well as one of the most essential aspects that guarantee that we, beings, are able to exist. If it weren't for the heat coming from the center of Earth, and if it weren't for the warmth coming from the Sun, life would not be possible. Life would not be possible without what lies within me, as well as the source of energy outside of me. In and out, there is energy. In and out, there is potential.

I look at this flame, and I notice its movements. The picture has two parallel motions. The background seems to move in circles, representing that underneath our existence, there is something that informs who we are and the context of our lives, and that this "something" goes round and around, breathing new life - new air - into the flame, allowing it to burn higher.

The flame itself moves upwards. It wishes to transcend, it wants to reach beyond its limits. However, the fire is only able to actually grow if this background gives it fuel in the form of air. God is everywhere, and a soul is only able to reach a higher level of spirituality if it does so by inviting more of God's presence into the world. Otherwise, the flame remains on stand-by, on pilot mode.

The most interesting aspect of a pilot light is precisely the summary of how painting this piece impacted me emotionally. I have the potential to transcend, and with every stroke of paint, I felt that to become more real and significant. On the other hand, I could not have the strength and capacity of mixing the ink and applying it to the canvas without my motor skills, my senses and my body.

Perhaps this is able to illustrate the importance of the physical body. Even though I have a soul, even though my spiritual existence preceded my body, it is only through it - only through matter - that my spirit can transcend. It is only through the physical that the spiritual in me shifts from potential to actual. Izkor. I remember who I was, I remember who I am, and I imagine who I can become.

Painting no. 5

This painting solves one of the most complicated chapters in the Biblical narrative. The specific point that it responds to is to the function of the red heifer. The red heifer was used to a specific method of purification, by which the ashes of the animal would be used as an instrument to achieve spiritual cleanness.

The problem, however, is how to locate a red heifer. This obstacle could infer that there is no way to achieve purity on that way. The ritual could have been considered dead, as in the case of the *tekhelet*, which was also extracted from an animal which cannot be found (although there are those who disagree).

The connection between animals and humans is profound. I feel connected to all that exists in my surroundings. Weren't I created by the same God that created all animals?



Sometimes, I like listing all that differentiates me from an animal. Reason and cognitive thinking. I eat animals, and not the other way around (at least in life, since in death this process is reverted). But at the end of the day, I am just like everything in nature, and I am part of the same flow of energy that breathes life into my nostrils and into a heifer's.

What this painting does is to connect me to the red heifer. The light blue symbolizes Israel, and I, as a child of Israel, am the red heifer. Perhaps the first important goal of the red heifer ritual was to remind how similar we are to all of creation; through our connection with the ashes of an animal, we achieve purity. Through our awareness of our role in nature, and our connection to the rest of creation, we achieve transcendence.

Perhaps purity is much more in one's mind than it is in the outside. Uncleanliness may be an afflicted state of spirit, in which we forget that we deserve to be complete and fulfilled. Impurity may be the lack of remembrance that we inherited a role in creation and that we have a potential - given to us by God - to pursue transcendence.

It may well be that there are no red heifers so that God can measure how bad we really want repentance. If it is hard to go back to an initial state of purity, one has two options: either give up, or search for other alternatives for atonement. I prefer the second option. And this is what this painting is all about.

We can wear the cow's skin. We can be the vehicles of our own transcendence. We have the potential of becoming who we want to become, and wrestle with our misdeeds but guarantee our benevolence. We don't need ashes, we need ourselves, our own skin.

The other interesting aspect of this painting is that the colors initially remind me of clouds. If the images were brown, I would think of a cow's skin first, but since they are blue, they remind me of the sky. What is powerful about this is that each and every cow skin represents the clouds in the sky - if they themselves were not brown, but blue, they would be very similar in our minds to the heavens.

The powerful image, as I paint this piece of art, is that I too reflect the heavens. The Psalmist cries: "I rise my eyes toward the mountains, where will my help come from?" (Ps. 121). But one does not need to look up to find the spiritual. One carries the spiritual beneath one's skin. The idea that we represent an image of God alludes not to our bodies necessarily, but to what lies deep inside our existences, what sustains our lives and nurtures our souls.

A cow, just as a human, represents that the divine is everywhere and within all that breathes. The heavens are not far off in the distance, unreachable and inaccessible. Rather, they are as close to ourselves than our own bodies. They are as open to our wanderings than the will of a person to wander and take the first steps.

This painting makes me realize that I don't believe in a distant God, far from my personal reach. I believe in a God that is everywhere, and is capable of just as much as we are willing to do. I believe in a God that is outside but is reflected and present in the inside. The problem is that sometimes I get lazy. Perhaps this means I should paint more often.

