

GALLERY



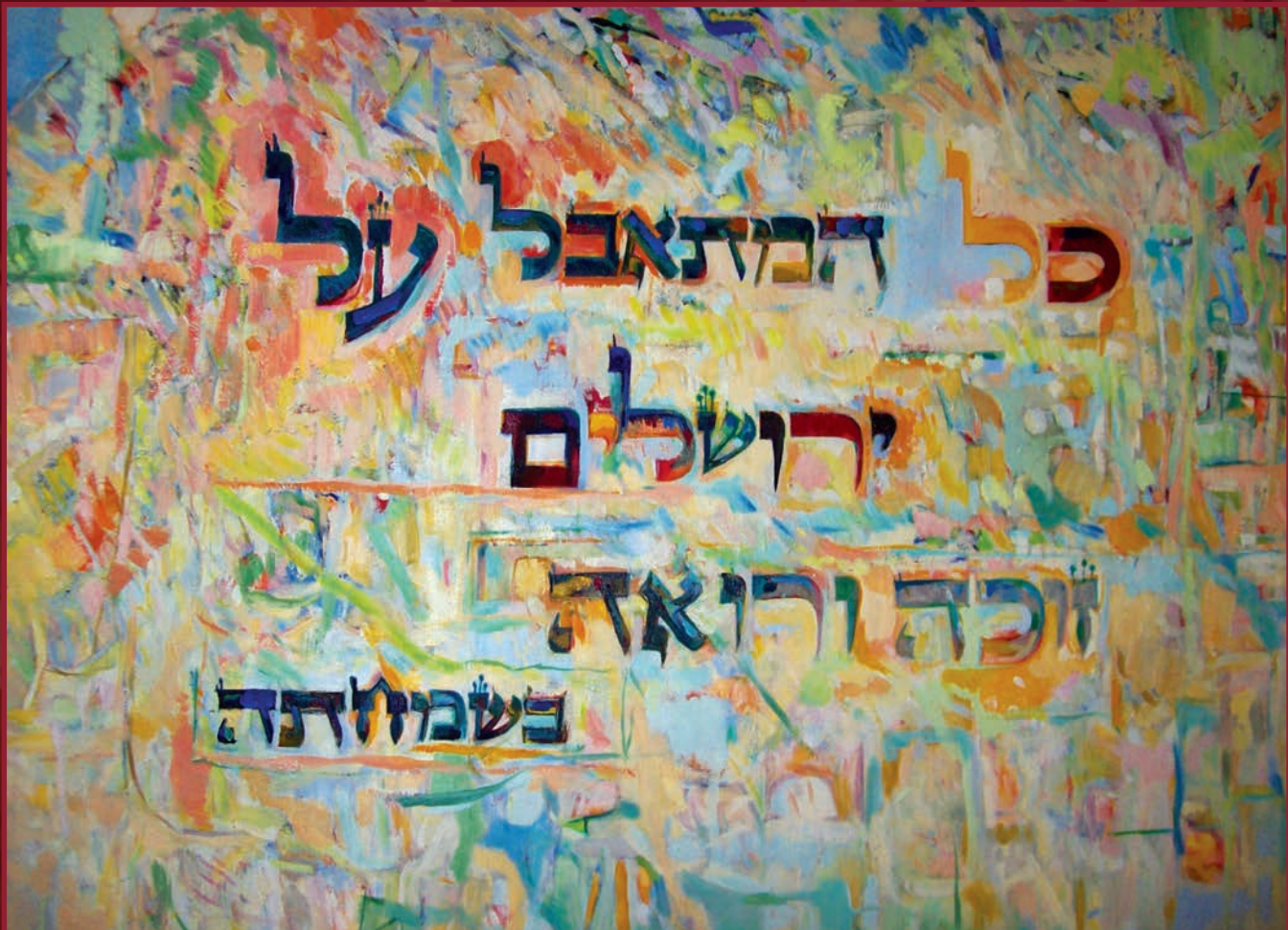
Painted Letters with a Life

A glimpse of the work of artist
David Wolk

BY RHONA LEWIS

By integrating his skills as an artist and scribe with his search for truth, David Baruch Wolk is creating holy art in his studio in Beit Shemesh. The blessing of the Biale Rebbe, Harav Ben Zion Rabinowitz, *shlita*, has borne fruit.





