



VICTOR
MAJZNER

Personal Journey

Without the Torah there would be no Judaism. The Torah makes temporal reality purposeful and the spiritual experience tangible.

Art makes the intangible visible.

One mid-afternoon in 1977, I visited the Rothko Inter-denominational Chapel in Houston, USA. It was late May, the heat was already pervading Texas. As I sat alone in that cool space, looking at the subtle, grey variations in the paintings that blended so perfectly into the octagonal space, I felt that I was being transported out of myself. It was a very odd yet not frightening sensation. I must have been there for hours on my own. There was no artificial light to disturb the setting. I was only aware of a diffused, natural light illuminating the space from a single window in the ceiling. As the parade of clouds obscured the sun temporarily, the constantly changing light would transform the space inside the chapel – from a dark and mysterious tomb-like space to one that was illuminated, glowing, and full of energy. Rothko's paintings were the perfect vehicle for this amazing lightshow brushing across them. Perhaps it was the light that tripped me out? Perhaps the silence in this space was taking on a physicality? In retrospect, it sounds like a Hollywood cliché but the paintings, the simplicity of the space, and the varying degrees of greyness/nothingness in this enclosure made me conscious of powers outside of my immediate control. I felt as if I were in a womb, experiencing a birthing where I was witnessing a new reality being formed out of this light and silence; not unlike the original creation, I imagined.

I learned to appreciate the spiritual in art from historical paintings and sculptures in the various churches and museums of Europe. In this instance, however, art had a direct, physiological effect on me. No imagery to distract, no melodrama of narrative to interfere with my emotions – just a personal, direct contact with the Divine. I like to think of it as my first Jewish spiritual experience. From that day my art shifted.

I always had a strong sense of Jewish identity based on my secular, humanistic upbringing but from that day Jewish subject matter and spiritual content started to enter my paintings.

A few years later I engaged in the study of Jewish history from cultural, socio-political and religious points of view. I started learning Torah. This brought all my other Jewish interests into a cohesive focus. Through Torah, I finally 'got' (understood) my Jewish self.

I searched through world art and history books for images of Jewish spirituality and/or of Jewish religious significance but with little success. I took heart from the fact that Judaism has contributed some very original art objects and installations to the history of art and civilisation, such as the tabernacle; the menorah; the vessels of the Temple; monuments containing the text of the Torah; the complex diagrams of the sefirot with all their metaphysical permutations; and most importantly, the beauty, mystical significance and power of the Hebrew alphabet. I was questioning: What happened to this rich heritage? Where is this Jewish visual tradition today? Why is even the category of a Jewish – spiritual or any other – art so problematic?

I was perplexed by the fact that, for centuries, the Torah had inspired the most gifted artists who created thousands of important cultural masterpieces throughout the world, yet none of them Jewish and very few images could be classified as being created from a Jewish perspective. Images of Masaccio's *Expulsion from Paradise*, Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, Bruegel's *The Tower of Babel*, Rembrandt's *Binding of Isaac* or *Moses with the Ten Commandments*, Poussin's *Adoration of the Golden Calf*, Gauguin's *Jacob Wrestling With the Angel* have always haunted me and are still amongst some of my favourite paintings. All from the Torah, all iconic images, yet none of them Jewish – spiritually or artistically.

I began to wonder: what would Jewish images of these Torah subjects look like? Would it even be a possible undertaking? How could one deal with such ancient, Biblical subjects and make them relevant to the twenty-first century experience? The biggest hurdle I envisaged was how to deal with the idea that Jewish imagery can, at best, only represent the attributes of spirituality rather than a narrative. How to represent the iconic Biblical events without producing icons? How could this be done? These questions posed huge challenges and a profound opportunity.

As I had no precursors or tradition to draw upon, I imagined possibilities without hindrance.



Looking back at my own recent artistic past helped. I was comforted somewhat by the fact that I already had a history of creating images with Jewish content, without precedent; *My Images of Tanya* were certainly that, my *Australian Haggadah* to some extent – both Jewish in every sense like numerous other paintings I had done over the years that dealt with Jewish ideas.

I guess the acknowledgement of my Jewishness in my work has always been very natural to me. As it surrounds every particle of my being, it is simply the reflection of who I am as a person and as an artist.

I don't remember when I read the Torah for the first time. However, I remember vividly when I first asked a rabbi to help me understand a certain passage of the text. He simply said to me, 'Let's learn together.' What an amazing way of putting it! Of course, he was the one who was reading the Hebrew or Aramaic, translating, interpreting and explaining, and I was the one who was *learning*, but I loved his invitation.

I have learned Torah with many rabbis since. And since that first 'Let's learn together' session long ago, learning Torah has become part of my daily routine. It has become a source of life for my sense of self.