Painting no. 6



The exercise for this painting was a new process. I closed my eyes, listening to music (in this case Vivaldi's "Le Quattro Stagioni") for about half an hour. I then proceeded to meditate on the emotions that Vivaldi's work was generating in me. I started to think of the Bible, and the narrative of the binding of Isaac came to mind. I used the music as an entry way into one of the most intense moments of the Torah; namely, when an angel of God comes to stop Abraham, who was about to kill his son Isaac. Were this not to happen, Jewish history would have ended almost at the same time where it was starting.

Listening to the music again, I set up my canvas, and going back to those original emotions, picked a color for the background. I let the music dictate the rhythm with which I stroke the screen. The result can be seen in the painting; this was such an intense moment that my eyes became teary.

I then proceeded to represent what my heart felt. The arm of Abraham is not perfectly symmetric. Its lines are shaken up, just as I would be if I were him. Reluctant, hesitant. What are the limits of faith? It is not fair for me to discourse on this, because I have never been on that situation. What have I sacrificed to be here, about to become a rabbi? I don't see my family nearly enough. I have acquired student debt. But that is pretty much it.

And I am reluctant. Do I deserve to be here? How come I deserve to fulfill my dream - have an amazing family and friends, become a rabbi - and so many more in society are unable to pursue their visions and their wishes. I am not part of the vulnerable, of the marginalized.

Abraham, however, reminds me that we all are - or could easily become - vulnerable at some other moments in our lives. One day, everything is perfect. Sarah is happy. Isaac is

growing healthy. And then, it all changes. Then, Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son. It all shifts. Now, there is fear, reluctance, instability.

What happens next? The yellow lightening in the painting represents the angel, sent by God, to stop Abraham. Abraham has a weapon, and is about to kill Isaac. But the angel stops him. The lines of the lightening are also not perfect. This time, they don't represent reluctance, but the idea that there are no clear boundaries, no limits to God's presence in everyday life. Divine energy cannot be contained, cannot be restricted to lines.

Perhaps the key factor in this episode is that Abraham becomes aware of the angel, becomes aware of this infinite energy flowing everywhere, including at that moment. It may be that the divine in Abraham stops him from committing murder. Abraham's fear is met by reassurance. From tears into smiles, the story changes by the raising of spiritual awareness.

The only clear shaped image in the painting is the knife that Abraham holds in his hand. That weapon is merely physical, it is only composed of matter and not spirit. It is cold. It is sharpened. It just "is," without being able to expand and transcend what its existence means. But Abraham is not like that; I am not like that.

I easily default into parts of my routine that keep me from noticing the sacred around me. I focus on the physical, on objects, on driving my car, on eating (without the mindfulness that this process could have) and on living in an "automated" way. But painting this piece reminded me of the importance of listening to sounds, of getting in touch with the painting, and of being in relationship not only with one self but even with the matter, even with the physical objects around me, like the brushes that I used.

Heschel writes that reading and studying text is a way of inviting more of God's presence into one's life. I feel that working on this painting helped me to achieve that. Text is brought to life by the way that we approach it. If we struggle with it, if we feel it in our skin, as if we were ourselves experiencing what we read, then the Bible becomes our narrative, our personal story. I am the struggle. I am the pain. I am the reluctance. But I am also the one able to raise my awareness of the sacred around me, and then take a deep breath, pause, and finally change.

Painting no. 7



Nothing speaks to my soul more than the waves in an ocean. Spending time watching the waves break is for me a spiritual experience. It allows me to reflect back to how cyclic life is. A wave is formed, and is brought toward the shores. It then breaks, starting up the process from the beginning.

However, there is one more powerful aspect. Waves are ultimately made of water, which is affected by pressure and by gravity. In some senses, that reminds me of my own existence. I believe that my soul, like all souls, is eternal. In this current wave, I am Beni. I swim through rocky terrain sometimes, and I gaze at what seems to be an obstacle. But I always make it just fine. Even when I ultimate touch the shore again, at the end of my life, I believe that something of the order of the spiritual will remain alive.

Watching waves breaking at the ocean inspire me to continue my life, and to attempt not to be afraid of all obstacles that I will face, because I am water. And water is amongst the most malleable of the substances. Because of its fluidity, it is able to circumvent all sorts of bumpy roads.

The light green reminds me of a wave, and reminds me also of the spiritual waves that exist within my own self. I see this in the painting as my *yetzer ha'tov*, that tries to gallop off with my existence. This way, it agitates me to act in accordance my values and morality with others, with myself and ultimately, with God.

But just as in the ocean, this is not always easy. There are other elements out there in the endless sea, and that influence my everyday life. My *yetzer ha'rah* is represented by the black in the painting.

