

**“art *is* spirituality!”:
practice, play, and
experiential learning
in the jewish renewal
movement¹
chava weissler**

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the art world of ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal—in order to better understand the role of particular material practices in creating a distinctive religious experience and community. One attractive characteristic of Jewish Renewal is its invitation to play artistically with Jewish canonical texts, practices, and traditions. While some might argue that play leads necessarily to a limited and fragmentary Judaism, and that more rigorous study and practice is required, others see both practice and play as routes to a deeper religious experience. Artistic play with Jewish texts and traditions is seen by Renewal Jews as experiential learning, a variety of midrash (biblical interpretation). Artistic adornment of ritual objects and garb may also be understood as *hiddur mitzvah* (beautifying the religious precepts). Through an examination of the work of five artists (two painters, two fabric artists, and a weaver), the essay engages the concept of “handmade midrash” (artistic works as interpretations of sacred texts); creative reinterpretations of such traditions as counting the Omer and celebrating the New Moon; and the meaning of Torah and of prayer. This essay argues that through artistic engagement with Judaism, Renewal Jews practice play.

Keywords: Midrash, Jewish Renewal, practice in religion, play in religion, tallit (prayer shawl), quilt, gift shops—religious articles, religious crafts

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Artistically formed religious artifacts and artistic modes of engagement with Jewish texts and traditions are the key to understanding crucial aspects of Renewal Judaism. This essay explores the art world of ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, from the artists to the gift shops to the consumers, in order to better understand the role of particular material practices in creating a distinctive religious experience and community (Figure 1).

FIG 1

Elizheva Hurvich, modeling her American flag tallit and selling cards printed with her artwork at the shouk, ALEPH Kallah, 2005, Johnstown, PA. Photographer: Chava Weissler.



Scholars have offered different approaches to understanding how people engage with material culture as part of their religious life. In her discussion of a Depression-era photograph of the interior of an African American home, Colleen McDannel comments:

People learn the discourses and habits of their religious community through the material dimension of Christianity. By singing Gospel hymns and looking at pictures of the tortured Jesus, this African American family internalized a set of religious ideals. They *practiced* their religion, as one would practice the piano to become a competent pianist. The symbol systems of a particular religious language are not merely handed down, they must be learned through doing, seeing, and touching... Experiencing the physical dimension of religion helps *bring about* religious values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes. Practicing religion sets into play ways of thinking. It is the continual interaction with objects and images that makes one religious in a particular manner. (1995: 1–2)

This passage likens the contemplation and handling of religious artifacts to the rigors of musical training, suggesting

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a lifelong, deeply serious engagement with images and artifacts, norms and values.

Whereas McDannel's account of practices engendered by religious artifacts in a vernacular religious culture stresses rigorous engagement, Jeffrey Shandler's exploration of postvernacular Yiddish highlights the possibilities for play offered by objects associated with a language with great symbolic resonance even for those who cannot speak it. The Yiddish version of Magnetic Poetry, a set of refrigerator magnets of Yiddish words that can be arranged at will to create "poetry," is an example of how fragments of the language acquire "extreme, particularist, and richly connotative" qualities: "The encounter with Yiddish that these magnet sets proffer marks it as both less than and more of a language—limited and fragmentary on the one hand, aestheticized and charged with affect on the other hand . . . [T]hese magnets . . . invite improvisational play rather than methodical learning" (2006: 157–158).

Which of these passages best characterizes Jewish Renewal art? Is it serious practice or improvisational play? Can it be both? Is practice "better than" play? Some might argue that play leads necessarily to a "limited and fragmentary" Judaism, while others see both practice and play as routes to intense religious experience. What is the role in religious life of "methodical learning"? The tension between rigorous study and ecstatic experience, found in all religious traditions, has recently been the subject of debate in American Judaism. While some bemoan the preference for intense spiritual experience over careful study of traditional sources, others insist that the two can coexist.²

One characteristic of Jewish Renewal in general, and one of the things that makes it so attractive, is its "invitation to improvisational play" with Judaism. This invitation to play artistically with Jewish canonical texts, practices, and traditions is termed by Renewal Jews "experiential learning" (ALEPH 2005, [5]). Most other forms of Judaism—certainly all of the American denominations from Orthodox to liberal—speak in an authoritative voice, conveying their view of what Judaism *is* and *should be*. By contrast, Jewish Renewal speaks, as it were, in the subjunctive, and invites its participants to engage in improvisation. Yet some Renewal Jews themselves (not to mention their critics) worry that this produces a Judaism that is "limited and fragmentary on the one hand, aestheticized and charged with affect on the other." Others see Jewish Renewal aesthetics as essential to the movement's distinctive approach to Jewish spirituality.

