For Tal

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I.

A fellow art student—we'll call him Tal—once described to me how it felt to wear a skirt for the first time—jubilant, liberated, correct, and uncomfortable. The skirt exposed a deep truth; but even as he felt whole, wearing a skirt meant sacrificing the convenient comportment he had once used as a shield. Since he had always been an unassuming person, the stares took some getting used to. Tal worried that wearing a skirt was overly flamboyant; he didn't want to be a drag queen, he just wanted to be a gay man who wore a skirt. His conclusion, and I have thought of this often, was that joyously idiosyncratic behavior is almost always viewed as extravagant, whether it presents as a man wearing a skirt or a woman wearing a headscarf.

All this poured forth from Tal as we sat in a studio waiting for the model, spiderlike, to refold her limbs for the next pose. We were the only two in the class wearing skirts. Tal's commitment to joyous idiosyncrasy lent his demeanor a peace I envied. I longed to feel as at ease in my skirt as he, his hairy leg propped up on the orange bucket of a plastic chair, apparently did in his. But I'm still coming out to the art world as Orthodox, and to the Orthodox world as an artist. So, on that particular day, I did not wear my skirt with aplomb.

I have failed to find a comfortable home for myself at the intersection of contemporary art and Modern Orthodoxy. Perhaps someday I'll easily inhabit both realms, but most days I feel like a barely viable chimera. Until recently, I have kept art and religion as separate as milchigs and fleishigs. But in the past year, I have become involved in the Jewish Art Salon of New York and Jewish Art Now. Hesitantly, I look around and I see pockets of religious Jews, more hopeful than I, who desire a place for art within Orthodox life.

If they endeavor to carve out such a space, they may encounter some of the tensions I outline below. Or not. The challenges I list presuppose an orientation toward contemporary, secular, and liberal art, and there exist other art forms—beautiful ritual objects, folk traditions, and meaningful illustrations—that integrate with Orthodoxy far more readily. Further, these challenges only exist if the Orthodox world wishes to co-opt my work. I make no claims about the inherent Jewishness or Torah value within the product, process, or audience of my art. While I can try to convey the foundation for my work and the cultural prerequisites for its production, ultimately, the Orthodox community arbitrates which types of art they value.

II.

As an artist, my aim is fidelity to the thickness of experience, experience being the sine qua non of art making. Watching a pink towel flutter or a carp gasp for breath in the market can serve as the kernel for a piece, or the impetus can be something more dramatic, like driving through Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina. Inspiration depends only secondarily upon the material and primarily upon one's mindset during the encounter. Now, I am too much of a structuralist to wait around for transcendent or ineffable experience. Although I despair of escape from Barthes' ubiquitous web of meanings, I concede that one might bounce above that web briefly, like the kid who becomes momentarily airborne while jumping on his trampoline on shabbos afternoon. While aloft, the readjusted lens of perception renders anew the subject of encounter. One always returns to earth, but if you are an artist or a poet, you get pretty decent hang time.
I refer to these episodes as "getting hit" because they have a passive quality, and because they are often violent in their power. Salvatore Quasimodo wrote a few lines that capture the quality these experiences brilliantly:

Ognuno sta solo sul cuor della terra
Traffito da un raggio di sole:
Ed e subito sera.

Everyone stands alone at the heart of the world
Pierced by a ray of sunlight,
And suddenly
It is evening.

The heart of the world represents the territory trodden most regularly by humanity, falling in love, giving birth, or simply watching a pink towel fly from an open window. People pass back and forth over essentially the same experiences, yet, paradoxically, they stand alone. The bounds of sense swell in reaction to being pierced, or hit. When that occurs there is a constriction of all but the subject of experience. Then the ray of sunlight. As a painter, I prefer to think of this not as an epistemological metaphor, but as a sharpening of the senses. “And suddenly it is evening.” One returns to the mundane, which is the matrix but not the location of this event, and finds it dim.

Frequently, but not necessarily, these episodes are correlated with states no polite religion condones, like drunkenness, lustfulness, shock, anger, or mania. Whatever else one might say about them, these states sometimes help launch the artist away from his demons: the verbal, the propositional, the prosaic, the linear, and the assumed. To the extent that Orthodoxy deifies these modalities, it becomes hostile territory for art making.

The Orthodoxy I know is fairly risk-averse, favoring replicable, consistent behaviors over sensual experience, which is neither predictable nor controllable. To be risk-averse is prudent when sin is the price of a bad gamble and, in light of the concept of commanded-ness, replicable behaviors make good sense. Unfortunately, being risk-averse is not a great way to approach art, and predictability does not tend to foster the seed experiences that produce art. However, once that seed experience is had and the artist sits down to draw or paint or sculpt, Orthodox culture dovetails rather nicely studio practice. The sense of personal responsibility for and dogged pursuit of meaning that Twyla Tharp describes in “The Creative Habit” is one of my favorite characteristics of religious life.