No matter how powerful my *yetzer ha'tov* is, I cannot deny that I have, just like any other person has, an evil inclination as well. It is present, and it is strong. I do not want to pretend to be perfect, and know that sometimes, my acting does not correspond to what I consider the best behavior to be.

In between the good and evil inclinations, the red represents the divine attribute of *Gevurah*. That element is the one that has the most texture in the painting, represented by the red. It has more texture because it symbolizes the infinite power of God, and how it influences the way that I attempt to struggle - and hopefully succeed - against the evil inclination.

God's *Gevurah* is yet another wave. Besides participating in the transition between what is good and what is bad, it attempts not only to establish that bridge but also to influence the victory of the *tov*. I don't think that I am God, but I do think that God influences my life in the deepest of all ways.

This painting is almost a prayer - that God will help me dominate my evil inclinations. By doing so, I don't claim to surrender responsibility, but only to inspire myself by the sacred, and invite more of its existence into my personal life. This way, I hope that my mind and my heart may not only coexist but live coherently, *panim el'panim* with each other. Not that either of them is inherently bad, but that soul and reason can together join forces with the infinite *Gevurah* that exists in everything and everyone, including in myself.

The white represents God's *Chesed*. In the painting, it also appears as a wave, moving towards the *yetzer ha'tov*. My prayer is also that divine kindness and justice will permeate all

that I do, adding fuel to my spiritual combustion. The struggle against the evil inclination is not an easy one. However, there are enough resources around me to help me to balance it out.

Painting no. 8 - *Kisseh Ha'Kavod*



For the last exercise in this series, I was searching for a way to dive deeply into the sense of Awe. For that, I needed to focus, meditate and let feelings govern my mind, instead of thoughts. I wanted to use painting exactly in the way that I have been proposing in this

thesis; namely, as a vehicle to express what is beyond expression in a way that is personal and spiritual, portraying the deepest of all emotions.

After listening to music for a while and letting my rational side go to sleep, I decided to portray the *kisseh ha'kavod*, God's throne. Nothing seemed more difficult, yet majestic. The idea that God sits on a throne makes that royal seat metaphorical; but how to portray what is by its definition beyond human understanding? Could art really fulfill to the full extent what I have been arguing all along?

I also decided that this painting needed to be the most personal one that I have ever done. For this reason, I decided to leave my brushes aside, and use my own body as an instrument this time. This painting was completely done using my bare fingers. I wanted to enter into relationship with the ink and with the canvas. I wanted to be one with my creation. As a created being myself, I would only be able to portray God's throne if I attempted to be on an equal plane with the matter that I was touching.

I started with a basic structure of a chair. To get to the metaphorical, I felt that I had to start with the physical. Since I operate through senses and cognition, only through those means I would be able to elevate my work into the mystery of mysteries. The choice of turquoise was purely emotional; I went with the color that my gut instinctively decided was most appropriate. I simply grabbed colors and started to mix them, until I got to this tone.

I realized later on that this color has for a long time been related as a talisman to kings and warriors. No color could have been better. It denotes the heavens, but in its most royal capacity. The turquoise arches and the orange strokes around the throne of God symbolize the clouds and the fire, the connection between heaven and earth.

In the Bible, the imagery of stormy clouds and fire is associated with Divine revelation. I wanted to express how this revelation happens everywhere, not only in God's throne. It emanates from there, but flies like birds into all corners of the world (as well as the other spiritual worlds).

In the center of the chair, in bright yellow, one can vaguely make out a human face, as well as what seems to be limbs. That figure, in the center of the throne, represents how humans can reflect their faces into the majesty of God's kingdom. It is not our place to sit on the chair, but part of ourselves reflects back to this original source of energy, to the place where God "sits" and waits for a human response to the question of *Aiekah*. The face is disfigured because at that point, when a person's soul is so intensely elevated spiritually, there are no bodies.

What we do in this world - what I do in this world - affects God. My body, and in this case my fingers, are vehicles to explore creation and invite more of the sacred into my life. My hope is that through my actions and engagement, I can add on to God's throne a bit of myself, as I invite more of God to be part of me.

The white images represent the angels around the throne. These envoys are the connectors between us and the One, bridging the gap between finite and infinite. They stand still in Awe, as a role model to what our behavior should be as we live our daily lives, and forget to search for the realm of the spiritual.

It is extremely important to notice that God is not depicted in the image, because that would be contrary to all of my beliefs. I believe in a God that is beyond my understanding,

and even when I attempt to transpose my limitations of expression, I would still never dare to depict God, who is beyond expression.

Although there seem to be shapes inhabiting the chair, I intend for the chair to be empty, only because there is no way that I could imagine the One whose throne is symbolically expressed here. All that this painting is supposed to represent is a person's emotional response before the vastness of the universe. Then, humbly, one is able to use art to reflect Radical Amazement, and stand in Awe before the Mystery of Mysteries.

