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# Jewish-Islam Relationship in the Works of Israeli Religious Female Artists

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Abstract
This article is directed to uncovering an unknown branch of contemporary Israeli art that examines the ties between Judaism and Islam in general, and specifically the cultural ties between Jews and Arabs in Israel. This branch is developing among women artists who are active in the Modern Orthodox social sphere. Central to this article is the understanding that the local art discourse rests on European models and these are tied directly to the world of Christian iconography. However, the artists who appear in this article do not yield to these accepted standards. Not infrequently they aim at appropriating, or at least examining, the possibility of a deep connection between their world of Jewish art and the Muslim cultural milieu. A study of their artistic works that will be presented in this article reveals that they reflect a clear independent identity, which does not contradict a complex, multi-dimensional, challenging view of the "Other", and deals with the tension between Jewish and Muslim culture. On the one hand, their works sharpen a focus on the dichotomy between them, but, on the other hand, they also strengthen the areas shared between them.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has accompanied the establishment of the national Jewish homeland from its inception has received and still receives pronounced expression in the Israeli art world.[1] During the eighties, for instance, some Israeli artists accentuated the connection between Eastern and Western consciousness, particularly in the context of the increasing conflict with the Palestinians (among them: Itzhak Danziger, Yigal Tumarkin, and Yehoshua Burkovsky). However, the world of religion has not usually been represented in this feeld. Our

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On The expression of Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Israeli art world see Yigal Zalmona, *100 Years of Israeli Art* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2010), 356.

discussion here will include the complicated relations between Judaism and the Muslim world, as they are reflected in the works of three female artists working in the Jewish religious sphere.

The works at the center of our discussion demonstrate the way in which the dialogue taking place between different worlds, namely, the religions and cultures of the inhabitants of the area – is reflected in the art created in Israel. Naturally, these topics embrace a wider discussion – the political discussion and the discourse concerning otherness and orientalism, which have also found significant expression in recent decades.[2] But here, we would like to focus on Judaeo-Islamic relations, specifically on their reflection in the works of female artists who create from within the Jewish modern Orthodox and the religious Zionist world.

We will discuss works that reflect a clear self identity and a cultural backbone; works that do not contradict a challenging, complicated and multi-dimensional view or openness to the "other." The artists presented here deal with tensions between Jewish and the Muslim cultures. On the one hand, their works clarify the dichotomy between them, but on the other hand, they also strengthen their common ground.

Talmud researcher Yishai Rosen Zvi showed that the ancient Jewish ethos, which relates comprehensively to the non-Jewish other, defining him as a "gentile" with no differentiation or first name, underlies the prevailing ethnic chauvinism in the Jewish world in general, and in the religious world in particular, but no less in the secular Israeli world.[3] Rosen Zvi demonstrates how "the common assumption that religion and secular Zionism are at opposite poles" – is baseless. He says that "on the contrary, the state has made the religious establishment the authority on the very subjects where it serves the state's interests".[4]

Thus, in this context, it is interesting to examine references that come specifically from the religious world, which perceives itself as committed to Halacha (Jewish law) and its spirit. The article seeks, therefore, to present an unknown branch of Israeli art which, from a humane and deep perspective, examines the relations between Judaism and Islam in general, and the cultural

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[2] See for instance Yigal Nizri, ed., *Eastern Appearance/Mother Tongue: A Present that Stirs in the Thickets of Its Arab Past* [in Hebrew] (*Tel* Aviv: Babel, 2004).

[3] Yishai Rosen Zvi, "Between Bloods" [in Hebrew], *Darsheni* 3 (Summer 2011): 44–50.
[4] Ibid., 48.

and religious relations between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East in particular. In accordance with prevailing feminist approaches (on which I shall expand at the end of this article), the artists we present here face the complexities and tensions and deal with them without altercations.

### Politics and the Israeli Art Field

The characteristics of modern Jewish art created in Europe and later in the United States, aimed towards universalism and the harmonic existence of different neighboring ethnic groups.[5]
In addition, Jewish art in Israel, which to an extent continues Jewish art from the past,[6] served and still serves as an expression of the banner of left-wing, liberal, pluralistic, and open multi-culturalism, striving for peace and anti-militarism.[7]

Even so, this utopia is by no means absolute. In a well-known article, cultural researcher and theoretician Sarah Chinski showed that Israeli art discourse has expelled "other worlds", meaning, the oriental "other, " and especially the Arab and Palestinian other.[8] Chinski also added that the Jewish Ashkenazi culture that developed in Europe has also been removed from critical discourse in Israel.[9]

In a critique of Chinski's article, the Israeli art historian Dalia Manor claimed that even though Chinski intended to expose how artistic discourse banished "other worlds" from the picture, the truth is that even Chinski's research was based on common patterns of art research, which create a dichotomous separation between local and international styles , and between Zionist and modern-universal styles. Manor: "The writing of art history in Israel is mostly

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[5] Ezra Mendelson, *Maurici Gottlieb – Art, History, Memory* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2006), 202–217; Mathhew Baigell, "Social Concern and Tikkun Olam in Jewish American Art," *Ars Judaica* 8 (2012): 55–80.
[6] *Thou Shal Make…: The Resurgence of Judaism in Israeli Art*, [catalogue: Tel Aviv, Zman le'omanut; in Hebrew], curator Gideon Ofrat (Tel Aviv: Zman le'omanut, 2003); *No New Nation* [catalogue: Tel Aviv, Zman le'omanut; in Hebrew], curator Gideon Ofrat (Tel Aviv: Zman le'omanut, 2004), 13; Gideon Ofrat, *The Return to the Shtetel: Judaism as an Image in Israeli Art* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2011); Zalmona ,*100 Years of Israeli Art*, 13.
[7] Gideon Ofrat, *Encounters with Art: Essays on Israeli Artists of the 20th Century* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Hasifria Hazionit, 2005), 546–554.
[8] Sarah Chinski, "Silence of the Fish: The Local Versus the Universal in Israeli Discourse of Art" [in Hebrew], *Theory and Criticism* 4 (autumn 1993): 105–122.
[9] Sarah Chinski, "Eyes Wide Shut: The Acquired Albino Syndrome of the Israeli Art Field" [in Hebrew], *Theory and Criticism* 20 (spring 2002): 57–86.

recruited writing, one committed to ideology or theory, which dictates, in advance, both the choice of phenomena worthy of discussion, and the manner of their description."[10]

Manor claimed that deconstruction of these patterns and new emerging perspectives reveal that in the past many artists did, indeed, try to create from within a complex identity that included elements of both the local and the international, but they were excluded and omitted from the local artistic canon. According to Manor, by relying on the accepted research model, Chinski herself unknowingly duplicated the act of banning and excluding the other, and actually participated in the act of omission.

Moreover, Chinski pointed out the fact that like the art of Mizrahi Jews (or: "Arab-Jews")[11] and Palestinians, Ashkenazi Jewish art created in the Diaspora was also repressed in Israel. However, Manor stressed, Chinski did not pay attention to the fact that even in Israel "Jewish" art was created but considered "non-art" and was repressed.[12]

To this critical discussion, calling for a new outlook that will lead to revising and deconstructing systems in Israeli art and discourse (which is, of course, not free of political elements), we should add the call, or different political view, of the late religious curator and art critic (and resident of the West Bank settlement of Ofra) Zipora Luria. Luria invited the art community, which is usually identified with the political left, to revise its attitude towards artists with a different political and religious agenda. She suggests they "shake off the ideological view on the one hand, and develop a humanistic, compassionate view on the other, and wake up from the torpor of unconsciousness.[13] According to Luria, these artistic voices might "feed a large number of images to the contemporary Israeli and Jewish bank of images that attempt to face the

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[10] Dalia Manor, "Pride and Prejudice: Recurrent Patterns in Israeli Art Historiography" [in Hebrew] *History and Theory: the Protocols, Bezalel, Department of History and Theory* 1 (winter 2005), http://bezalel.secured.co.il/zope/home/he/1126095346/1126096536-manor/#_edn27.

[11] In modern Israeli usage, the term Mizrahi (literally, Eastern) Jews refers to all Jews descended from North African, Middle Eastern and West Asian countries, many of them Arabic-speaking Muslim-majority countries. Despite their heterogeneous origins, Mizrahi Jews generally practice rites identical or similar to traditional Sephardic Judaism.