I do not believe that religious and artistic truths are fundamentally at odds. Although religious text might structure some experiences, there remain broad tracts of lived meaning that I have never heard a Jewish text or voice address. Torah does not usually answer questions such as, what did it feel like to give birth? (Not what should you feel like, but what did you feel like?) Or: why does a red wheelbarrow standing in the rain make me feel both full and empty? Or: what is the quality of this widower’s pain? Or: how do I experience space, fantasy,

memory, fur, lust, displacement, meat, or glee? Torah may dictate that we experience this meat and not that one, but it is silent on the topic of the meat's redness. All these are phenomenological questions and narrative truths that religion does not address and, perhaps, cannot answer.
The artist, however, does ask these questions and, while chipping, gouging, and shaping, he must continually recall the seed experience until it instantiates as form. As Dewey wrote, "while that initial thing is certainly experiences, it is not experiences in such a way as to be composed into experience." To that end, the artist must spend long nights at the drafting table. The painting or sculpture she creates in the slow after burn of inspiration is the best answer to a question like, "how do I experience space?"

III.

I asked a student of mine, a talented painter from a kollel family, why she thought painting and frumkeit were compatible. She answered that learning something of perceptual painting gave her self-confidence and cultivated her appreciation of Hashem's physical creation, so, nu, what was the problem? This is a legitimate, and quite beautiful, way to combine art and piety. But I remain dissatisfied with this answer because it treats art as therapy. What is the distinction between art as therapy and art as aesthetic experience? Audience. Art does not blossom into aesthetic meaning until someone other than the artist sees it. As John Dewey puts it, "expression is not merely a process of discharging personal emotion. It is a rhetorical stance, a technical stance." And for a rhetorical stance, one needs an audience.

The scarcity of Orthodox gallery-goers hinders the cultivation of an Orthodox aesthetic culture at least as much as the dearth of Orthodox artists does. Capturing an audience requires compromise and subtly, the essence of rhetoric. For the sake of an observant audience, one might refrain from unnecessarily crass imagery. For the sake of a broader audience, one might abstract cultural particulars.

Sad to say, I have run up against this "audience problem." I make paintings that are walls, not windows. This concept stands in counterpoint to the art historical notion of perspective as a metaphor for infinite space. My idea is not a purely "Jewish idea" anymore than Alberti's original description of drawings as windows is not an unalloyed "Christian idea." Even so, this formal concept has deep roots in my experience as an Orthodox Jewish woman, specifically in feelings of claustrophobia and containment. After getting married, but before the birth of my daughter, I made a drawing based on an old class portrait. While working through

these drawings, I discovered that the neurotic repetition of childish faces reflected my ambiguous feelings about motherhood; these faces were hypnotic and compelling even as they overwhelmed me.

The first private creative space I ever had was my graduate school studio; dark perhaps, but utterly precious—Woolf's paradigmatic room of one's own. This cubbyhole became ground zero in my fight to protect the space for intense art-making. Within, I drew an infestation of the almost-children who threatened the boundaries of my creative practice. The work showed nationally and won a major prize, but more than one critic complained that the work was irrelevant because the art world had dealt—apparently conclusively—with these "women's issues" 30 years ago. Within the contemporary art world, visual art emanating from a life predicated on a non-liberal religious tradition is almost impossible to pull off.

I regrouped and tried another version of this project. My original problem was partially one of audience. Few, if any Orthodox Jews saw the work, and secular gallery goers on whole could not relate to the experience of having limited access to birth control. My solution to the first half of this problem was to abstract. Instead of speaking about the commandment to procreate, I spoke of threatened interiority. Gaston Bachelard description of the process of abstraction is more eloquent and precise than I could ever be. While he speaks of language, his concept also applies to painting:

Words—are little houses, each with its cellar and garret. Common sense lives on the ground floor, always ready to engage in foreign commerce on the same level as the others as the passer-by who are never dreamers. To go upstairs in the word house, is to withdraw, step by step; while to go down to the cellar is to dream, it is losing oneself in the distant corridors of an etymology, looking for treasures. To mount and descend in the words themselves—this is a poet's life. To mount too high or descend too low is allowed in the case of poets, who bring earth and sky together.

Bachelard's poet employs registers where looser bonds obtain between signified and signifier. The downside to abstraction as a rhetorical tool is that the piece often loses emotional and political urgency. In the case of this project, abstraction only solved half the problem. Although the second, abstracted, version of my project was more accessible to a secular audience, still, few observant Jews saw the work.

IV.

The first step toward making art and Orthodoxy friendly is to clearly demarcate the boundaries between phenomenology, the realm of art, and ethics and ontology, the territory of religion. Once we have avoided a turf dispute, there remains the issue of risk-taking behaviors and the cultural value of experience. But an even bigger source of friction is the texture, not the authority, of religious truth. Modern Orthodoxy imagines revelation as mainly proscriptive, rather than descriptive, logical rather than evocative, cerebral rather than sensual. From the Orthodox vantage point, then, so too must all truths be. This cultural bias does not welcome my particular brand of art making.

Finally, there is the problem of audience. From the standpoint of contemporary art, audience is key. Because the Orthodox audience for art is small, there is only a very limited possibility that a sculpture or painting will significantly impact the religious mind.

Some of these problems are potential fixable, but there are so many, and some of them are ponderously deep. I remain somewhat pessimistic about the possibility of a vital art scene welling up from within the Orthodox world. And yet, I’m not going to stop being an artist and I’m not going to stop being Orthodox. I might just have to ignore some of these obstacles, while trying to solve some and waiting for the cultural climate to change. In the meantime, I will focus on being joyously idiosyncratic.