BORN IN DETROIT, MICHIGAN, in 1959, David Baruch Wolk studied fine arts at Amherst College in Massachusetts and graduated magna cum laude in 1981.

“We weren’t taught simply to record,” says Wolk, “we were taught to perceive solidity and depth.” This skill of painting more than what the eye sees was to become the cornerstone of Wolk’s work as a Jewish artist who captures the holiness of Jewish letters on canvas.

A dedicated artist, Wolk continued his education at Queens College, the Boston University Museum School, the New York Studio School, Yale University, and Oregon University. “I was searching

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for purpose in life. I wanted to know what being alive means, and I was sure that I would find the answer in art," he says.

Wolk was drawn to modern art because of its diversity and like all modern artists he wasn't interested in simply reproducing a slice of life. "By giving us the tricks of perspective — depth, color, and shadow — Hashem allows marks on canvas to give the illusion of reality," he explains. "A painted mountain looks like a real mountain. I wanted to move away from this 'lie of painting.' I wanted to paint the truth by painting what we experience — not just the colors that we see, but the colors that express what we feel."

Modern art, according to Wolk, is an attempt to move closer to reality by capturing the inner life of a subject and not simply its outer shell.

Changing Directions

Five years after graduating, Wolk reached a turning point in his life. Although he had been searching for spirituality, he found that art alone was "utterly empty, a body without a *neshamah*." He quotes *Koheles* (2:11): "Then I looked at all the works that my hands had wrought and at the labor that I labored to do; and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun." Disillusioned, Wolk took his father's advice and left for Israel.

After a short stay on a kibbutz, which he describes as "more empty than anything else," he went to the Diaspora Yeshiva. "I realized that there was no point in being alive for anything else," he says, "even if the road didn't appear to be a happy road."

For an accomplished artist, starting at the beginning was tremendously challenging. Although Wolk poured all his considerable talents into learning Torah, he says, "I felt it would take me years before I would have a good grasp of *Gemara*." It would be twenty years before he picked up a paintbrush again.

A New Art: Conceptual Abstraction

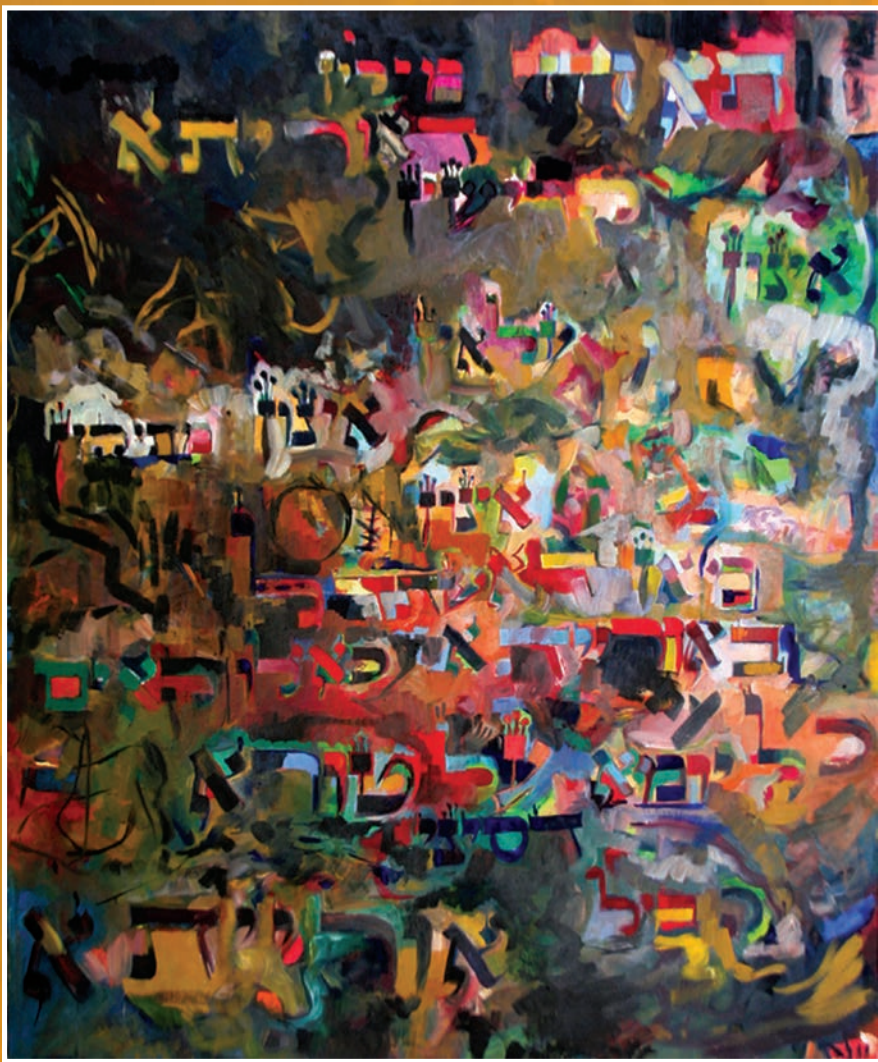
Wolk married, and to support his growing family, he became a scribe. When



