

Afterword

Prophecy and Painting

by Rabbi David Sears

For religious Jews, the seven days of the week culminate in the Sabbath; and the high point of the Sabbath is the weekly Torah reading in the synagogue. According to tradition, the Five Books of Moses are completed and begun anew every year. Thus (at least for the diligent) Judaism's most sacred text is reviewed in its entirety on a constant basis. The Torah provides the spiritual and intellectual wellsprings from which the Jewish people throughout the ages have derived their sense of the meaning - and mystery - of existence. The Torah puts everyday life in cosmic perspective.

This is intimately familiar to Janet Shafner, one of the few Orthodox Jewish Expressionist-Symbolist painters on the planet. During the past decade in particular she has developed a vivid personal visual language to describe her spiritual journey. In so doing she has parleyed her entire gamut of artistic knowledge gained from a lifelong attempt (in Paul Klee's memorable phrase) to "render visible what cannot be seen," achieving a crystallization that few ever attain. Shafner's brooding, almost hallucinatory Surrealist paintings of the late 1950s-early 60s and spare, monolithic still lifes of the 1980s have come back to life in an entirely new formulation in her biblical paintings.

Most of Shafner's recent works combine two or more images, one in a lunette. These images derive from multiple planes of experience. By juxtaposing the lunette to the painting below it, she binds the phenomenal world of ordinary experience to the archetypal world of prophetic allegory.

It is an axiom of rabbinic thought that even when the prophets recount historical events, those narratives bear archetypal meanings. In its anthropomorphic language the Midrash declares: "God looked into the Torah and created the world." Thus, the world is Torah - prophetic archetype - and we who contemplate its joys and terrors, its bounties and brutalities, must realize that our lives and our very consciousness are part of Torah, as well. These paintings are part of an ongoing account of how this master artist is pursuing her quest to deepen her perception of this mystery. She draws freely upon Expressionism, Realism, and

Surrealism - how else should one paint prophecy? The tree in the park is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; the electric chair (with perhaps a hint of social commentary) is the biblical scapegoat; phenomenon is the noumenon.

In the last mystical discourse he delivered before his passing, Chassidic master Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) described the problem of attaining true perception of reality - Eden as a mode of experience, a way of being in the world. The interface between the unitary essence of the mind and physicality, in Rabbi Nachman's conception, is the imaginative faculty. Because it must participate in the experience of a multifarious physical world, the imagination almost inevitably falls into error. Its *tikkun*, or spiritual rectification, is through the divinely inspired images of prophecy: the Torah into which God "gazes" in perpetually recreating the world anew. As the prophetic images flow through our minds, the fragmented, shadowy images of the mundane world are transmuted to those paradigms of the transcendental realm that produce them.

Contemplating the Torah and its meanings is the main way *tikkun* is accomplished. There are various ways to engage in such contemplation, including that of artistic vision. Although this does not claim to be true prophecy, it may bear a glimmer, however faint, of prophecy. The sages of the Talmud state that there were one million prophets during the period of the first Holy Temple in Jerusalem, half of whom were women. Could Janet Shafner be a *gilgul*, a reincarnation of one of them?

Fig Leaves and Jewish Law:

Since image-making was classically bound up with idol worship, the rabbis forbade sculpturally rendering the full human form. (In any event, we would have had a problem with fig leaves, since the sages of the Talmud disagree as to the nature of the Tree of Knowledge. Grape leaves and *etrog* [citron] leaves, among others, might have been strong contenders.) However, since the rise of modern secular culture, the religious character of the fine arts has changed radically, permitting, within certain constraints, "Jewish Art." One of those constraints is to refrain from depictions of nudity. This has posed quite a problem for the present artist, and her recourse has been to make her depictions of the human form somewhat generalized, or a bit hazy. I admire this attempt, but must state that from the standpoint of *halacha* (religious law) it is a questionable solution.

Rabbi Sears is the author of The Path of the Baal Shem Tov, Compassion for Humanity in the Jewish Tradition, The Flame of the Heart: Prayers of a Jewish Mystic (translations from Rabbi Noson Sternhartz), The Tree That Stands Beyond Space: Rebbe Nachman of Breslov on the Mystical Experience, and the forthcoming The Vision of Eden: Animal Welfare and Vegetarianism in Jewish Law and Mysticism. An artist as well, he has illustrated more than a dozen Jewish children's books, including Tales From Reb Nachman.