Taking Play Seriously

ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal was founded in 1962 by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi as B'nai Or (Sons of Light), and went through various organizational permutations to reach its present form.³ Schachter-Shalomi (and many of his disciples) saw the creation of the movement as a response to the rupture of the Holocaust. (In this, Jewish Renewal is similar to postvernacular Yiddish, despite the fact that the

latter is often a secular rather than a religious phenomenon.) “Restoration” of the destroyed world of Eastern European Hasidism was impossible, Schachter-Shalomi argued; instead, what was needed was a “renewal” of Judaism, a “paradigm shift” that would enable new forms of Jewish spiritual life to emerge⁴ (see, e.g., Schachter-Shalomi 1993; Goldstein 2005). Indeed, some ALEPH members describe the relationship between the destroyed world of Eastern Europe and the emergent Renewal movement in terms of the kabbalistic myth of the shattered sparks and of reincarnation; the “sparks” of the souls of those who died in the Holocaust were reborn into the generation of Jews born in America in the late 1940s and 1950s. “We were carrying so many people through us and didn’t know that. Six million were lost just before our births, the births of those who came into the world in the late forties and early fifties. We’re carrying some of those fractured neshamas [souls] from the Shoah [Holocaust]” (Husbands-Hankin 2005). While the destroyed Eastern European Jewish civilization is deeply mourned, paradoxically, the fragmentary nature of the legacy—the fractured souls that have been reincarnated in a new generation—provides the freedom and opportunity to use those fragments to create something new.

Thus, the movement sees itself as “*neo-Hasidic*,” a *new* form of Jewish spirituality, built upon a Hasidic legacy. Jewish Renewal draws flexibly on the resources of Jewish tradition, especially midrash (creative biblical interpretation), kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), and Hasidism. One new aspect of Renewal, compared to its Hasidic roots, is the desire to incorporate women fully into religious life; indeed, some have characterized ALEPH as “Hasidism meets feminism.” Like Hasidism, ALEPH emphasizes such artistic means of spiritual expression as music, storytelling, and dance. As we shall see below, *visual* arts also play a key role in Renewal Judaism. Central to Renewal is the quest for an experiential relationship with the divine and an affirmation of women’s spirituality and creativity, both of which are expressed in Jewish Renewal art. The movement attracts Jewish (and a few non-Jewish) spiritual seekers, especially those with artistic talents or an artistic sensibility. One Jewish Renewal artist, Jackie Olenick, emphasized that: “Art *is* spirituality. There’s no distinction” (2005). In its emphasis on the artistic, the creative, and the playful, Jewish Renewal resembles other new spiritualities. Wicca, new goddess religions, and even contemporary Christian spirituality are intimately intertwined with art.⁵

Gift shops at the Kallah (a week-long biennial gathering of Renewal Jews from all over the world), at regional retreats, and at Jewish Renewal retreat centers make the products of Jewish Renewal artists available to the membership at large, as do the artists’ websites. In these venues, spirituality is given material expression in garments, paintings, jewelry, musical instruments, and CDs of music and teachings (books are available as well), and is transformed into a purchasable commodity. Participants can acquire tambourines painted with scenes of Miriam leading the Israelite women in dance

and song, patchwork challah (bread) covers to use at the Friday night Sabbath meal, embroidered kippot (skullcaps), T-shirts emblazoned with the names of the four biblical Patriarchs in purple calligraphy, and handmade meditation cushions in reds, blues, and blacks, appliquéed with the six-pointed Star of David.