By chance, a few years ago I was commissioned to paint images of the first *parshot* (portion of Torah text) of each of the Five Books of the Torah. This was a perfect chance to test out some of my imaginings. I discussed each *parsha* with the Senior Congregational Rabbi of the commissioning institution and based upon our discussions, I painted each of the five *parshot*. With each image my confidence grew, and although I was somewhat surprised by how different my paintings looked to the historic icons of Biblical, Christian interpretations, I was elated by the Jewishness of my artwork.

Soon after completing these five paintings, as if by some preordained plan, I was approached to paint some images of *parsha Noach*. I continued learning Torah with other rabbis and lay scholars on a regular basis in order to understand the deeper levels of meaning contained within each *parsha* I was painting. With each painting, my understanding of Torah evolved.

Having completed the paintings of *parsha Noach*, I gingerly contemplated painting all of the *parshot* – the complete Torah. My ambition was to create Jewish images of Torah to balance the scales a little of Biblical world art. Just because it hadn't been done before didn't seem to be too much of an obstacle. In fact, this became the challenge for me; some might call it an obsession!

The way I rationalised it to myself was that I would paint these images, almost in secret, purely to satisfy my own needs and if they turned out reasonably okay, perhaps also for posterity. And if, for whatever reason, this project would prove impossible for me to realise, no harm would have been done, only my ego would get bruised. But I was used to that!

So, seeing myself as something of a Jewish Don Quixote, I set out to play amongst the gods of art, the Michelangelos and the Rembrandts, hoping that perhaps my paintings could pave the way for future Jewish artists.

I developed each painting by gathering ideas from numerous Jewish sources. I was learning Torah and grazing freely amongst other Jewish texts, especially the Midrash and various Torah commentaries.

A Talmudic injunction to learning Torah states: 'Find yourself a teacher'. I was lucky to have found many, within both the rabbinic community as well as the lay one. I was learning Kabbalah, trying to understand the *parshot* from an underlying, mystical perspective. I straddled the various levels of the mystical orchard – *PRDS (Pardes)** – and I tried to visualise the symbolic and metaphysical possibilities contained within that ladder of Torah content.

As my knowledge of Torah developed, so did my visual interpretations of it. Slowly, the images began to reveal themselves to me. Gradually, I started seeing the Torah as a visual feast. At times it was a frustrating and difficult endeavour. Some paintings had to be repainted numerous times to reflect my recently acquired new levels of understanding the text or image clarity. I was painting the *parshot* sequentially and over time I was convincing myself that this undertaking had possibilities.

As I completed each painting of the books of the Torah, my confidence grew. By this time Torah images were pervading my dreams and my daily routines. I was even visualising ideas for Torah paintings while taking my dog for a walk. Every moment of my day seemed to be filling with possibilities. As Viktor Frankl so eloquently put it: '*If one has a why, the how is relatively easy...*'

According to a beautiful Kabbalistic teaching, the Torah is composed of 600,000 letters (black fire + white fire) just as there were 600,000 witnesses at Mt Sinai where we received the Torah. Each person present was given the Torah personally. A mystical understanding of this event is that there are therefore 600,000 individual ways of understanding the Torah; each person represents one letter or one space of the Torah. The complete Torah is regarded as another name of God. Each person is therefore a letter or a space in the name of God.

It is a positive commandment for every Jew to write his own Torah: '*So now write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel, place it in their mouths...*' (Deuteronomy 31:19)

* From a Jewish perspective, the study of Torah is often equated to a mystical orchard from which one can attain all sorts of sustenance: conceptual nourishment, intellectual understanding and spiritual revelation. This mystical garden/orchard is known by its acronym PRDS (Pardes) and it refers to the different levels of learning/understanding the Torah:

Pshat = literal reading (simple)
Remez = hint, allusion, philosophical (implied)
Drash = analytical, teaching, Talmudic (moralistic)
Sod = secret, mystery, Kabbalistic (mystical)



I'm not a scribe, I'm a painter. So I decided to paint mine. The second commandment notwithstanding, if God didn't want artists to engage with these ideas, the Torah would not have been so visually inspiring!

I have painted the Torah very much in the spirit of Bezalel, the first appointed Jewish artist. We both had the same guide: Moses. In his case, Moses provided the blueprints for the designs and objects that God commissioned. I would like to imagine that through this act, God provided the 11th commandment: *You shall make art!* In my case, Moses left me the Torah to challenge and inspire me.

This Torah inspiration/challenge took me six years to 'complete' but the journey I travelled was life-changing.

My original intention through this project was to learn more Torah and hopefully make a contribution to the body of Jewish art. Having completed it, however, I hope that my paintings can also provide a new level of meditation, contemplation and understanding of Torah.

This effort is the culmination of six very inspirational years of learning, thinking, imagining and creating. I know that this project could never reach a definitive point of resolution. Just as one can never reach an ultimate level of knowing/understanding the Torah, one can never paint the ultimate representation of it.

Nevertheless, on completion of the last painting of my Torah series, I thought I heard a faint whisper from the depth of my heart, a very pale echo of the one in *Bereishit*, that this, my creation, was '*very good*'.

I invite you to enjoy my personal celebration of the Torah.