[12] Manor, "Pride and Prejudice," See also Ofrat, *The Return to the Shtetel*.

[13] Zipora Luria, "The Empty Image" [in Hebrew], *Eretz Acheret* 10 (May-June 2002): 42.

present conflicted moment. It's a gripping, sometimes unbearable moment. Our culture must not leave it mute".[14]

Many of the female religious artists in Israel create art using materials and dynamic modes of creation that are integrated in discourse orientations that characterize the hegemonic discourse in Israel. These artists operate as part of the general art discourse, are aware of it, correspond with it and are actively part of it.[15] However, although their work is linked to the general field of art, its relationship with the world of religion – and primarily to the Halacha, which is foreign to the majority of society and art discourse in Israel – is explicit and undisguised.[16]

We are dealing, therefore, with "Minor Art"[17] that derives from an inner and cultural world that is aware of its otherness and seeks to create critical, non-assimilated artwork. We are dealing then, with "minor" art that stems from one's inner and cultural world, conscious of its difference, and seeking critical perspective, not assimilation into the mainstream. In fact, if the content of this art often crosses mainstream Orthodox borders, this is due to the simple fact that many religious women no longer subscribe to the confining religious/secular dichotomy. This post-

[14] Ibid.

[15] David Sperber, "Feminist Art in the Sphere of Traditional and Religious Judaism," *Matronita: Jewish Feminist Art* [catalogue, Museum of Art, Ein Harod, in Hebrew and English], curators David Sperber and Dvora Liss (Ein Harod, 2012), 164–144 .

[16] Sperber, "Feminist Art in the Sphere of Traditional Judaism,"

[17] Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "minor literature" refers to literature written by a member of the minority in the majority (or the colonizers') language – like Kafka, a Czech Jew who wrote in German. Giving expression to a sense of estrangement from the mainstream, minor practices offer nonconformist perspectives in opposition to it. Minor art, likewise, is a complex hybrid combining a minor consciousness of Self and that of the mainstream collective. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

Do not confuse the usage of the term minor as it is discussed here, with another usage of the same term meaning weak or weakened. In fact, the term minor art has appeared recently in the local discourse in other contexts bearing different significances. An intuitive review by the artist and poet Roy Chicky Arad, in the art magazine *HaHadash VeHara* (Summer 2009: 27-32) suggests this term as a broad thesis related to current Israeli artistic work. This thesis was embraced by the curator Yigal Zalmona in his book 100 Years of Israeli Art (In Hebrew, Israel Museum, 2010, 415). Gideon Ofrat has used this term in this significance, while explaining other kinds of works in his book Minor art: Art in Israel at the dawn of the 2000s (in Hebrew, Jerusalem, 2010, 61–73). These writers point out, in different modes, a return to the weakened, the temporary, the melting, the dim, the loose and the minor in local artists' work which represents them seeking to shut themselves in their own private world, and more often than not, wrap themselves in vulnerability and sensitivity using pale visual presentations.

Orthodox trend has spread to Modern Orthodoxy, in Israel and elsewhere. Moreover, as shown in Jane M. Jacobs's extensive research, the sharp delineations of the past, when each group lived in isolation, have now blurred, in the postmodern age. In today's world, different cultures mingle in a hybrid world, in an extended, heterogeneous territory. We find integration of all forms of identity – tribal, religious, national, and gender. Instead of "center/periphery", the newer world is marked by interrelated identities.[18] Yet, thematically, Arnovitz's works deal with topics that are by and large absent from general Israeli art: the biblical "adulterous woman", the agunah (woman whose husband has left her without granting her a divorce, and his whereabouts are unknown), Lilith etc. Many of her works deal with problems pertaining to current issues, viewed from a Jewish-halakhic perspective informed by the ancient sources. These sources are put to work so as to point out what is in need of tikkun (repair) in society.

**Between Judaism and Islam**

Naturally, the world of European Jewish art referenced and was fundamentally linked to Christian art. Later on, mainstream Israeli art was established on modernist European models, rooted largely to the Christian world and its iconography.[19]

But the artists we will present here do not surrender to this structure. They quite often purport to reclaim, or at least explore, the option of a deep connection between their Jewish worlds and the surrounding Muslim culture.

It is possible to examine and present the background and reasons for this in various ways and from different perspectives, but first and foremost – and even if only because they are women who affiliate themselves with the religious world – it would appear that a theological explanation lies at the bottom of it. The fact is that theologically speaking, there is a wider gap between Judaism and Christianity (belief in the Trinity was perceived by many of the sages as idol

[18] Jane M. Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (London: Routledge, 1996).
[19] Graciela Trajtenberg, *Between Nationalism and Art: The Construction of the Israeli Field of Art During the Yishuv Period and the State's Early Years* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005), 173–178.

worship) than between Judaism and Islam who share the belief in one God, with no body image, nor body", as it is expressed in the medieval "Jewish principles of faith."

In recent years, we can identify a trend (albeit a marginal one) in the religious world, mainly among religious settlers on the West Bank, of a conscious attempt to reach out and establish a dialogue with the Palestinian world – a dialogue that unmistakably addresses religious issues. This is a field in the making and therefore has not yet been researched or publicized widely:[20] The feminist religious organization Kolech –Religious Women's Forum – is leading dialogue groups and joint courses for Muslim and Jewish women; The late Rabbi Menachem Froman from the settlement of Tekoa was promoting an inter-faith dialogue with Hamas; poet Nachum Pachnik from the settlement of Kiryat Arba established the organization Eretz Shalom (Land of Peace); poet Eliaz Cohen created Yerushalom and poet Elhanan Nir established an organization called Ohel Avraham in which Rabbis and Sheikhs from the Hebron region meet for discussions.

Those kind of trends are often based on historical fact: as opposed to the Christian world, where persecution and false accusation were fostered by demonic perceptions of Jews and blame for the crucifixion of Christ, the persecution of Jews in Muslim countries was usually sporadic, local and brief, and was the result of government policy or in response to public pressure. They did not generally derive from religious ideologies.[21] In fact, the demonization of Jews in the pre-modern Islamic world was not as common as it was in the Christian world.[22] In addition, the proximity of those worlds has a wide historical horizon. Openness to the culture of Muslim society as well as acculturation characterized Jews in Muslim countries until modern times, and was manifested in a variety of areas – from the culinary arts, fashion and architecture to poetry and music, theology and philosophy.[23] Meaning: there was a far clearer exchange of culture

[20] See David C. Jacobson, *Beyond Political Messianism: Poetry of the Second Generation of Religious Zionist Settlers* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press), Chap. 5.
[21] Yakov Lev, "Jews in Muslim Society in the Middle Ages" [in Hebrew], *Machanaim* 1 (January 1992): 170–175, 172.
[22] Ibid., 172 . On the legal and social status, sense of security and lack of persecutions in Islamic countries See Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), and details in Yaron Ben-Naeh, *Jews in the Sultans Kingdom* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2007), 77–99, 105–113.
[23] Ben-Naeh, *Jews in the Sultans Kingdom*, 326–331; Homas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press,1979), 174–177.

between the Muslim and Jewish worlds in the pre-modern era than between the Christian and Jewish worlds.[24]

The world-renowned political scientist Samuel P. Huntington maintains that in the current clash of civilizations between Islam and Christianity, Judaism is part of Western-Christian civilization.[25] But the Jewish religious world does not always yield to these accepted observations. Kabbalah researcher Avraham Elyakim, for example, called for reflection that might break down the barriers between Judaism and Islam. He says that "we should start rebuilding the spiritual relations between Judaism and Islam."[26] Elyakim, who is close to Muslim Sufi circles, claims that the proximity between Islam and Judaism finds expression in several concepts in Judaism. In the world of Kabbalah, for example, the world of Islam is related to Sephirat HaChesed (Enumeration of Mercy), and this is also the self-awareness of Muslim believers ("Religion of Mercy"). According to Elyakim, if we do not adopt this approach, we will live in a small crowded space, and our lot will be the constant tension of imminent collision and disaster.[27]

And indeed, the starting point of the artists to be presented in this article is a multi-cultural and inter-cultural perception whereby the Jewish world is perceived as exposed and wide open to the surrounding world, affecting and affected by it, and is essentially in constant dialogue with other cultures. In addition, although political discourse and even the world of art tend to divide the world into "good guys" and "bad guys", even defining an "Axis of Evil", the artists whose works we shall discuss find the picture to be far more complicated. They appear to rely on the fact that inherent in every one of the monotheistic religions are contradicting positions – aggression on one hand, and pacifism on the other. For example: When dealing with the approaching Kingdom of God, the New Testament is a gospel of peace, justice and pacifism; nonetheless, one can find sharp transitions from "Love Your Enemies" (Matthew 5:44) to "I

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[25] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

[26] Avraham Elyakim, "Religion of Mercy – Meetings with Islam" [in Hebrew], *Deot* 19 (Winter 2005): 6–8.
[27] Ibid.

have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). On the contrary, Islam, often called "Religion of the Sword", that in the beginning did not hesitate to force itself on the defeated, sees itself as a "Religion of Mercy", and the Quran says that Allah does not like the aggressors (Surah 2:190) and "if any one slew a person [...] it would be as if he slew the whole people" (Surah 5:32, compare to Mishna Sanhedrin 4, 5).

