

## Judaism and The Arts

### Introduction

The arts have always featured prominently in Jewish religious life and culture. The concept of "beautifying the commandment", was interpreted as meaning that the commands should be fulfilled in aesthetically pleasing ways.

The Jewish People are known as 'The People of the Book' (the People of The Bible) and they became literate as a result of studying the Bible. The phrase 'People of The Book' has become synonymous with a love of books. Other peoples were not able to read and write unless they were reasonably well educated.

Jewish religious literature has its roots in the Bible; the Jewish Bible is divided into three sections:

The Torah – the Torah consists of The Five Books of Moses and the Commandments. The Five Books of Moses records the story of creation, the patriarchs, the matriarchs and the People of Israel's exodus, from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Land of Israel. It also includes the 613 Commandments of the Jewish faith that form the basis of Jewish life.

The Nevi'im (the Prophets) – the Nevi'im tells of how the Jewish people settled in the Land of Israel, of the Judges, the Kings and the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Ketuvim (the Writings) – consist of the Book of Psalms, Chronicles, and the Megilloth (commentaries), read on special occasions and Festivals. The Book of Psalms is perhaps the first example of literature, written in the main by King David. It is a collection of songs of praise sung by the Levites in the Temple. These writings are central to much of Jewish prayer.

The Megilloth consists of five commentaries, two record the stories of the great heroines of Jewish history Ruth and Esther; the other three are more poetic in nature: Solomon's Song of Songs describes love of G-d<sup>1</sup>, Ecclesiastes, written by King David is about the spirituality of mankind, and Lamentations tells of the destruction of Jerusalem.

Other important sources of learning and knowledge are The Mishnah – the oral law of the Jewish people and The Talmud – an authoritative record of rabbinic discussions.

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<sup>1</sup> Judaism does not permit G-d's name to be reproduced in non-religious text

After the French Revolution, and the emancipation of the Ghettos, Jewish writing diversified away from traditional Jewish topics, and Jewish authors contributed to the world of philosophy, arts, medicine and politics (e.g. Karl Marx, Lucian Freud, Albert Einstein).

Many of the mediaeval Rabbis were accomplished poets amongst them Rabbi Judah Halevy and there were many Spanish Jewish poets, a by product of their religious destiny.

Music has throughout the ages been a mainstay of Jewish life. Historically, the Jewish people have been scattered amongst many cultures and their music is a melting pot of influences. However, remarkably it has still managed to retain a distinctive identity in many widely differing ethnic, social and religious environments.

In the times of the temple, 3000 years ago, there were choirs performing during the daily service espousing the idea that music is very close to spirituality. Pure music, (music without words) especially, is used to express the yearning of the soul and features prominently in Judaism.

Dance was one way Jews could express themselves at times when other forms of artistic expression were very limited as a result of anti-Semitism and prevailing cultural conditions. Chassidic Jews believe prayer should not be sombre and dour and use dance as a way of expressing their love of G-d, and a way of becoming closer to Him<sup>2</sup>.

There is a conditional approach to the arts in Judaism: ethics over aesthetics. Judaism distinguishes between art for a positive purpose - which may create harmony and promote 'the ways of peace' - and that which is used for amoral purposes. The roots to this philosophy lie in the biblical story about the Israelites who built a Golden Calf at the time when Moses had been called by G-d to receive the Torah (Jewish law). They did not think he would return with the law.

Art in Judaism always has a spiritual purpose: to make us aware of the universe as a work of art, testifying to the supreme Artist, G-d himself.

The Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks commented in 'Thought For The Day - 10 December 2003':

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<sup>2</sup> The Judaeo-Christian traditions both refer to G-d in the 'masculine' tense

"My attention was caught this week by two contrasting stories from the world of art. The first was Tate Gallery's Turner Prize, awarded to a potter whose work was described in the press as specialising in pornographic and paedophile imagery with titles like 'We've found the body of your child' – worthy company for such previous winners as the unmade bed, the elephant dung and, of course, the pickled sheep.

What I wonder will future ages make of these works? Will they see them as we today see the impressionists, scandalous in their time but now a paradigm of beauty? Or will they perhaps see them as symbols of an age puzzled as to the role and significance of art?

