

# Images of Tanya, Mysticism and Jewish Art

From amongst the plethora of definitions of art, I like the simple one - art is: 'making the invisible visible' – be it an idea, a feeling, an experience etc. This is challenging enough on the physical level, dealing with 'worldly' experiences like: beauty, humanity, land/culture etc.

**To make the spiritual experience visible is even more challenging and perhaps the ultimate challenge.**

All other major religions have a long artistic tradition of spiritual representations. Judaism is the only religion with a glaring omission of any visual tradition.

Making the Jewish spiritual experience visible is literally, like creating from nothing, it's an artistic 'terra nullius' as there are no visual precedents for an artist to draw upon. I often feel that I'm working within an unknown terrain and walking an uncharted visual spiritual space for the first time. I'm sure that there are other Jewish artists in various parts of the world who are also grappling with representing the spiritual but that whole area of art or 'movement' if one can call it that is unrecorded with very little shared information about our individual activities. However, in spite of limited patronage and a very small appreciative audience, I consider myself lucky enough to be able to pursue these projects out of pure personal determination and creative need.

My motivation behind the *Images of Tanya* was to visually express mystical ideas drawn from my own Jewish cultural tradition and to create a unique and original body of artwork.

These limited edition prints are based upon the book: *The Gate of Unity and Belief* (commonly known as Tanya) by the great Chassidic scholar and mystic, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. The themes developed through these Images of Tanya deal with how **the oneness of God is reflected in Creation.**

According to the Torah, Judaism is founded upon a direct spiritual contract between God and the Jewish people, individually and collectively. Jewish mysticism is the attempt to try to fathom and decipher the processes and the infrastructure of that spiritual contract.

Unlike all other religions, Judaism is grounded within this world, this immediate experience, the every day, the mundane, the touchable, the real. Jewish spiritual experience is not to be had on some lofty, distant mountain top or imagined as taking place somewhere in the sky, hovering above us – no, it's to be experienced right here and now. That is the distinguishing aspect of Jewish spirituality –

it is in our world, everywhere and in everything, every moment, within and around us. It is both universal and intimate, at the same time.

From the beginning of Jewish history, Jewish spirituality and mysticism was expressed primarily through words, through the 'holy' language – Hebrew. The Hebrew language is the foundation to the understanding of Jewish mystical ideas. However, over the centuries, especially through the numerous Kabbalistic texts, various diagrams, symbolic charts, schematic images and artistic representations have contributed to the evocation of Jewish mystical ideas.

Perhaps because Jewish ideas of mysticism are contained in texts and require some intellectual effort in order to understand them, an intimate process of learning one to one with a rabbi or in small groups is the usual method employed. And perhaps because Jewish mysticism is an intimate, personal process of revealing the infinite, Jewish mystical art generally seems to manifest itself most readily through intimate forms like micrography, calligraphy, book illustration (Haggadah and Megillah Esther), human scale paintings and sculpture? Or is this simply the early beginnings of a Jewish art form coming into its own and taking tentative steps along the road of its evolution from the small, personal to the grand and when necessary monumental?

One reason for choosing the print form for these images was the fact that it is an intimate art form, both in the process of production and appreciation – these prints could be viewed in the portfolio, like a book, or be individually framed.

In order for me to begin to understand the mystical ideas contained within this important Jewish text, I spend some months studying the text with Rabbi Cowen. I would go away after each session, produce drawings of my ideas and we would discuss these as possibilities for illuminating the specific chapters of the text. Eventually, when we agreed upon the form and content of the image, I would paint watercolours of each idea from which I produced these limited edition prints.

It was therefore quite natural for this project to be a true collaboration between a mystical text, a Rabbi and an artists, a collaboration between words, ideas and images or as the late Rabbi Haim Gutnick put so eloquently, between the head and the heart. He referred to Rabbi Cowen as "the head" and to me as "the heart" of this project.



Through the creation of these images I made visible my interpretation of Creation (based upon the Tanya text) and thereby enabling the viewer to contemplate upon the mystical wonders that surround us. I also hope that through this work I have contributed to the body of major, Jewish Art that will enable an appreciation of our reality with a deeper understanding, from a Jewish, mystical perspective.

The images in sequence.