Though often not directly acknowledged as such, this wealth of material culture is strategic to a key concern of the Jewish Renewal leadership. Both administrative and rabbinic leaders have expressed concern that much of the core activity of Jewish Renewal happens at temporary gatherings such as the Kallah, which are playful in character; the leadership sees a need for participants to convert this play into practice in their lives. A special booklet entitled “Bringing Your Kallah Experience Home” begins:

Chances are good that whether this is your first or tenth Kallah, you are wondering how you can bring what you found here home. How can you experience the spiritual depth, communal connection, personal growth, amazing Jewish learning, powerful prayer and open-hearted presence that are so carefully tended here back into your community, and to your day-to-day life? (ALEPH 2005, [1])

The booklet briefly describes and points to websites for Renewal organizations, communities and projects, suggests forming a meditation or spirituality group in one’s home community, and lists two-year Training Institutes in such topics as Jewish spiritual direction, chant leaders’ training and Jewish spiritual literacy. While not one of the methods suggested in this booklet, purchasing religious objects such as kippot, tallitot (prayer shawls), meditation cushions, decorated drums, and pictures illustrating biblical texts, can provide resources for continued spiritual practice, such as *davenen* (prayer) and meditation at home. Indeed, the *shouk* (market) or gift shop at the Kallah is called “Renewing Resources” (Figure 2). Answering a query about the purpose

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FIG 2
Shoppers in line in the gift shop at Elat Chayyim, 2002.
Photographer: Chava Weissler.

of the “Renewing Resources” shouk at the Kallah, Susan Saxe, the Chief Operating Officer of ALEPH, wrote:

Jewish Renewal has a well-deserved reputation for delivering “experiential highs” but *we are not in the business of spiritual entertainment*. Yes, folk can come to a Kallah, have a great time, daven [pray] up a storm, hang out with friends, and all that. But the reason we bring them together is to change our lives and change the world. You can’t strengthen the God-field by simply providing people with a week or a weekend of spiritual vacation so that they can go back refreshed and better able to tolerate the unrelenting materialistic demands of their “real” lives. Jewish Renewal is not about giving up and withdrawing from the struggles of the world while occasionally relieving our pain by experiencing that which ought to be and the rest of the time shutting down to endure that which is. But transformation takes time and sustained effort, and for that you have to “go and study.” The goal is lifelong Jewish learning, preferably in community, to inspire and empower us to manifest Torah values in the world. We’re the “People of the Book,” right? (2006b)

Yet Saxe’s words, along with constant reminders by Schachter-Shalomi that davenen should be a daily practice, not only an occasional or even a weekly one,⁶ reveal the anxiety of the leadership that many members of Renewal regard the retreats and other Renewal gatherings as a time of play, disconnected from their ordinary lives. For the play at retreats to transform them, the movement’s leaders argue, play must become practice. That is, prayer and study, in their experiential, playful modes, should be engaged in regularly, and should transform one’s self-understanding as a Jew, mode of action in the world, and relationship to the divine.

Renewal Jews understand art as an important means of engagement with both spiritual experience and Jewish tradition, indeed, as both *hiddur mitzvah* (the adorning of a religious act or object) and a form of *midrash*. *Hiddur mitzvah* is mentioned in the Talmud, and is the justification for investing resources in the creation of beautiful ritual objects. Wearing a lovely prayer shawl, dressing the Torah scroll in a beautiful mantle, and covering the Sabbath loaves with an appealing challah cover enhance the meaning of religious acts. Schachter-Shalomi uses the concept of *hiddur mitzvah* as a way of speaking about the artistic component of Renewal Judaism (Schachter-Shalomi 2006).

More innovative than Renewal’s use of art for *hiddur mitzvah* is its development of art as *midrash*. *Midrash* is a mode of inquiry into the meaning of biblical texts created by the rabbinic sages in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. While classical *midrash* relies on certain sorts of linguistic manipulation and close textual analysis, for the rabbinic sages, “Bible study was an *ad hoc* activity directed essentially to an audience hungry for a response to its immediate needs and to the desire to have Scripture speak in the present moment” (Stern 2004: 1,874). In this spirit, but with different tools, new forms of “creative *midrash*” have come into being

in recent decades: drama workshops, creative writing classes, modern dance interpretations. This development echoes the “irrepressible playfulness” of classical midrash, its “delight in multiple, polyvalent traditions of interpretation” (Stern 2004: 1,874). However, these new approaches to midrash do not require the deep textual knowledge that classical midrash assumes, demanding instead other sorts of literacies.