Which brings me to the second story, the publication this week of a book called "Rembrandt's Jews". It tells of how the great seventeenth century Dutch painter was fascinated by the Jews he met in Amsterdam, most of them refugees from religious persecution in Spain. There is something wondrous in the way those portraits bring out the beauty of those whom others so often despised.

One of the great mystics of the twentieth century, Rabbi Abraham Kook, was stranded in London during the First World War, and he found inspiration by going, as often as he could, to the National Gallery, to look at its Rembrandts, and he said about them something very striking: The Bible says that on the first day G-d created light. But He didn't make the sun and moon until the fourth day. What then was the light of day one? The sages said it was a special radiance that G-d kept for the righteous in ages to come. G-d took some of that light, said Rabbi Kook, and gave it to Rembrandt.

I think I understand what he meant. There is something religious about great art. The late Iris Murdoch used to speak about its power to do what she called "Unselfing", to release us from the prison of our cares and look for a moment with awe and gratitude and, yes, humility, at the sheer miracle of that which is there, frozen in a moment of eternity.

Which is I think the difference between art then and now. Art, which aims to shock, shocks only once, while art which aims at beauty never fades. Art as sensation eventually deadens our sensations, while art as wonder wakens them. Which is why I'll leave the Turner to higher minds, and be grateful simply for Rembrandt and his undiminished gift to re-enchant our disenchanting world."

The Jewish community recognises the importance of free artistic expression, but not at the expense of communal harmony and the bringing about of incitement to hatred. Whilst artists may have the right to offend, they are not morally justified in doing so.

The Chief Rabbi has also said:

"Freedom involves responsibilities as well as rights, self-restraint as well as self-expression. If I purchase my freedom at the cost of yours, we do not yet have a free society."

**Observant Jewish people will not be able to attend, or take part in, an event on the Sabbath or during some leading Festivals.**

### **Sensitive Issues**

Event organisers should be aware that material demonising Israel as a State is deeply offensive to the Jewish community. The political complexities surrounding the establishment of the State of Israel coupled with a lack of knowledge and understanding of the issues often results in inaccuracies, anti-Semitism and anti Israel sentiment.

It is very important that material relating to the Holocaust is treated with sensibility. The Holocaust Educational Trust can be contacted for advice (Tel. 020 7222 6822).

*The guidelines on Jewish religious practice and requirements are thus, guidelines only, and are from an Orthodox perspective. The Jewish religious community is diverse and differs in opinion and practice, as well as degree of observance.*

Further information and advice can be obtained from the representative body of the Jewish community, The Board of Deputies of British Jews Tel. 0207 543 5400, Email: [info@bod.org.uk](mailto:info@bod.org.uk) or The Office of the Chief Rabbi, Tel. 0208 343 6301, Email: [info@chiefrabbi.org](mailto:info@chiefrabbi.org).

## **Music**

In the synagogue, at the Sabbath table, and in celebration of life cycle events such as birth, baby naming, circumcision, rites of passage, weddings, festivals and holidays, music has always been at the forefront of Jewish life.

The bible records that music making, both instrumental and vocal, was common amongst ancient Jews at all important occasions, religious and secular. Singing was responsorial (in response), antiphonal (a hymn sung in two parts by two groups of singers, and in refrain (in chorus).

The first instruments mentioned in the Bible are the kinnor (a lyre), and the ugab, (possibly a vertical flute). Other instruments, of ceremonial rather than musical value included the hasora, (a trumpet) and the shofar, (a ram's or goat's horn) which emits a rousing sound still used in the Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) to call people to repentance. In Biblical times the shofar was blown to announce a forthcoming important event, such as war or peace. The shofar is said to have been blown during the greatest event in all Jewish history, the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai.

Melodies in the Synagogue are wide-ranging and diverse from the introspective, reflective and sombre melodies during The Day of Atonement, to the joyful tunes of the Sabbath and Festivals. The playing of instruments e.g. organs in synagogues is only permitted during the week as it is considered they would break the sanctity of the Sabbath.

Jewish music today is varied and vibrant from traditional cantorial music, Klezmer originating from Eastern Europe - carrying the influence of polka, mazurka and Russian works songs - to religious rock and Israeli secular hip hop, popular with the young and recognised as a way of keeping them in touch with their religion and culture.

There have been many notable composers of Jewish music. Salamone Rossi (c.1750-1630) was one of the earliest accomplished composers, setting many Hebrew liturgical texts to music. Louis Lewandowski was another, whose settings are still widely used in many American synagogues.