In the Jewish context, we can relate to the words of Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi (Spain, 12th Century) in his book Kuzari. In response to the sage who took pride in the Jews' relative moral purity, the king of Kuzar answered: "This might be the case if you had chosen your humility; but it is inevitable, and if you had the power you would slay your enemies".[28] Yehuda Ha-Levi, of the Jewish Golden Age in Spain, wrote the sage's reply, saying "Thou hast touched our weak spot, O King of the Kuzars."[29]

In the contemporary art field indicates several comparisons between the Jewish world and Islamic culture, and preoccupation with the same basic questions about relations of domination and force in a male, patriarchal society. An obvious example is the manner of treatment and topics of discussion that evolve in the art of feminist artists who work in both Jewish and Muslim spaces. The attention to body covering, and particularly head-covering among women, is very common in both societies (Figs. 1, 2, 3).[30]

[28] Yehuda Ha-Levi, *Book of Kuzari* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1974), 114.
[29] Ibid., *115.*
[30] David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, eds., *Veil – Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art* (London: Gilane Tawadros Books, 2003). Women from the Arab and Muslim sphere tackle the rules of chastity, especially the veil in its diverse manifestations. On the one hand it is a symbol of female oppression and, on the other hand, it is also a symbol of resistance against cultural colonialism. For a wide cultural discussion about this topic, see Tamar Elor, "A Veiled Winter" [in Hebrew], *theory and criticism* 37 (2010): 37-68. For an English version of the article see http://www.tamarelor.com/images/stories/articles/the%20winter%20of%20the%20veiled%20women%20%20tc.pdf.

1. Ampannee Satoh*, Burqa series, Le Tricolore*, 2010, pigment print on paper, 120 x 240 cm. / 150 x 300 cm. Courtesy Yavuz Fine Art Gallery, Singapore.

2. Hanna Goldberg, *Self-Portrait*, 2000, oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm. Collection of the artist, Jerusalem.

3. Shula Keshet, *Lovesick*, 2001, computer edited Photography, 100 x 70 cm. Collection of the artist, Tel Aviv.

Critical feminist art produces an intercultural sphere, in which women of different faiths and cultures sometime have an affinity between themselves, which is greater than that between women and man of the same religion or culture. Furthermore, religious and feminist Jewish artists often work within or alongside the boundaries of Halachic space, but do not surrender to its defined rules. They often examine the world of Judaism from a radical perspective. However, what often seems to be provocation and verging on an anti-Halachic act, is not perceived that way by the artists.[31] Art historian Ganit Ankori observes a similar spirit in the work of female Palestinian artists who create within the traditional culture in which they were raised (Christian or Muslim). Despite the trace of radicality in their works, Ankori stresses that these artists do not

[31] David Sperber, *Abjection: Nida, Impurity and Purity in Feminist Jewish Art* [in Hebrew] *History and Theory: The Protocols, Bezalel, Department of History and Theory* 22 (October 2011), http://bezalel.secured.co.il/zope/home/he/1315639275/1315640429.

deny their tradition, but aim to connect with it, while also criticizing and exposing its inherent tyranny.[32]

All the above appears to indicate a foundation for a new connection sought by the female Jewish religious artists (of Ashkenazi decent, one should say) whom we will present. If so, not only the physical "place" or the Jewish-Arabinian or Israeli-Palestinian conflict underlie their art (although these are main topics there), but primarily the will to reclaim a common, local, cultural space (artistic, religious and concrete ) whereby religion and culture constitute a common ground for connection, and not only a platform for dispute and conflict.

**Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov – Hosting Culture**

The paintings of Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov (b. 1961) who emigrated from the United States to Israel in the 1970s, often deal with the tension concerning a "cultural paradox," since the subjects of her paintings are taken from Jewish life, while the language of her paintings is rooted in Western culture. "Halachic Judaism," says Ben-Dov, "is very much concerned with the body, often discussing it in minute detail, but it usually does so through words, verbally and textually. In contrast, Christianity placed spirit above flesh and annulled the commandments that center on bodily activities, while at the same time it rendered plastic arts one of its main languages of expression".[33]

We will now discuss the series *Prayer Rugs*, images of rugs or *parochot* (the curtains hanging in front of the Torah Ark in synagogues), painted by the artist in oil on canvas between 2003 and 2005. According to the artist, this series of works constitutes variations on a 17th century

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[32] Gannit Ankori, *Palestinian art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 390. In the same way, art and culture researcher Eleanor Hartney discusses the meaning of the Catholic image of the Virgin in women's art from the end of the 20th century. She focused on works that investigated the myth of Immaculate Conception, as part of the feminist discussion of body representation and boundaries of sexuality. According to Hartney, the works created a riot among clerics and conservatives who perceived them as blasphemy, while the artists did not see their works as blasphemy at all. See Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004).

[33] Ruth Kastenbaum Ben-Dov, Letter to the Author, 1990.

*parochet* from the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York.[34] Based on the design of a traditional Muslim prayer rug, the original piece that inspired the series invited an encounter between East and West and between Judaism and Islam. The artist uses this encounter in order to visually confront the conflict between two religions, each claiming exclusive truth, and particularly the clash taking place in the Middle East regarding the ownership of land.

In general, one should point out that the decorations on many Muslim rugs express the traditional Muslim perception whereby the rug is a gate to heaven, described in Muslim heritage as a heavenly garden.[35] In the Jewish tradition, too, it is customary to see gate imagery decorating Holy Arks, *parochot* and book covers. This imagery represents the divine presence and expresses the active participation of the believer as he approaches sanctity.[36] The imagery of the gate as a path to the divine is expressed mainly in *parochot* and Holy Arks in synagogues. This is why they are often inscribed with the verse "This is the gate to the Lord," from the "Hallel" prayer (originally in Psalms 118:19–20).

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[34] See: com/gallery/image/parochet.jpg.
[35] Elizabeth B. Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden in Persia and Mughal India* (New York: Abebooks, 1979); Sheila Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* (Texas: University of Texas, 1991).
[36] Shalom Sabar, *Mazal Tov: Illuminated Jewish Marriage Contracts from the Israel Museum Collection* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1993), 18–25.

**Prayer Rugs – Combinations and Hybrids**

As a background to understanding Kestenbaum Ben-Dov's works, it is necessary to mention that The prayer mat is prominent in the art of women and men artists interacting with the Muslim cultural sphere but living in the western world. For example, Mona Hatoum (Palestinian artist who works in England, b. 1952) Shirana Sahbzi (b. 1974 in Iran, living and operating in Switzerland), Mike Kelly (1954-2012, b. in the United States) Asad Azi (b. 1955, a Druze b. in Shfar'am, Israel) and Fatima Abu Rumi (b. 1977, Palestinian, Native of Tamra, Israel). Jewish-Israeli artists also refer to this theme, for example Sigalit Landau (b. 1969) (Fig. 4) and Belu-Simion Fainaru (b. 1959).

4. Sigalit Landau, *Ambulance/Cheri Cheri the Blue Eyed Fantasy/Asia*, 1999, Bemalte Bronze, 45 x 65 x 50 cm. Courtesy Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv.