The idea of art as “handmade midrash” was developed by Jo Milgram, who taught at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and elsewhere before moving to Israel some years ago. Although she does not consider herself to be part of the Renewal movement, Milgram has taught at the Jewish Renewal Retreat center Elat Chayyim and in other Renewal venues; she has deeply influenced many Renewal artists, professionals and amateurs alike. Her method for midrash workshops with non-artists combines study of biblical texts and images from art history with artistic creation and writing. She writes:

Through handmade midrash one learns to recognize that biblical phenomena and events occur at many levels of meaning. Symbolic thinking connects these levels and adds infinite richness to experience. As hidden forms and feelings surface, new meanings of the biblical text emerge. A counterpoint starts to resonate between the ancient text made intelligible and the individual's current life situation. (1992: 8)

Following in Milgram's footsteps, many Renewal artists advocate for and teach the artistic mode of midrash to non-artists as a means of interpreting and playing with Jewish texts and traditions. According to Milgram:

Handmade midrash is not art for art's sake... Rough, untutored shapes responding to a biblical passage, shapes resembling something or nothing—these will be invested with whatever meaning the maker gives them. There is no right or wrong. The idea is to give the hands autonomy, to be a child, to allow the soul to play and to make shapes that the rational mind may at first consider worthless. Once those forms find their voice, they can become powerful personal metaphors resonating [with] the individual's very nature and embodying a deep personal experience of the text. (1992: 10)

Thus, Milgram is “taking play seriously” (1992: 7) as a vehicle for connecting the biblical text and the depths of an individual's nature and experience. Serious play is the vehicle for a practice of learning that is deeply personal and creative. For “handmade midrash” one must become a playful child, rather than a learned sage: here, the task is to liberate oneself from “too much” intellectual knowledge. The literacies of artistic creation and spiritual practice are privileged over the traditional literacies of textual expertise and manipulation. Handmade midrash is truly in the subjunctive, not the authoritative, mode; every one of us, as artist, can play with our relationship to text and tradition.

Five Artists

The ways in which Renewal art enters into the midrashic process, takes the form of spiritual practice, and invites viewers and users into spiritual experience can be seen in the work of five artists: Elizheva Hurvich, Jackie Olenick, Anita Rabinoff-Goldman, Stephen Shaffer, and Bara Sapir. Sapir led an art workshop at the 2005 Kallah, while all of the others offered their work for sale at the shouk. Olenick, Shaffer, and Rabinoff-Goldman are in their early sixties, while Hurvich and Sapir are in their late thirties. Brief biographies of the artists reveal certain themes and tensions: their degree of identification with ALEPH and its spiritual project; the extent to which they regard themselves as “professional” artists, both in artistic training and in how they earn their livelihoods; the ways in which they sell their work and how they think of their relationship to those who purchase and view their work; and how they see the connection between art and spirituality.

Thus, Olenick, Hurvich, and Shaffer place themselves squarely within Jewish Renewal: Olenick, for example, refers to herself as “one hundred percent Renewal,” and her work is enormously popular among members of ALEPH. The other two, Rabinoff-Goldman and Sapir, regard their work as more marginal to Renewal art, although they both have connections to Renewal. Perhaps not coincidentally, both Rabinoff-Goldman and Sapir made the point in their interviews that they “attended art school,” that is, that they are professionally trained and have professional aspirations. By contrast, Olenick said repeatedly that: “A real artist would say [of her work], ‘Ah, it’s just folk art.’” Hurvich was not trained in art school, although she apprenticed with Jo Milgram; when, in 2005, she enrolled in art school, hoping to find additional depth and inspiration for her work, she found it disappointing and uncongenial. Finally, Shaffer had a very different sort of training, studying pre-Columbian weaving techniques with a Zapotec weaver in a small Mexican village. Of all of the artists, Shaffer is the only one who earns a full living by his art; Olenick and Rabinoff-Goldman are both partially supported by their spouses, Hurvich is a Hebrew school principal, and Sapir runs a holistic test-preparation service.

