

Roberta Carasso, Guest Columnist
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David B. Wolk: Painter of Eternal

Jewish Truths in Modern Abstractions

In David B. Wolk's paintings holy Hebrew letters and shapes of varying sizes, colors and lines sing and dance before our eyes to rhythms of modern abstraction and ancient calligraphy. Wolk is a master painter, scribe and Torah Jew living in Israel. Through intense life challenges, he came to the realization that using Hebrew words as his subject, composed of individual letters, will tell a truer story about reality than anything else he could paint. Rather than, as other artists, depict nature, Wolk moves closer to what is real by painting the very words that bring nature into being - the holy utterances recorded in Genesis. Basing his compositions on many potent Torah texts, Wolk seeks to find reality in the hidden intersection between contemporary abstract theories and eternal Jewish truths.

In 1977, as an undergraduate student at Amherst College in Massachusetts, Wolk looked for a major that would offer an opportunity to come closer to the God he sought and a direction that would allow him to express his deeper self. He chose art, as it seemed that a creative field would develop his inner life, bring him closer to spirituality and provide the most meaning. It was a difficult decision. His parents were not happy; but Wolk graduated Magna Cum Laude and continued to study art in graduate classes, through a scholarship to Queens College, then the New York Studio School and Yale University, consistently receiving the highest honors and being cited for his outstanding artistic abilities.

Wolk acquired skills and a vast background of artistic concepts and knowledge. Had he moved in the direction of mainstream secular painting, he probably would have established a fruitful career in the gallery and museum systems, and may even have attained fame and fortune. But when he left school, still searching for the holy in art, life became difficult. He had no money and the promise of profound spirituality he believed art would provide had not materialized. In 1986, he packed up to go to Israel, ending up in a yeshiva in Jerusalem.

The contrast of having been an art student and now studying in a yeshiva was painful. In America Wolk was a top student. Now 27 years old, he felt as if he was in nursery school. Torah was the greatest challenge he had ever faced. He moved to Kiryat Arba, the ancient Biblical settlement where patriarch and matriarch Avraham and Sarah had lived. Wolk was determined to find what he truly was looking for. Art, as yet, was not the solution. He stopped painting.

Despite his stalwart determination, Wolk still did not have a grasp on the truth he sought and decided that by dedicating his life to Torah, he would come closer to reality. Wolk married, had children and, after two and a half years of study, became a sofer, a scribe, creating hand written text in a traditional manner with inks on parchment, as it was and is done throughout the Jewish world. He became known for his exquisite writings of ancient texts, Torah scrolls, mezuzot and more. It took all his strength, but being a man of integrity, Wolk persisted. He moved to his current residency, Bet Shemesh, a modern city cited in the Book of Joshua. The physical move

would also bring a life change.

At this point the reader must consider that for a true artist, engagement in the creative process - painting, drawing and other expressions -- is the equivalent of prayer. Can someone with a passion for praying stop and easily toss it aside? Certainly not. Art is a visual form of prayer. It is an intimate relationship between the artist, the painting and the Creator Himself, just as much as prayer is an intimate relationship between the person praying and his Creator to whom he prays. It cannot be given up easily. It is as if to say to the artist or to the one who prays: "Don't breathe." For an artist, creating art is life itself. It is more than a physical need. It is the soul crying out for expression. Praying, as painting, smoldered within Wolk and it was time for him to return to making art.

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A turning point was when Wolk received a blessing from the Grand Rebbe of Biala, Rabbi Ben Zion Rabinovitch, shlita, to create holy art. Continuing to be a scribe and spending hours a day in Torah learning, Wolk went back to painting, but this time he created with letters from the Hebrew alphabet. Letters represent the essence of creation itself; and getting as close to creation put Wolk on a more realistic track. Integrating what he knew as a master artist, scribe and seeker of truth, Wolk formed letters of holy texts with oil paint on canvas. The letters, propelled by their spiritual meanings, became alive. They were no longer text taken from a Gemara. They became integrated into a work of art.

Letters interacted with other letters, with the colors of the background, the space of the foreground, the negative and positive shapes of each letter and layers of letters and patterns of colors, one woven over another. While modern artists have been known to incorporate words in their art, the only artist Wolk could find who worked in a similar manner was the famous contemporary secular artist Jasper Johns. While there was much to learn from Johns, the artistic purposes of the two men were diametrically opposed. Johns sees letters as graphic symbols, as

pictures connecting words, a visual art on a flat surface as in traditional writing. Wolk perceives that the Hebrew letters and alphabet are building blocks of the universe. This knowledge offers Wolk the extraordinarily profound security that he was seeking. He now works in the structure that sustains the world, the hidden essential element not easily found in secular artistic expression, but which is possible to realize when stepping over the line into "religious" art.

Now in his fifties, Wolk realizes that the inner life he sought as an undergraduate is attainable; but before he could reach that goal he had to spend years searching and evolving as a Torah scholar, a human being and an artist. He had to discover that his art had to connect with the very essence of creativity, which can only be found for an Orthodox Jew in Torah. Certainly, the blessing from the Biale Rebbe was of major significance.

In each generation, artists, secular and religious, search for truth: each in a distinct form - Vincent Van Gogh sought it in nature; Mark Rothko sought it in pure abstraction. The difference, however, is that Wolk seeks it in Torah. He is not concerned with creating Biblical images or scenes of religious practices as is common in the Jewish art world. Rather, he integrates holy words into his compositions and their power -- augmented by an elevated knowledge of color, line, space and composition -- adds a dimension to each canvas that cannot be obtained otherwise. Each painting - made by the hand of a 21st century modern artist who is also a Jewish scribe - shows the holy oneness that can be achieved when an artist probes the depths of the human soul and imbues his art with both timeless aesthetic principals and eternal spiritual truths. Sarah Lehat, Director of the J. Klaynberg Gallery, in Manhattan, where Wolk will exhibit, summarizes his art: "To stand in front of David's work is to meditate on G-d's constant renewal of creation." Nurit Bank, Lecturer on Jewish Art and former Associate Curator at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, states: "Just being in the presence of these works creates a very deep and powerful experience. When I first viewed these works, the deep emotions stirred within me were expressed through true tears of joy and excitement that I haven't experienced for many years."

Wolk will have a solo exhibition this fall at the Hekel Shlomo Gallery, part of the Great Synagogue of Jerusalem, and an exhibition at the J. Klaynberg Gallery. The artist has also been accepted to show his paintings at the Jerusalem Theater. In 2009, he exhibited his art in Jerusalem at the Beis HaBaal Shem Tov.

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