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## **Dance**

Throughout the ages, dance has been used as a means of rejoicing. In the Bible and throughout the ages dance was one of the few ways Jews could express themselves in times of repression.

The Chassidim often use it as part of worship. Chassidim began rejuvenation in Jewish life in the mid 1700s. They offered communal worship and stressed the importance of the individual's relationship with G-d. Up to that time the emphasis was on scholarly study of the Bible but the Chassidim considered knowledge secondary to practice, and being happy and comfortable with religion. Following prayer they break out in dance as a way of showing their love for G-d and as a way of expressing fellowship. They link hands and dance in a circle, symbolising equality.

In strictly observant circles men and women always dance separately, although a bride and groom are permitted to dance together.

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## **Theatre**

Yiddish theatre was popular and vibrant during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and was enacted by the Ashkenazi Jews. It originated in Northern and Eastern Europe, but its roots are in the traditional Purim festival plays (amateur theatricals derived from the biblical Book of Esther). Today Yiddish theatre is popular in America.

Celebrated Jewish playwrights include Harold Pinter, Arnold Wesker and Deborah Levy.

In regard to the performing arts, Judaism would expect performers to dress in a modest manner in the belief that the human body is a private domain and not something that should be flaunted in public. Similarly, the Jewish belief is that physical intimacy should be reserved for a couple in a married relationship, and public displays are disapproved of.

## **Literature**

Many of the mediaeval Rabbis were accomplished poets amongst them Rabbi Judah Halevy and there were many Spanish Jewish poets, a by product of their religious destiny.

After the French Revolution, and the emancipation of the Ghettos, Jewish writing diversified away from traditional Jewish topics, and Jewish authors contributed to the world of philosophy, arts, medicine and politics (e.g. Karl Marx, Lucian Freud, Albert Einstein etc).

*Fiddler on the Roof*, based on the short story "Tevye and His Daughters" by Sholom Aleichem, was one of the first musicals to defy Broadway's established rules of commercial success. It dealt with serious issues such as persecution, poverty, and the struggle to hold on to one's beliefs in the midst of a hostile and chaotic environment. Criticized at first for its "limited appeal", *Fiddler on the Roof* struck such a universal chord in audiences that it became, for a time, the longest running production in the history of Broadway.

*Note* : Generally, Judaism does not permit G-d's name to be reproduced in hard copy, because G-d's name is holy e.g. if a photograph were to be taken of the text of a Torah scroll G-d's name would have to be blanked out. The term Hashem (the name) is often used instead, though it would be permissible to write G-d's name on paper as long as that piece of paper is buried rather than thrown away. There is no objection to reproducing G-d's name on a computer screen.

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### **Carnival/Festivals**

Purim, the Jewish festival that commemorates the salvation of the Jews from destruction under Persian rule in 425 BCE was traditionally a time when Jews would enter into a carnival atmosphere. Carnivals are frequently held with many people sporting fancy dress to celebrate and recall the event.

## **Photography**

Photography and associated equipment is forbidden on the Sabbath, in accordance with Sabbath laws, and during the leading Festivals.

The second of the Ten Commandments reads "You shall not make for yourself any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath." (Exodus 20). This has largely been understood as a prohibition against any form of idolatry, excessive worship of images and the making of any image of G-d. It is unlikely that photographs or drawings of people will be found in Synagogues and there has been a general reluctance amongst Jews to reproduce the human figure in a religious context, but generally, images of the human form do appear in art produced by Jewish people of all denominations.

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## **Painting/Stained Glass**

Marc Chagall, painter and stained glass artist must be the most celebrated of contemporary Jewish artists. In particular he is known for the stained glass windows at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The creation of the windows took two years and was a labour of love. The windows represent the 12 sons of the Patriarch Jacob, from whom came the Twelve Tribes of Israel. They portray floating figures of animals, fish, flowers and numerous Jewish symbols.

Chagall's deep sense of identification with Jewish history, its tragedies and victories, as well as his own personal background in the shtetl of Vitebsk influence the pictures. However, his main inspiration came from the Bible, particularly Genesis 49 where Jacob blesses his 12 sons, and Deuteronomy 33, where Moses blesses the Twelve Tribes. Even his choice of colours was drawn from the Description of the breastplate of the High Priest in Exodus 28:15.