1. God's speech, understandable to us through language, depicted here both literally and symbolically both in English (our common language) and Hebrew (holy language) through the symbolic Hai - life. This image also deals with the separation of light from darkness and heavens and earth. A suggestion of the mystical nature of this creation is implied by the (red) light beam reflected upon the water emanating from a mystical source, somewhere outside the depicted space.
2. The letters of the holy language Hebrew are descending from 'above'. These letters, through the words they will form are the "instruments" of creation. The word *Atoh*, "You" is composed from the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, together with the letter *heh*, symbolising the five parts of the mouth which articulate the letters from within – the Divine "breath". The images represented in each word symbolically represent the 'whole' world: *aleph* = Bungle Bungles stand for Australia, Africa, Asia, *toiv* = Negev stands for Israel and the Middle East, *heh* = snow clad mountains stand for Europe and the Americas.
3. Everything in creation derives from the transcended power of God. This is symbolised by the whirls of 'divine energy/ light' as well as by the implied (hidden) mechanism which is only partially revealed as all human understanding is limited.
4. Specific entities exist within creation because God enables a sense of contraction to merge with the infinite engendering power. In this image, the underlying 'swirls of energy' are 'constricting' metaphorically to formulate symbolic templates for everything: flowers, birds, trees etc, etc. One shard of this 'template is further 'constricted' to form/reveal a detail of a landscape. This is a hint of the 'total creation' to come.
5. The holy alphabet, Hebrew is superimposed upon the English sentence *He And His Attributes Are One*, symbolically inferring that God's instruments are not Him but are wholly united with Him. The 'energy swirls' of previous images are still discernable in the background and the colour within the overlap is one of a fiery furnace where 'creation' takes place.
6. The 'energy swirls' have 'constricted' to form the Kabbalistic diagram of the Divine *Sfirot*\*. Each has a specific function/ purpose. Although they are separate, each Sfiira contains aspects of all the others within itself, thereby forming connections and paths between themselves that connect creation into a oneness of unity. Here the letters of Divine thought, speech and action through which the creation is concretely articulated, are all nullified – wholly dependent and insignificant in relation to their immediate source, the Divine Sfirot.

7. A further process of contraction takes place where the Sfirot themselves are totally nullified to "Him". Everything – the Sfirot, the letters of creation and the physical entities of creation themselves – are all equally insignificant besides Him. The way I understood this is not through a process of taking things away, but on the contrary, the 'contractions' referred to here are where God is making room for the creation of a space for the process of filling it with our world. In this image, although everything is reduced to its diagrammatic simplicity, the whole image is 'pulsating with portent'.
8. The penultimate phase of the 'creation' process is the energy of contraction/unification. The quintessential Godliness has chosen to unite Himself with the Sfirot in order to create the world. Symbolically, the 'white heat' or the 'blue fire' which pictorially fuses all the 'Godly utensils' of creation consumes them all and unites the process into its final emanation.
9. In turn, the Godly powers of the Sfirot are drawn into the letters and words of Divine speech. This is "God's speech" through which the concrete entities of creation are animated and enlivened. The process of creation is literally depicted through the transformation of God's 'energy' into physical reality.
10. The concrete entities of heaven and earth (and everything else within them) in the letters of their names represent a coding of the Divine powers of the Sfirot. The very being of each created entity is formed through the letters of creation into which are drawn the powers of the Sfirot and through the Sfirot which are united with the infinite, the power of Godliness itself. Everything (reality) now is 'concrete'. Even the reflection on the water has its source (the sun) depicted. However, through the meaning of the names of things in Hebrew, the numerical significance of each name together with their Sfirotic function/purpose is what enlivens creation.

An image of a garment appears in each of these 10 works. I'm using this metaphor of garment as God's garment for the world – a form of containment, protection as well as vulnerability. This metaphoric garment is God's gift to us. It is for us to wear it, however, as our free will has a part to play in creation – we must take care of it. Safe in His garment, we are here to complete the creation that God made for us. Having so to speak, the Divine within us, **we are ultimately responsible for His garment.**

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This paper was presented during a seminar on the Mystical in Art at the Institute for Judaism and Civilization, Melbourne.

\* In each of the 10 images referred to above, 11 Sfirot (symbolically circles) are represented. This is highly unusual as traditionally only the 10 Sfirot appear in most diagrams of these Godly emanations. However, we decided (after considerable discussion) to include the 'hidden' Sfiira of Daat which normally is not visualised. This Sfiira represents the combination of Hochmah (wisdom) and Binah (understanding). Through this combination we begin to have direct connection with the Divine, therefore we decided to 'reveal' this Sfiira and give it its rightful place in our diagrammatic constellation.