Elizheva Hurvich

Hurvich, a quilter and fabric artist in her late thirties, grew up in California. She is currently the principal of the Hebrew school of Kehilla Community Synagogue in Piedmont, California (formerly in Berkeley), the largest Renewal congregation in the country with about 400 families.⁷ A Women’s Studies major in college, she has strong feminist convictions, which inform her art. A turning point in her artistic development came when she saw an exhibit of Amish quilts, and came to think of quilts as a kind of “women’s constitution,” a repository of women’s wisdom and community (Hurvich 2006). For Hurvich, quilting is a deeply feminist act, and she values it as a repetitive, meditative, modular form. Hurvich’s spiritual quest and connections with Jewish Renewal began when she was an undergraduate. She later lived in Israel for a year and studied

with Jo Milgram. After working for Hillel for a few years, she earned a master's degree in Jewish art and material culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1999 (Hurvich 2003).

Of the aesthetics of Jewish Renewal, Hurvich says:

Jewish Renewal is about people being able to put their own hands on something and have their own experiences . . . to be able to experience Judaism meaningfully and personally, and whatever that means; whether to know Hebrew, or to chant, or do a ritual and connect to a well-spring in some non-formulaic way. It's about making it personal and touching it, by being the human hand in the work; something handmade and personal with feeling: handmade ceramic and weaving. Those things are more the aesthetic of the Jewish Renewal Jew. And my work is about the hand, and the handmade. (Hurvich 2006)

Here Hurvich stresses the improvisational, as well as the "limited and fragmentary" character of Renewal spirituality and Renewal art. Hurvich's work expresses her Judaism, her feminism, and her spirituality, through this handmade, patchwork aesthetic.

Jackie Olenick

Jackie Olenick, of Boca Raton, Florida, is a painter who identifies herself as "absolutely, one hundred percent Renewal," Olenick's goal in her work is accessibility and immediacy of spiritual impact. "I want to make things accessible and affordable, so people can have [the work] in their houses. I want people to get it, to get the message, to look at something and have it touch their heart right away."⁸ While Olenick sells regularly at the Kallah, Jewish Renewal is just a small part of her sales. She participates in shows in her home state of Florida almost every weekend during the winter season, working with someone she characterizes as "the biggest promoter in America." Parenthetically she adds, "A 'real' artist wouldn't be caught doing these things; it's beneath them." In contrast with the professionally trained Renewal artists, Olenick has a "folk art" background: she grew up living with her parents and grandparents over their tailor shop in Philadelphia, and learned to sew and embroider the aleph-bet (Hebrew alphabet) before she could hold a pencil and write.

Olenick's work is beloved by Renewal Jews. At the 2005 Kallah, one of her paintings was auctioned off to benefit ALEPH; it was the lead item in the fund-raising auction, and fetched by far the highest price of any object. Before the auction began, the emcees asked how many people in the audience owned a piece of Olenick's art. About three-quarters of the 600–700 people in the audience raised their hands. She is so central to the ALEPH art world that Schachter-Shalomi gave her smicha (ordination) as an artist, a member of the "sacred guild of the disciples of Bezalel."⁹ Normally, ordination is bestowed only upon rabbis; however, Schachter-Shalomi gives a variety of kinds of ordination, recognizing leadership in artistic and pastoral work. The smicha certificate hangs in Olenick's studio.

Anita Rabinoff-Goldman

While Rabinoff-Goldman, a fiber artist from New England, is a member of both ALEPH and a Conservative synagogue, she considers herself “just Jewish.”¹⁰ “Being Jewish is who I am, and it’s very important to me, but going to services is less important . . .” Equally important to her identity is her art: “I don’t remember a time I wasn’t doing art. It’s just who I am . . . I’ve always done art and always sewn.” “My mother and grandmother always sewed and did needlework. I learned from them very young.” Rabinoff-Goldman was an art major in college, but she, like Hurvich, was transformed by a quilt exhibition: “As soon as I saw that exhibit [at the Whitney Museum of Art in 1971], I just thought this is what I want to do . . . It was a perfect fusion of loving to sew and making art.” Eventually, she devoted herself to making art quilts. Years later, Rabinoff-Goldman wanted a tallit. Although she was running a synagogue gift shop at the time, and presumably could have her pick, she was unable to find one she liked. So she made one for herself, using appliqué, one of several techniques used by quilters. “Someone else saw it and asked me to make one and that’s how my business got started.”