In the Israeli context, many artists have dealt with the interplay between *parochot* and prayer rugs when dealing with the complex relations between the Jewish and Muslim worlds. For example, Yizhar Patkin (b. 1955) and Haim Maor (b. 1951). in the late 1980's, Haim created a

series of *parochot*. Embroidered on one of them in Arabic are the words “I'm a Jew” (Fig. 5), while on the other appears “I'm an Arab” in Yiddish.

5. Haim Maor, *Ana Yahudi* (Arabic for “I am Jewish”), approx. 1989, golden application and tassels, 146 X 192 cm. Collection of the artist, Meitar.

Kestenbaum Ben-Dov also creates a multicultural and interfaith dialogue, playing with the image of the original *parochet* in various ways. As the series develops, the image seems to transform: from a *parochet* to a prayer rug, to a window, to a view and finally – to a piece of earth. In addition, the original 17th century *parochet* on which the *Prayer Rugs* series is based was

dedicated by a father to his deceased daughter. This dedication takes on an eerie meaning in Kestenbaum Ben-Dov's work.

Two religions are echoed in this series; both claim the truth and total ownership of the same piece of land. The texts in the paintings, taken from Jewish prayers and scriptures and translated to Arabic, reinforce the feeling that those two worlds are firmly intertwined. According to curator Yifat Ben Natan, the physical position of the worshiper in the two religions is different: the Muslim rug is the base for a man prostrating himself in prayer, while the *parochet* faces the person standing in front of it. This is shown in the artist's works as a fundamental contrast between earth as a tangible entity and the experience of rising above reality, while perceiving these contrasts as complementary.[37]

The verses quoted in *Prayer Rug 2* (Fig. 6), in Hebrew and in Arabic, originate from the "Aleinu" ("We Must Praise") prayer, and are said at the end of each of the three daily Jewish prayers. This praise shifts from universal sayings such as "It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to ascribe greatness to the Maker of primal creation", to racist and chauvinistic sayings that create separation and polarization between religions: "For He has not made us like the nations of the lands and has not emplaced us like the families of the earth. For He has not assigned our portion like theirs nor our lot like all their multitudes. For they bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god who helps not". The verse "But we bend our knees, bow, and acknowledge our thanks", part of the same prayer, appears on the top of the work, constituting a link to the daily Muslim way of worship (in the Jewish world, it is customary to bow down while saying these words only on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur). Where the name of God appears in Hebrew in the original *parochet*, it appears in Arabic in Kestenbaum Ben-Dov's work.

[37] *Prayer Rugs* [Exhibition Page: Kiryat Tivon, The Art Gallery in the Memorial Center in Kiryat Tivon; in Hebrew], curator Yifat Ben-Natan (Kiryat Tivon: The Art Gallery in the Memorial Center in Kiryat Tivon, 2006).

6. Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov, *Prayer Rug 2*, 2003, Oil on canvas, 80 x 125 cm. Collection of the artist, Eshchar.

The development in the series of works is most apparent in *Prayer Rug 4* (2003, oil on canvas, 125 x 80 cm). This work echoes the Jewish traditional iconography of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, where it is often depicted with a kind of a fence around the foot of the mountain, in accordance with the verse “Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it’ [...]” (Exodus 19:12). In contrast with the traditional description, in this painting the mountain was interchanged with a view of the Galilee as seen from the artist's window. The traditional fence is transformed into barbwire, a common element in contemporary Israeli reality. In the background, the town of

Carmiel and the village of Deir el-Assad are visible. The clear view of the mountain's towns, both Jewish and Arab, a view uncommon in Israeli art – and the gate imagery from the original *parochet*, used here as a blurring screen, offer a complex metaphor for a perplexing reality. Around the landscape, the artist has inscribed a prayer in Hebrew and Arabic: "The Merciful will grant peace between sons of Isaac and sons of Ishmael" – a prayer added to different versions of the Jewish grace after the meal in several communities.

In *Prayer Rug 5* (2004, oil on canvas, 125 x 80 cm), the view is a close-up of the ground, on which is a shadow of a kneeling figure, which is repeated in this series and is reminiscent of the blurred imagery in the works of American artists, Jasper W. Johns (b. 1930)[38] and Julian Schnabel (b. 1951).[39] The text framing the image derives from the prayer recited after eating fruits of the Land of Israel, in which one gives thanks for "a delightful, good and wide land that you wanted and gave to our fathers..." According to the artist, this praise includes expressions that relate to everyone who lives on this land, together with expressions that point to the heart of the conflict: "Please have mercy... on Jerusalem, your city, and Zion, residence of your pride." The combination of earth and the rectangular shadow in *Prayer Rug 6* (2004, oil on canvas, 125 x 80 cm) which, according to the artist, symbolizes a baby's grave (a motif borrowed from the dedication on the original parochet), brings the viewer back from utopia to harsh reality.

**Hospitality and Opposing Directions of Prayer**

The metaphor of hospitality as a substitute for tensions between cultures is present in the series of works *Welcoming Guests* (2001-2003, oil on canvas), which realistically describes – among other things – figures from Arab villages in the artists' environment. In contrast to self portraits in the *Prayer Rug* and other series , where the artist uses Jewish texts to confront herself with her cultural-spiritual space, in these paintings, she shows portraits of "the other." Kestenbaum Ben-Dov invites her neighbors and paints them, as subjects.

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[38] *Diver*, 1962–1963, charcoal, pastel and  watercolor on paper and canvas.
[39] *Portrait of God* (from Mutant King Series), 1981. oil on tarpaulin with wax.

The direction of prayer has special meaning in the relations between Judaism and Islam: Jerusalem, towards which the Jewish worshiper prays, was the first Qiblah (the direction towards which the Muslim worshiper prays) before it was determined that one should pray in the direction of Mecca. In the painting *Two Directions of Prayer* (2005, oil on canvas, 50 x 100 cm) there are two blurred images of women, each praying in a different direction: on one side, the artist, and on the other side, a Muslim woman whom the artist knew and painted in the series *Welcoming Guests.* In contrast to directions of prayer, which distinguish between the different ways of worship in the two religions, the position of prostration depicted in this work is common to both. In the Jewish world there is, as mentioned, only a remnant of the traditional prostration during the High Holidays, but there were Jewish sages in the Islamic world who, influenced by Islam, determined that bowing and prostration was an authentic religious expression dating back to the days of the Prophets, and it should be adopted.[40] In this piece, Kestenbaum Ben-Dov does not wish to remove the differences or to create a synthesis between the religions, but gives each one its place.

**"The Temple Shall Be Built" – Memory of the Destruction**

In her series of works, *Remembrance* (2005–2007), Kestenbaum Ben-Dov uses the Jewish tradition of leaving part of a new house (the size of the ancient measure of *ama*, or square cubit), bare of plaster, in memory of the destruction of the Temple. This part represents the empty space caused by the destruction, and believers have faith that it will be filled. In her work, *Remembrance 1* (Fig. 7), the artist inserts a painting of the Dome of the Rock next to a grey square, visualizing the part bare of plaster, referring to a similar custom in the Muslim world – decorating the house with a painting of a tile with a stylized image of the Dome of the Rock.

[40] Shlomo Dov Goitein, "Abraham Maimonides and his Pietist Circle," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altman (Cambridge: Cambridge, Mass, 1967), 145–164.

7. Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov, *Remembrance 1*, 2005, oil on canvas, 70 x 140 cm. Collection of the artist, Eshchar.

In the work *Remembrance 2* (2005, oil on canvas, 70 x 70 cm), the grey square returns, but this time at the center appears a drawing of a building reminiscent of the Dome of the Rock. It is a copy of a seal by a Jewish Italian printer from the 16th century, in which the Temple was depicted as the Dome of the Rock on Temple Mount. Temple images are part of a vast tradition in Western art in general, and in Jewish art in particular. This iconography is also linked to the nineteen century tradition of paintings of holy places in Palestine-Israel, painted by traveling painters and fundraisers. Sometimes these paintings were created according to what was customary in the place and time in which they were painted (like images of the Temple as a medieval gothic building), and sometimes the painting was inspired by the actual Muslim building on the Temple Mount (Haram a-Sharif), and sometimes it was symbolic or utopian imagery that did not necessarily relate to a particular reality.[41] This series by Kestenbaum Ben-

[41] *Sent Offering, Descriptions of Holy Places by Jewish Artists* [catalogue: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; in Hebrew and English], curator Rachel Sarfati (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2002); Shalom Sabar, "Messianic aspirations and renaissance urban ideals: The image of Jerusalem in the Venice Haggadah, 1609," *Jewish Art* 23/24 (1998): 295–312.