Conclusion

This thesis was meant to be an exploration of art as an urban vehicle for Radical Amazement. This goal came out of the difficulties in the present day of pursuing spiritual awareness in a way that is both meaningful and possible. Abraham Joshua Heschel called attention to the importance of the question posed by Isaiah 40:26: “Lift up your eyes on high and see, Who created these?”

In order to contemplate what it means to ask this question today, one would have to lift up one’s eyes and engage with the surroundings. This exercise would be much simpler for one who lives in direct contact with nature, and possibly even working the land. However, in urban settings, this is much more difficult. Concrete walls and traffic jams are much more real than nature for many people. Spiritual awareness, then, is not often either a priority or an easy to access endeavor.

Through this thesis, I intend to respond to the Psalmist (Psalm 118:5): “Out of distress/narrowness I called to You.” The narrowness here meant the reality that a high level of mindfulness seems distant to what we can achieve in our everyday lives in big cities. The relevance of this thesis was that it is indeed a great need of modern humans to figure out alternate ways of inviting more of the sacred into their lives, and do so in a way that is meaningful, coherent, easily accessible, and compatible with one’s routine.

In order to do that, the first step was to elaborate on the concept of Radical Amazement as seen by Heschel. In addition, I had to establish a strong connection between Heschel’s thought and Jewish sources so that it would become explicitly relevant theologically in a Jewish frame.

To achieve this goal, I drew extensively from chassidic thought. Radical Amazement was exposed as intrinsically connected to the way in which Chasidism dealt with mystical concepts, which were also evaluated. The bridge between Awe and Jewish tradition was already known to Heschel, who himself was a descendant of a chasidic dynasty. Nevertheless, making those connections explicit was necessary.

The relationship between Radical Amazement and Judaism was also exemplified through the analysis of a midrashic source. Although not seen in the context of the Ineffable, this examination of a rabbinic text contextualized the issue at stake as one relevant to Judaism in many different layers. In fact, Jewish thinkers have devoted much effort to reflecting on the connection between humans and God, and how we respond from our finite existence in face of the Endless.

Secondly, this thesis focused on determining the issue of the spiritual in art. Following the determination of what Radical Amazement consists of, it was important to discuss how it may apply to art. In the process of making the artistic exercise into a theological endeavor, there were important definitions to be made.

The first step toward this direction was to discuss art theory, especially regarding abstract expressionism. This was important because the idea of the abstract is the basis for the development of the notion of the spiritual in art. This thesis was able to show how the notion of abstract develops into the concept of art.

It was then important to discuss what art really means. This was done through the contrast between art and “mere things,” in a way that illustrated how transcendence of a “normal” stage of an object creates art. This idea was demonstrated to be relevant, as it

generated a discussion on the metaphysical and its role in arts, which was corroborated by Kant's conception of the sublime.

The last stage in the analysis of art theory deals specifically with the spiritual in art. Theories of painting were used to show how deep of an experience it is to both create and contemplate works of art. This process was contextualized as one that touches souls, and is able to generate (through color, shapes and texture) feelings rooted into the realm of the spiritual.

The next chapter was a test of the proposal of this thesis, from the lenses of the observer. It consisted of me going to museums, and exposing myself to different works of art from other painters. I spend many hours in museums, gazing at pictures and journaling intensely.

The result was the corroboration of the thesis. Those works of art were able to create in me a deep appreciation of the sacred. I was able to expose deep feelings that inspired in me a strong awareness of the sacred around me, even in places like a museum in the largest city in the United States (New York City).

The last chapter of the thesis explores the role of Radical Amazement in a person's creation process. For that exercise, I painted several works of art, and wrote about the technique, method, and general experience. In addition to this, I also journaled about my own paintings.

Through this endeavor, I was able to notice a strong sense of spiritual awareness. The motifs invoked by my works, as well as the activity of creating, proved to increase my sense of Awe. This was possible even in an urban setting, in my apartment in Los Angeles.

In conclusion, I believe that this thesis succeeds in proving that art can indeed be an urban vehicle for Radical Amazement. The processes of creating and observing paintings corroborated the theory developed in the first two chapters, establishing a direct and explicit link between the Jewish sources that dealt with Awe, and art theory. Painting was proven to have the potential of being a theological exercise.

It may not be easy to get into a state of mind to always focus on the spiritual side of everything. It may even be harder to do so in big cities, where the fast pace of life is much more of a priority than Radical Amazement. However, it surely is possible - as demonstrated by this thesis - to carve some space for opportunities of engagement with the sublime. Art is an excellent way of pursuing this goal.

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