he eventually returned to painting, he found that his break from art had given him an entirely new perspective. While some modern artists have been known to incorporate words in their art (Picasso, for example, put pieces of newspaper into his paintings), it is rare to find an artist who uses text as the core of his work.

"I had always thought that art was enwrapped in trappings foreign to Torah," Wolk says. "Finding a way to combine art and Torah by using Hebrew letters, which are the building blocks of the universe, as the focus of my work gives me awesome satisfaction." This new artistic genre has been labeled "conceptual abstraction" by Nurit Bank, art connoisseur and former curator at the Israel Museum.

Hashem's guiding Hand can be seen clearly in Wolk's fascination with modern art. He explains that the strength of an image lies in the artist's ability to balance forms and colors and in this way to capture the essence of a subject. Recognizable images, however, severely limit the potential of a picture, for against your will, you will always see the same tree, horse, or other object. An "abstract" image, on the other hand, has the



potential to create a new concept of that item in the mind of the viewer each time, depending on the depth of the painting.

Abstract art is thus particularly apt for expressing Torah concepts; the Torah has seventy faces, and new aspects can be discovered each time. Several of Wolk's clients have commented that the beauty of the pieces they own lies in the fact that they are always discovering new things in them.

Wolk's training taught him that the potency of every piece of art lies in the relationship between two areas of color, how they meet each other. The *Yerushalmi* tells us that the Torah Moshe was shown was written as "black fire on white fire" (*Yerushalmi, Shekalim* 14; *Devarim Rabbah*, 3:12). We see from these and other sources that the letters of the Torah are not like other scripts, where the symbol itself is the whole letter and the space around it simply holds the letter and has no importance in itself. Instead, Hebrew letters are formed with black and white parts that have equal importance; a letter is the interaction between the black

blues and greens; the *Gemara (Bava Basra* 4a) says that the parts of the Second Beis Hamikdash that were built by Hordus were *techeiles*, a blue-green color.

I wonder if children are able to appreciate Wolk's art. He smiles. "I was once traveling on a bus with several paintings when I heard two young boys behind me discussing my work. 'He paints the *ohr hapenimi*, the inner light,' one boy explained to the other."

Toward the Future

Wolk's art has been exhibited at the Amit Annual Art Exhibition; Shamayim Shira in Tel Aviv; the Heichal Shlomo Gallery, part of the Great Synagogue of Jerusalem; and at the Old City Jewish Art Center and Beis HaBaal Shem Tov in Jerusalem.

Wolk dreams big. "We know that art can influence large numbers of people in large ways," he says about his aspirations. "I'd like to replace the inappropriate images that dominate our world with enormous paintings of beautiful expressions of *kedushah*." ■

"limbs" and the white surrounding space.

The Words Appear

Viewing Wolk's art isn't a passive process ... and he won't disclose its secrets immediately. Some viewers see the colors first, others the words. As the viewer picks out the shapes of the letters and combines them into words, an array of emotions, thoughts, and associations is aroused.

As we talk, my eyes keep wandering to a painting dominated by shades of red and burgundy. Suddenly I make out the words "*Atah chonen l'adam daas* (You graciously endow man with wisdom)." I smile at the pleasure of discovery. I look at a larger painting with beautiful green and blue hues. Here I see clearly the words "*Kal hamisabel al Yerushalayim zocheh v'ro'eh b'simchasah* (All those who mourn over Yerushalayim merit to see its happiness)." Of course the letters are clear in this painting, and I think, "When Yerushalayim is rebuilt, everyone will see it."

A week later, I think of the painting and reflect on how fitting it is that the dominant colors are