Dov unites Jewish belief and Muslim art in a metaphor of destruction and absence, which, according to both beliefs, will be corrected in time. At the center, echoes the question: Can the two beliefs be fulfilled in harmony with each other, or does the salvation each one yearns for necessarily mean the destruction of the other, and that the void in one can only be filled by creating a void in the other?

The work *Destruction/Home* (Fig. 8) consists of a wooden frame with fourteen paintings inside it. Twelve of them are arranged in two columns of squares, or six pairs, one beneath the other, and two of them are rectangles located at the bottom of the piece. The images change from Temple to home, to a face, and, finally, to soil, and their development is also expressed in colors that range from shades of blue through colors of skin and flesh, to the colors of the soil. The figures on the right-hand side of the piece correspond to figures on the left-hand side: Next to a painting hinting at an un-plastered wall (symbol of the destruction), and under it, an obscure image of the Temple (according to the restoration by archeologist Michael Avi Yona that was exhibited at the Holyland Hotel in Jerusalem and is now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem), blurred images of the Dome of the Rock appear, based on the tile imagery that, as mentioned, decorates the houses of many Muslim believers.

8. Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov, *Destruction/Home*, 2005, Oil on canvas on wooden plates in wooden frame, 32 x 12 cm. Collection of the artist, Eshchar.

The dichotomy changes in the next pair of paintings, and the Temple appears beside the erased Dome of the Rock. This way, the pairs keep describing destruction and building, deletion and existence: The private (Jewish) home, built on the remains of another home (Palestinian); a destroyed house in front of the facade of “the other”, and so forth. Later, the contrasts become more brutal. The artist says that at first, she planned to juxtapose two images, a complete face and the defaced face of “the other,” but she was unable to do this and therefore portrayed her own face in two states, complete and defaced (one with light-colored eyes and one with dark eyes).[42] The division in two columns of square is broken by the rectangles in a joint ending, where all that is left is a description of the dry and desolate soil.[43]

**Nechama Golan – "You are consecrated to me"**

Nechama Golan (b. 1947) is one of the most prominent religious Israeli artists today. In her works, Golan often uses printed religious texts and frequently deals with the relations between Jewish and Muslim culture. Most of her works mentioned here were created in a technique that combined computer retouched photography and sculpturing technologies. Some of the works may seem like performance or installation documentation, even though they were originally created to be exhibited as photographs. This practice, which simulates a performance, combined with feminine figures that sometimes populate the works, as well as the feminist content that appears there, all correspond with the underground genre of performance in the 1970’s, which was often documented with 8 mm film, and later on video, and became a prominent arena for women’s voices, especially on the West Coast of the U.S., while the traditional and hegemonic field of painting was still controlled by men. As mentioned, many of Golan's works use texts from Jewish tradition. Parallel to the subject under discussion, (Judaism-Islam relations), in many of the works, the artist combines Hebrew letters with Arabic letters.

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[42] Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov in a conversation with the author, 1997.

[43] See more David Sperber, "Ambivalent Discourse and the Productive Look in the Work of Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov" [in Hebrew], *History and Theory: the Protocols, Bezalel, Department of History and Theory* 26 (2012 ), http://bezalel.secured.co.il/zope/home/en/1349198192/1349626015.

In her work, *You are consecrated to me*, Hebrew letters filled with Arabic text are designed as a circle on the ground and form the beginning of Jewish marriage ceremony: "you are consecrated to me..." (Fig. 9). The work shifts between several layers of interpretation: Golan juxtaposes the sanctity of the marriage with the sanctity of the earth. Since ancient times, marriage has been linked to the building of the nation. The sanctity of the ground and the metaphorical act of coitus are images that were common in both Jewish, Zionist and Israeli culture, and symbolized admiration, conquest and building. The use of the two languages, Hebrew and Arabic, expresses a complex reality whereby two nations claim ownership of the same piece of land.

9. Nechama Golan, *you are consecrated to me*, 2007, Photography and Lambada Print, 90 x 90 cm. Collection of the artist, Bnei-Brak.

In another work, we see a canopy of letters covering the ground, which invites you to reflect on the importance of ownership as opposed to the completeness of the building. The name, *Tears of Ground*, is reminiscent of the Israeli popular song by Dan Minster and Yoni Rechter, "Tears of Angels", which has become a hymn at Memorial Day ceremonies in Israel. The work shows two

figures of angels made out of polyester and broken glass, with light cords running through them. A Star of David and a crescent with a star distinguish between the “Jewish” angel and the “Muslim” angel. According to the artist, these angels are used here as mediators that remove the testimony from the human sphere to a divine sphere where the memory and historic faith of two peoples unite, fated to live together.[44]

The angels (who are also reminiscent of biblical cherubs), also appear in other works by Golan. Sometimes they are joined together, and sometimes they stand “face to face” (like the name of one of the works, which echoes the meaning given by Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to this term), and move between meeting and mutual visibility to a frontal confrontation.

In the piece “*I have made you a father of many nations...”* (according to Genesis 17:5), Golan explores the mythological connection between the two religions (Fig. 10). The piece refers to the myth of Patriarchs and Matriarchs that is common to both nations. Suspenders, used to hold up pants, serve as a metaphor for the common establishment of a tradition that might loosen without being firmly held on both sides. The genealogical scheme that appears in Golan's work refers to a piece by Dani Karavan (1997, “*To your descendants I give this land”* (according to Genesis 15:18), Neon and acrylic glass). Above is the image of the family tree made of painted neon lights; at the base is the name of Abraham, father to both Isaac and Ishmael, and the biblical promise to Abraham: “To your descendants I give this land” (Genesis 15:18). This piece charges the verse with a contemporary irony, since both Isaac and Ishmael are descendants of Abraham, and their descendants are fighting each other over “this land.” The irony in Karavan's work is missing in Golan's work.

[44] Nechama Golan, Letter to the Author, 1997.

10. Nechama Golan, *"I have made you a father of many nations..."* (Genesis 17:5), 2007, Iron, painted suspenders and text print, 30 x 150 cm. Collection of the artist, Bnei-Brak.

Hebrew letters filled with Arabic text are, as mentioned, a recurring motif in Golan's works that deal with relations between Judaism and Islam. The relations between the peoples combine with a feminist debate on man-woman/male-female relations and on the attitude towards women's hair, which is discussed in different contexts in Jewish tradition as "Nudity" or "Pubic" – a

definition that enforces the concealment of hair in different situations both in traditional Jewish culture and in the Muslim world. In the work *Untitled* (Fig. 11), we see a woman whose unbound hair is covering her face, and she is holding a sign saying "Stop! Border Ahead," filled with Arabic text from an article about art. The sign, and the mention of border, corresponds with the iconic work of Michal Na'aman *Eyes of the Nation* (1974, Documentary photograph of an action). Na'aman's work is usually interpreted in a political context of borders, as part of the artist's social and political criticism of Israeli society in the post 1973-war era.

11. Nechama Golan, Untitled, 2009, Lambada print photograph, 50 x 70 cm. Collection of the artist, Bnei-Brak.

The inscription on Golan's work somehow resembles the aforementioned work of Zipora Luria: before her untimely death, Luria inscribed the words "No Entrance" on the curtain of the Ark (ca. 2009, untitled, velvet fabric and thread). In Golan's work, the text is designed as a sign on white transparent fabric, which declares territorial boundaries between peoples as well as the boundaries of the subject, as well as the boundary of a woman's body, which, in various cultures finds expression by covering it. The boundaries unite in the sharing between a Jewish and a Muslim woman, expressed in the work in different languages.

**Andi Arnovitz – Garments of Reconciliation**

Andi Arnovitz (b. 1959) emigrated from Atlanta to Jerusalem in 1999. Her attraction to textile, paper and artifacts is now combined with prints. The clothing Arnovitz creates are un-wearable; they are metaphors that affect the viewer visually and emotionally. Beauty and pain are intertwined in them. The garments deal with several religious topics from a feminist perspective (the unfaithful wife, the “bound” woman, Lilith, etc.). Most of them are linked to contemporary problems from a Jewish-Halachic perspective and seek to point out the need for transformation.