Baruch Nachson is another celebrated contemporary Jewish artist. He studied with Solomon Naroni, Paul Cézanne's only student, from whom he learnt "a holy approach to art". His images, colours and shapes communicate a spiritual dimension permeated with light and celebration.

He became drawn to the vibrant world of Chassidism in his teens, attracted by the exalted mystical concepts of its Kabbalah based philosophy and bittersweet music. His work is deeply influenced by a commitment to his people's heritage and Israel's struggle to survive. Nachson's canvasses express a yearning for fulfilment and redemption in the spirit of Judaism's ancient traditions. Says Nachson "The Jewish past has been well-represented in art, so has the present.

But no-one has represented the future – the Messianic Age". In 1989 Nachson was recognised as one of Israel's foremost artists when he received the Distinguished Artist's Award in 1989. His paintings have been exhibited across the globe.

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### **Craft**

There is a strong crafting tradition amongst the Jews: Every Jewish home should have a Mezuzah (a small box made from silver, plastic, wood or glass containing a prayer on parchment) affixed to the doorpost of all rooms in a Jewish home, aside from bathrooms, kitchens and toilets. These are often made to be beautiful as part of showing a love of G-d and the commandments. A pair of, generally, silver candlesticks and a wine cup used during the Sabbath and other festivals as well as a Menorah, an eight-branched candlestick used during Chanukah, (The Festival of Light) are also incumbent on a Jewish household. These religious accoutrements are on sale in a bewildering assortment of designs in Israel and throughout the world.

In the Synagogue it is customary to cover the Scrolls of the Law, the Five Books of Moses, with a cloth, or to encase them in a metal case. Both may be richly decorated. Over the cover is hung a silver breastplate, sometimes engraved with The Ten Commandments, but invariably a splendid example of the silver maker's art. The parchment scroll itself is considered sacred and therefore not to be touched by human hand. A pointer is therefore used instead whilst following the text. It is often made of silver and frequently fashioned in the shape of a pointing human hand.

It is expected that holy objects and images be presented respectfully and in a setting appropriate to their sanctity.

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## **Marketing and Communications**

It is impermissible to reproduce holy text in communications, and it would be advisable to avoid the use of religious symbols of other religions in communications, where possible.

## **Dietary Requirements**

If an event were going to involve observant Jewish people and food planned, then there would be a requirement to provide Kosher meals. Many companies can provide Kosher meals in accordance with the general menu - from airline type packaged meals, to meals served on china.

*Note:* Kosher requirements vary and it is always advisable to check requirements with individuals.

## **Choice of Venue**

Some Jewish people would be happy to enter into a mosque or church or other place of worship e.g. for an interfaith event for the sake of 'darkhei shalom' (ways of peace). However others would prefer a more neutral venue.

## **Event timing**

Observant Jewish people would not be able to attend an event if it fell on the Sabbath or during a Festival. The Sabbath runs from Friday evening to Saturday evening and Jewish festivals begin the night before. Some festivals are longer than others and have different requirements and practices. On an ordinary day people may wish to pray. Prayers are held three times a day, morning (45 minutes), afternoon (15 minutes) and evening (15 minutes). A quiet place is required without religious symbols of other faiths.

## **Calendar of Festivals (Actual dates vary every year)**

Tu b'shvat	January
Purim	March
Pesach	April
Shavuot	June
Rosh Hashanah	September/October
Yom Kippur	September/October
Simchat Torah	October
Chanukah	December

## **Funding**

Arts events are often funded through lottery money. The question that arises is thus: is playing the lottery ethical?

The Jewish position has developed over time. Government sponsored lotteries came into vogue in the twentieth century pre World War II. Jews participated in the lotteries in the same way as everyone else. The Rabbis had to decide whether they considered playing the lottery was gambling, as gambling per se had always been deemed a form of thievery and frowned upon, if not actually forbidden by the rabbinic authorities through the ages. It took some time before they decided their position in this regard, but eventually it was decided that the lottery was a voluntary tax paid by lottery ticket buyers to the government, thus mitigating the issue of gambling. (Presumably, the fact that the proceeds were going to a good cause also influenced their thinking). Religious Jewish buyers in the state run lottery in Israel purchase thousands of lottery tickets every week without rabbinic objection.

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