Rabinoff-Goldman sells her work through her website and on consignment at several gift shops. She also shows her work at the biennial gatherings of the Union for Reform Judaism and of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. She finds the ALEPH Kallah a more pleasant and profitable experience. “Everyone was very nice, a really lovely atmosphere . . . At the Union for Reform Judaism and the United Synagogue, once you pay your fee that’s it. It doesn’t matter to them how you do. At ALEPH, everyone was on a percentage, so they have a stake in how successful they are, and I definitely got the feeling from Eliezer, who was running the exhibits, [of]—‘If you do well, we do well’—and that felt supportive.”

Jewish Renewal art, in Rabinoff-Goldman’s view, emphasizes the Jewish mystical tradition and Jewish spirituality more than other forms of contemporary Jewish art. But she insists that: “Every artist is working from a place of spirit . . . To me art is soulful work. Julia Cameron, in *The Artist’s Way*, says to put a sign up over the work space: ‘God, you take care of the quality, and I’ll take care of the quantity’ [(1992: 55)]. I don’t even take responsibility for the art. [I] have a gift, a gift was given to me, and I choose to use it.”

Stephen Shaffer

Shaffer, a weaver, came to his involvement with ALEPH about a decade ago through his second wife, who had a connection with Schachter-Shalomi going back some twenty-five years. “It’s a nice fit for me,” he says. “My spiritual practice has been developing over the last thirty-five or forty years,” but only took a Jewish direction after the break-up of his first marriage. He and his second wife live on an eight-acre organic farm in rural Nellysford, Virginia, about thirty-five miles from Charlottesville, where they are members of a Havurah.¹¹

In 1978, before his life took a Jewish direction, Shaffer spent four months in a village in Oaxaca, Mexico, studying with Don Andreas, a Zapotec weaver, who taught him to weave on the pre-Columbian backstrap loom. Shaffer, who once lived in rural Mexico for five years, had gotten to know Don Andreas through an earlier business venture, the import and sale of folk art objects. Shaffer loved the artistry of Zapotec textiles, with their ancient three-shade striping pattern, which he has adapted by adding more colors and by weaving them on a floor loom. Shaffer saw the handmade pre-Columbian textile techniques as a path to Jewish spirituality: “Don Andreas taught me the techniques for combining the hand, the eye, the mind and the heart to create textiles for the people. Based on this philosophy, I wanted to create a tallit that is lovely to look at, wonderful to feel and contains the spirit of prayer within it” (n.d. 2). When he returned to America after studying weaving, Shaffer learned that he had to market to women, as they, rather than men, buy handmade garments. He said that therefore, “I designed the Tree of Life [tallitot] with women in mind, not the concept, but the cloth, although I have sold a few to men. Out of ten sales, nine-and-a-half are to women.”

Shaffer earns his living as a weaver, making and selling tallitot woven of rayon, silk, and cotton. While he makes some “traditional-style” tallitot—white with black or blue stripes—most of his production is in the colors that are associated, in Jewish mysticism, with the ten sefirot, the emanations of divinity, also known as the Tree of Life.¹² He considers himself more a craftsman than an artist. “I produce for the marketplace,” he says. “A craftsman is an artist with two kids. I can’t just be an artist and express myself.” He also produces a line of chenille scarves, sold locally every fall, and has a contract to weave cloth for a designer in New York State. (“My kids were in school and you need to provide.”) A third of his income comes from the tallitot he weaves and sells in Jewish Renewal and similar venues: at the Kallah, the Havurah Institute, the Jewish Folk Arts Festival near Washington, DC, and especially through the gift shop at Elat Chayyim. “In Renewal, you meet artistic people, with a sensitivity to vibration. Handmade things carry the energy of the maker and pick up the energy of the owner. It happens just by having it around. People that I met in the Kallah were very attuned to that.”