In 2001, during the second Intifada, Arnovitz created a completely un-wearable garment – as a metaphor for maternal sensitivity. According to the artist, the work was meant to symbolize the universal will of all mothers to protect their children from violence.[45] The small garment was designed in the style of ceremonial garments for Afghani children. The vest was ornamented with verses from Psalms, the Jewish Traveler’s Prayer and protective talismans and Kabbalistic charts.

This topic was expanded upon when in 2009, Arnovitz created *Prayer Vest*, as a Jewish response to explosive belts used by Muslim suicide-martyrs ("Shahids"). Her vest is made of pages from worn out prayer books she purchased in the ultra-orthodox neighborhood, Me'a She'arim, in Jerusalem. She rolled each page carefully, and wrapped each scroll with strings, which she tied one by one to Japanese paper creating the vest. Hundreds of scrolls, organized in

[45] Andi Arnovitz in a conversation with the author, 2011.

dense layers, in sharp resistance to the nuts and bolts packed in the rolls around suicide bombers' explosive belts.

The use the artist made of verses from the book of Psalms is meant to fight destruction and hate. According to curator Dvora Liss:

> They represent hope, generosity and understanding. All through the ages, Jews called for God's help in times of trouble by reciting verses from the book of Psalms. Jews read Psalms verses daily when they pray for the well-being of a patient, when they hope for a good life, or when asking for divine help in the search for a partner, or as conciliation. The words of Psalms became keystones of the Jewish life.[46]

Liss adds:

> Groups of Jewish women all around the world gather daily to pray for the ill and depressed. They divide the book of Psalms into a series of 24 booklets distributed among the women. The women read together, each one from her own booklet, and the group quickly completes this joint reading of the book of Psalms. All their readings and emotions combine together to create one powerful supplemental prayer on behalf of all those suffering, in flesh and in spirit .[47]

In Arnovitz's work, the rolled pages from the book of Psalms are joined together. While each page is important in itself, the power and significance of the pages (and verses) is reinforced when they are joined together, much like each woman's prayer has meaning, but is more powerful when it is a part of a whole. Arnovitz's vest, containing countless verses rolled and joined together, represents a powerful symbolic protection by means of an ancient Jewish ritual object.

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[46] Devora Liss, "Tear/repair" [in Hebrew and English] *Tear/repair: Andi Arnovitz* [catalogue, Brandeis University and Yeshiva University museum, New York], no curator, ed. Tzachi Mezuman (Jerusalem: Self-published, 2010), 6.

[47] Ibid.

In the series *Garments of Reconciliation* (Fig. 12), Arnovitz aims at creating a dialogue (even if mainly symbolic) between Jews and Palestinian by means of a joint creation of “Small Talith” or “Tzizit”. Arnovitz:

> I went to the old Arab market in Jerusalem and borrowed 30 tapestries from my friend Mazen, a Palestinian. These tapestries were embroidered by women from different Palestinian villages. Since they were ancient and scarce, I did not want to cut them, so I took them to Western Jerusalem, to a modern Jewish print shop, where they scanned them and digitally printed them on linen. I then returned the original tapestries and took the scanned linen to Ibrahim, another Palestinian who owns a textile shop. I bought black cotton manufactured in Egypt, and he took the cotton and scanned tapestries to a sewing shop in Ramallah, where they were sewn by other Palestinians. When they were completed, I gave them to a young Israeli student who tied the Tzizit fringes for me. Throughout the process, the work of art passed from hands of Jews to hands of Arabs and back again. It was important for me that the garments were small, because education for peace starts at a young age.[48]

[48] Ibid., 7.

12. Andi Arnovitz, *Garments of Reconciliation*, 2009, Digital scans on linen, Egyptian cotton and threads, 60 x 30.5 cm. Collection of the artist, Jerusalem.

In the past, many works of art dealt with the impossible combination of clothing and stones, a combination that often embodies the tension between the soft garment and the hard stone. In the Israeli context, one of the most famous works is a *Robe for Self Stoning*, by Avraham Ofek (1935-1190; 1980, documentary photograph of action), and works by Nelly Agassi (b. 1973), or a tight garment worn by Hila Lulu-Lin (b. 1964), filled with stones in a work from 2002.

In addition, bridal gowns as religious metaphors were also common in the local art field. Arnovitz sewed a long bridal gown made of silk. Between the layers – in the sleeves and the bottom half of the garment, she sewed little stones she collected around Jerusalem. The edges of the garment are filled with so many stones that the dress is weighed down towards the ground (Fig. 13).

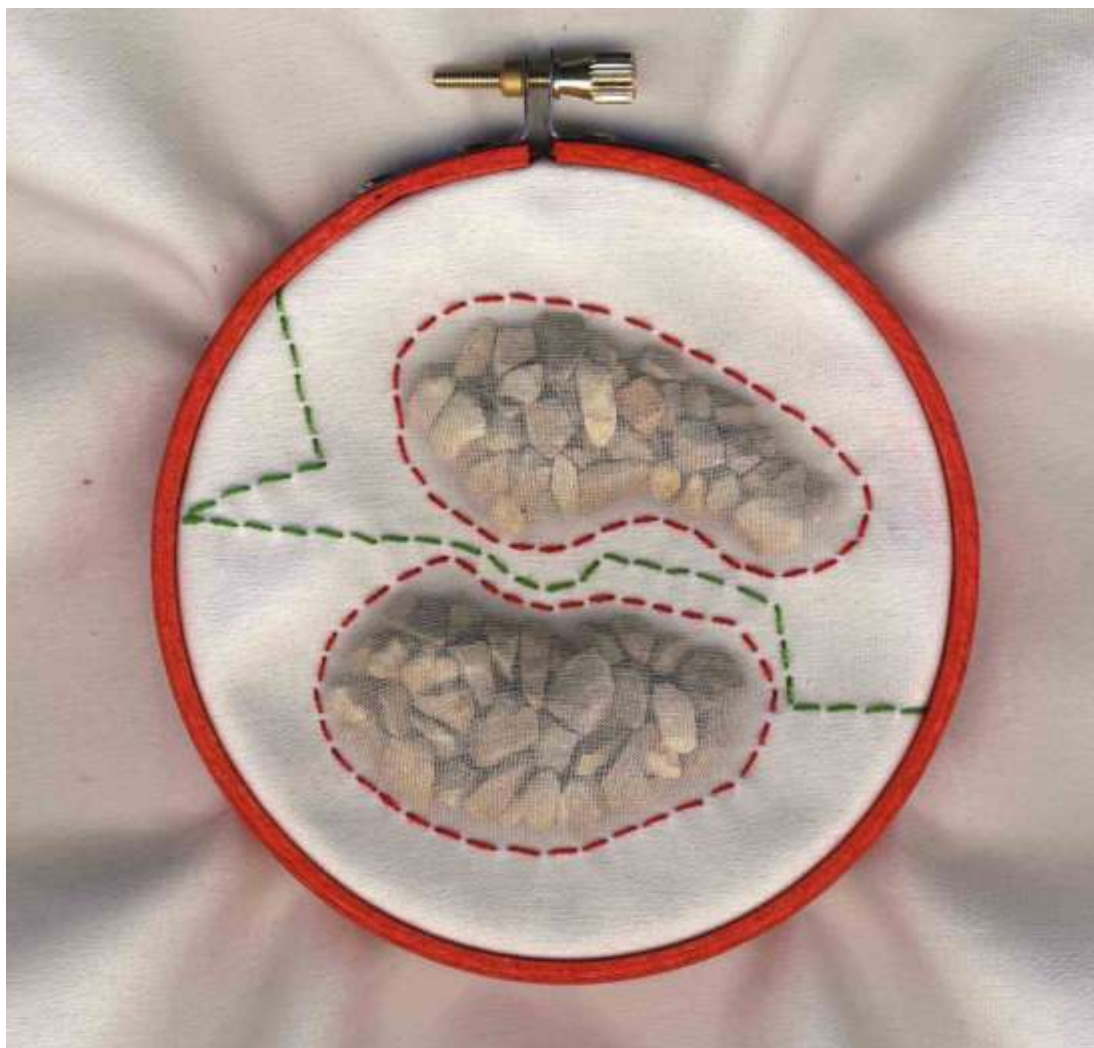
13. Andi Arnovitz, *Betrothed to the Land*, 2011, Silk, thread and stones, 160 x 157 x 100 cm. Collection of the artist, Jerusalem.

The artist emphasized: "The work deals with the strong ties Jewish and Palestinian women feel for this land and, above all, it demonstrates the unbearable weight of all these, a weight that makes us unable to move."[49]

The series *Red Lines/Green Lines* (Fig. 14): a work in progress since early 2012, continues the artist's interest in textiles and clothing. In this series, Arnovitz embroidered broken red and green

[49] Andi Arnovitz in a conversation with the author, 2012.

lines – the colors of the Palestinian flag. Zionist discourse lends itself easily to taking sides on historical events and borders: the 1949 cease-fire line versus the 1967 "occupation". By contrast, post-Zionism frequently challenges these delineations, as does the emerging discourse of settler circles; and, likewise, the Palestinians.[50]



14. Andi Arnovitz, *red lines/green lines*, 2012, silk, cotton/polyester fabric, embroidery threads and stones, hand painted embroidery hoops, 11 cm. in diameter, Collection of the artist, Jerusalem.

[50] Yehouda Shenhav, *The Time of the Green Line: Towards a Jewish Political Thought* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved Publishers, 2010).

The series includes what looks like a pair of twins separated by the green line, reminiscent of a mother's womb. Although separated, the two "entities" resemble twins in the mother's womb. The pair are fashioned out of small mounds of gravel, raising questions about the regional territorial conflict as well as questions about Israeli construction over the green line, an acute issue incessantly debated in Israeli media. The artist is apparently proposing that we replace power and ownership with ambivalence, by combining historical, cultural, and ideological models, as suggested by semiotician Louri Lotman who had described "ambivalent texts" as integrating historical, cultural, and ideological models.[51] In this type of discourse, the separation of the two nations (represented by the archetypical twins) is not blurred into non-existence. Rather, it is distinctly present, yet ultimately the emphasis is on "we are brethren" (Gen.13: 8). In the artist's comments on the piece; she has said that it refers to the current political situation as it continues to brutally hack at the land, randomly, it often seems. "As a matter of fact, that is what we are dealing with here – a dispute that throws up gravel: Despite my identity as an observant, Zionist woman, not for a moment do I believe that everything belongs to us - that would not be productive." [52]

**Summary: "Other worlds" and Politics of Inclusiveness**

Works like those discussed in this article present a central topic in the art work of the post-colonial era. Art historian Linda Nochlin has shown that in the past, the way modernist painters viewed the Middle East was affected by the absence of the West from the works. This is apparent, for example, in paintings by artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) and Eugène Delacroix (1863–1798).

According to Nochlin's perception, oriental iconography depended on a presence that does not exist in the work, meaning, the western perspective; a perspective that underlies the works, but, as mentioned, does not appear in them. The orient was described as a place where time stopped,

[51] Iouri Lotman, "The Dynamic Model of Semiotic System," *Semiotica* 21, no. 3–4 (1977): 193–201, 314.

[52] Andi Arnovitz in a conversation with the author, 2012.

a place of insanity, cruelty and sensuality, even perverted sexuality, but this world was a figment of the artist's imagination, echoing the associations and expectations of people in his time and the consumers of his work.[53]

In the same way, most hegemonic Israeli art was created from within a European viewpoint, through its local representative.[54] Without a doubt, like her European "parent," Israeli orientalist iconography was founded on the ruling Jewish presence that was left invisible. In the works presented in this article – works that create a comparison and a complex link between the Jewish (as discussed above – mainly European and Western)[55] and the Muslim (the local, the oriental) – there is an aspect of breaking the orientalist hierarchy, a sort of "dis-orientalism" – as Ganit Ankori calls it.[56]

These works do examine the "other" and its world, but they do not hide the Western view (and as mentioned above – the Ashkenazi-Jewish view) of the creators; Inherent in this viewpoint is an impromptu element. In this way, the works contribute to the undermining of the canon and transparency of the artistic description.

## The Feminist Dimension

The three artists discussed in this article are all Israeli Jewish feminists, who see themselves as part of the religious neo-orthodox world. When it comes to the Jewish-Palestinian conflict, an empathic or complex view does not only characterize women's art, but it seems that underlying the multi-dimensional and open view of the artists whose works are discussed in this article, we also find distinct feminist perspectives.

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[53] Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision – Essays on Nineteenth Century Art and Society* (London: Tower Books and Imaginary Orient, 1991).

[54] Trajtenberg, *Between Nationalism and Art*, 211–213.

[55] The art which is created by Arab-Jewish (Eastern) artists is another subject that is worth a discussion in its own right.

[56] Ankori, *Palestinian art*, 20–22.

In the 1970s, female artists in the United States already aimed at creating a world of empathetic and joint creation primarily intended as an antithesis to male artwork, characterized by personal creativity, and often based on the myth of the lonely artist. In addition, much has been written about feminism in regards to aiming for tolerance and peace. For example in her important book "In a Different Voice" the psychologist and Philosopher, Carol Gilligan, insisted that women have a different voice in the field of morality.[57] The non-militaristic spirit that characterizes many feminist approaches with regard to conflicts and their solutions can create a different viewpoint regarding the Jewish-Palestinian conflict.[58] This view is different from common political and defense discourse.

It is important to qualify these points. Essentialist gender researchers do claim that women are born with better socialization skills than men, but these researchers also stress that women do not necessarily use their skills for higher causes, and do not necessarily show a developed sense of justice. In the context of Israeli art discourse, despite the development of a gender and feminist discourse in Israel in the 1990's, visual culture researcher Yael Guilat mentions that an examination of the role of criticism in that period shows that even though the presence of women speakers was bigger, their voice and "the language of one's own" (based on Virginia Woolf's constitutive essay, "A Room of Her Own") still remained imprisoned in traditional dichotomies, and these women did not usually promote gender discourse in art.[59]

To the matter at hand, in the art that is created in the religious world – an open and complex view such as the one presented in this article, appears almost solely in women's artwork. The complex viewpoint that I find in the art of religious female artists can be explained in various ways, some of which are demonstrated by models offered by contemporary feminist discourse. For example, Carol Gilligan emphasizes that the female voice is different and sees things differently from the male voice – not because of primary biological data but because the life

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[57] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
[58] This feminist spirit finds clear expression in research on law and feminism. Feminists are striving to foster a free dialogue of opinions and interests, while seeking harmonious solutions that respect diversity and disparity without imposing one solution on all. See Carolyn Heibrun and Judith Resnilk, "Convergences: Law, Literature and Feminism," *Yale Law Journal*, 1913 (1990): 149–151.
[59] Yael Guilat, "Where Were You and What Did You Do" [in Hebrew], *Israel* 10 (Autumn 2006): 199–225.

experience of women is different from that of men.[60] The issue was raised more radically in French feminism, which tends to place more emphasis on the unique nature of the female voice. The philosopher, linguistic, psychoanalytical and cultural theorist, Luce Irigaray, claims, for instance, that due to a different biological structure, the female's life experience is one of diversity and disparity.[61]

Apart from the deep connection between feminist activity in the religious sphere to the one created in the general feminist world,[62] and that as mentioned, aims at an equal and non-aggressive dialogue, we will offer another view of a particular explanation that is strongly linked to the religious society in which the discussed artists operate. This explanation is based on the dramatic changes experienced by women in neo-orthodox society. In the Jewish traditional world, women were excluded from studying the Holy Scriptures. Usually, all they can do is practice obligatory decrees or study Mussar book (jewish-ethics) and, in recent decades, also "faith studies" (non-critical Jewish philosophy studies).[63]

In recent decades, there has been a dramatic change in this field. Jewish neo-orthodox women have started immersing themselves in religious fields that hitherto belonged solely to men (mainly Talmudic studies). The activity of women in this field is new and barely researched.[64] Generally speaking, one may say that because this is a new phenomenon that is not based on tradition, an intellectual freshness is identifiable in these studies that does not succumb to the rigid discussion common to the male Yeshiva world.[65]

Many of the Torah studies published by women around the world are characterized by a fresh and renewed examination, one that is aware of past structuring while combining traditional

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[60] See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
[61] Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One*, Trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).
[62] On the relations between religious women's art and feminist art of the past, see Sperber, "Abjection,"
[63] These often relate to the world of religious and messianic national orthodox Zionism at the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva.
[64] See Tali Brenner, "Religious Feminism, Beginnings and Directions, *Matronita*, 57–67.
[65] Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998); Tamar Ross , *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004).

religious studies with critical and research-oriented academic thought. This phenomenon has created a new kind of Torah studies and female Torah students whose work come from fresh, vital and non-dogmatic thought.[66] It seems that this spirit is also intrinsic to artists mentioned here. The re-examination of Jewish discourse that is typical of new feminine Torah studies, along with the complex new views regarding other worlds, is undoubtedly also visible in the world of art, which is characterized by a new spirit, that does not necessarily yield to the majority's perceptions or the discourse common to the Zionist-Religious society.

**Right and Left and the Excluded Passions of Minorities**

The artists presented in this article are part of religious society in the Israeli-Zionist world (and not post-Zionism, which is common among many artists in the Israeli art world), and some of them can even be associated with the right wing. More precisely, we must stress that works by religious artists such as these often undermine the common distinction between left and right. In the field of art, it seems that examining the meanings seen in their works is challenging, and even undermines a common distinction that was clearly expressed in an article written by Israeli art historian and curator Gideon Ofrat: Ofrat claimed that creativity among right wing people is, by definition, essentially based on non-humanistic and anti-avant-garde perceptions, and, therefore, there is no chance it could develop into “good art” (in the modern meaning of the term).[67] Ofrat concluded his essay with the statement: “right-wing capitalists can initiate and fund magazines such as 'Techelet [Azure] ' and 'Shalem' centers, where right-wing thought will be promoted, but no money and no initiative will foster a quality right-wing artist”.[68] Moreover, Ofrat's essay,

[66] Moreover, Christian feminist and theologist, Mary Daly, insisted that the worship of the known method in the religious world does not only dictate the answers to new questions, but also establishes in advance the boundaries of the area in terms of questions that may be asked. Feminist women are breaking this glass ceiling. See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 11–12.
[67] Gideon Ofrat, "Can Right Wing Art Exist Here" [in Hebrew], *New Directions* 9 (October 2003): 139–150. It was also was published under the same name in Gideon Ofrat, *Washington Crossing the Jordan River* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zionist Library, 2008), 191-201.
[68] Ofrat, "Can Right Wing Art Exist Here," 150.

“Are We Witnessing an Artistic 'Cultural Revolution' among Observant Israelis?”, published a few years later, still reiterates the same thesis.[69]

Similarly, Gilad Meltzer, head of theoretical studies at the school of arts in Beit Berl College wrote: “The question is not why right-wing artists and religious artists are not welcomed by the establishment and included in the discourse, but why most of them make bad art”.[70] Furthermore, in hegemonic discourse, the religious world is considered non-modern, and its artistic disability is presented as deterministic and bound by tradition. Writer Yoram Kaniuk, for example, claims that there cannot be worthy contemporary poetry because poetry requires an authentic expression of an experience coming from inner freedom, and any expression that has a religious side will always be recruited and artificial.[71]

These stereotypical assumptions are often based on theoretical observations that have become the bon ton of hegemonic intellectual discourse (even if they appear explicitly from writers that are not necessarily part of the heart of the discourse), and they are implemented as undoubted truth. Furthermore, the religious person, the “other” figure in Israeli society, is deprived of an independent voice, and the objectification and demonization of this figure is often expressed by marking him with traditional Jewish characteristics. It is no wonder, then, that mainstream Israeli art excludes religious artists from the discourse.

Furthermore, this perception is often embedded in the hegemonic writing of the local art world, to which is added a trend that attributes to its creators and its canonical objects, meaning, secular left-wing people, a monopoly on critical curiosity, humanism and complexity, while seeing the artwork of the religious or right-wing other as one that solely wishes to reaffirm and repeat traditional Jewish forms or ideas.[72] About this kind of statement one must say: as in other

[69] Gideon Ofrat, "Are We Witnessing an Artistic 'Cultural Revolution' among Observant Israelis?" [in Hebrew], *New Directions* 17 (January 2008): 164–176. The article appeared under the name “Jerusalem-Good Artist” in Ofrat, *Washington Crossing*, 202–221.
[70] Gilad Melzer, "Where are the Margins?" [in Hebrew], *Haaretz*, may 9, 2010.
[71] Quoted in Dov Berkovich, "Art Works and God Worship" [in Hebrew], *Tzohar* 34 (October 2008): 67–76.
[72] David Sperber, "Israeli Art Discourse and the Jewish Voice," *Images* 4 (2010): 109–131.

fields, the first tactic of oppression and exclusion is to say there is none and, in the artistic context, to claim that this art is unworthy of comment or to ignore it completely.

Historian Zohar Maor challenged the conventional distinctions between what is usually described as the Zionist mainstream that is taken as modern, rational and liberal, and right-wing perceptions that are usually defined as based on primordial, anti-rational and anti-liberal perceptions. Maor showed that the basis of peace-seeking and moderate perceptions, such as "Brit Shalom", was led by ethnic and messianic perceptions. He claims that right-wing perceptions such as those that later characterized the "Gush Emunim" movement, led in the past to a moderate and peace seeking political perspective.[73]

In fact, all works presented above echo, in more ways than one, the perception of the curator and theoretician Boris E. Groys: “Every art, whose motive is ideological – religious, communist or fascist ideology means secularizing the vision, and therefore becomes an object of paradox”.[74] Groys stresses that:

> Contemporary politics that support equal rights, are politics of inclusion and oppose the exclusion of political and financial minorities. But, the struggle for inclusion is possible only if the forms through which minorities can expose excluded passions publicly are not denied or suppressed to begin with by different means of aesthetic censorship, carried out on behalf of 'higher' aesthetic values.[75]

The obliteration of common distinctions between right and left that appear in the works we present undermines the central ethos of hegemonic writing in the field of Israeli art, one that forcefully holds to common dichotomies and existing ethos to reinforce its power and superiority.

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[73] See Zohar Maor, "Political Moderation from Righat to Left: Rabbi Binyamin to the Present" [In Hebrew], *Identities: Journal of Jewish Culture and Identity* 1 (2011): 41–56.
[74] Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 15.
[75] Ibid., 21.

Even though the religious artists whose works were discussed in this article are not ambiguous about their religiousness, and are rooted deeply in tradition, they create works that call for dialogue between Jewish and Palestinian cultures. In this framework, relations between Judaism and Islam receive a different dimension than usual. Stress, lack of trust and struggle, on one hand, or renunciation of narratives on the other, are converted in an invitation to create a joint realistic, artistic and theological space – a space that does not blur boundaries and disagreements, but aims at creating a dialogue based on a deep understanding of them.

The oscillation between viewing the "me" and its relationship to the "other" in the works that were discussed can be characterized as what the film critic and theoretician Kaja Silverman described as the productive look.[76] Base on Lacan's ideas, Silverman describes the productive look as one that allows the viewer to transform and make her own that which would have been violently rejected, while also recognizing as other that which may have previously been seen as me. The productive look, Silverman explains, incorporates into the viewer's memories aspects that are not his, allowing the viewer to participate in the other's desires, struggles and suffering; to experience their pain and past reverberating in his present.

These three artists have found a way to include the “other” in their traditional Jewish world view. They deal with the tension existing between Judaism and Islam, and do not blur the differences between the two religions, but rather, their work stresses the aspects common to both. These artists, then, bring deep humanistic sensitivity to their examination of Jewish-Islamic relations, thus challenging the mainstream Israeli art world. In a field controlled mainly by power structures with a unified religious and political agenda (or more appropriately – anti-religious), the artists discussed here represent most certainly a different and repressed voice. As we have showed in this article, a thorough examination of this voice reveals a fascinating combination of a conservative world and a profound and non-conformist spirit, based on the values of pluralism and humanism.

[76] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London and New York: Routlege, 1996).