Bara Sapir

A painter and sculptor in her late thirties, Bara Sapir is the art editor of *Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture*. She sees herself as an “observer-participant” in multiple cultures: “I consider myself a Jewish Renewal person, and an artist, and a woman. I don’t align myself with just one . . . Jewish Renewal brought me to a Jewish art . . . I associate with the Jewish Renewal community, but it’s not specifically Renewal art, and some of it isn’t even Jewish art.”¹³ She works in multiple artistic modes, including music, performance art, and ritual. Unlike Olenick, who prizes the accessibility of her art, Sapir,

reflecting her artistic training, sees her own work as more confrontational and thus, perhaps, outside the conventions of most Renewal art. It is important to Sapir that her work finds an audience that extends beyond the Jewish community.

Sapir's involvement with Jewish Renewal began when she was in graduate school studying art history. Among her fellow students and fellow artists, she met a young couple who had been influenced by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.¹⁴ Having been raised a Reform Jew, Sapir was stunned to discover a very different way to be Jewish: "When I met them, I asked, Judaism is *this*? . . . They were into Tibetan Buddhism and Native American spirituality, but they were Orthodox. My most formative experiences were meeting this family, and the community I became part of in Ann Arbor because of meeting this family. I met them when I was 22, and they were in their twenties and thirties." Through the Renewal community in Ann Arbor, Sapir connected with the wider ALEPH world in the United States and Israel, where she studied with Jo Milgram for two years: "She was a mentor, a powerhouse."

According to her website, "Sapir's academic, artistic and spiritual work is fueled by the dynamic interface between creative expression and spirituality. She believes that each provides inroads into the other, which deepen one's connection to self and the divine . . . Her work is driven by a passion to connect to sparks of life and to inspire others to do so as well." For Sapir, art and prayer are intimately interconnected: "The davvening [praying] I was doing was really about making art work. Sometimes the best davvening I do is about being 'in the zone' and making art, and allowing the idea, the motif, or prayer, or mantra, to permeate through me."

The Aesthetics of Renewal Art

In the words of Susan Saxe, ALEPH wants the aesthetics of its visual culture to be "in sync" with Renewal values. The softness of materials (fabric art is a favorite) as well as boundaries (figures may extend beyond the edges of a piece or breach internal boundaries) is understood as expressive of Renewal's openness. The Renewal aesthetic can also be seen in its preference for the handmade and in its distinctive palette and iconography.

The handmade is preferred to the mass-produced, not only as a matter of aesthetics but also of social justice: "[I]f you want to give a gift to yourself or a loved one for a simcha [joyous occasion; lifecycle celebration] or a holiday, spend the money on handmade, meaningful Judaica that supports a Jewish artist, not on a gift certificate [from] the Gap for secular stuff made in a sweatshop" (Saxe 2006a). This concern carries over into the financial and management practices of the shouk. The shouk does not sell mass-produced work. Further, the staff of the Kallah do their best to accommodate the artists, offering a variety of sales arrangements, from full service consignment to table rental, depending on how much time the vendor wishes to spend selling at the shouk. (Some vendors simply send their work to be sold by Kallah staff;

others teach or take classes at the Kallah and thus need to be away from their tables; while other vendors, hoping for commissions, may prefer to be at their tables most of the time.) “It really has to do with wanting to make it work for the artists. We realize that they have diverse needs and we aim to please” (Saxe 2006a). Because most of the vendors pay a percentage to ALEPH, the Kallah staff have a stake in helping them to do well.

Members of a Renewal congregation in Seattle once jokingly listed “wearing purple” as one among several distinguishing characteristics of those who participate in Jewish Renewal.¹⁵ This remark points to the preference for a particular palette in Renewal art (and apparel): blues and purples, the colors of the celestial, often emphasized by the gold and silver of the sun and moon. Other hues from the natural world are also prominent: the blue-green of rivers and seas, the greens, golds, oranges and reds of plants and flowers, the browns and ochres of the earth.

These aesthetics are shared more broadly with the art of New Age spirituality,¹⁶ including an emphasis on the artistic as a mode of spiritual expression, value placed upon the handmade, and a similar palette and iconography. Sweeping spaces of sea and sky suggest certain kinds of spiritual experiences: the “oceanic” feeling of deep meditation, the floating beyond the boundaries and limitations of the physical world, as well as, paradoxically, the sacredness of the planet as Mother Earth.

Renewal Art as Torah and as Midrash

What distinguishes the art of the Jewish Renewal movement is its engagement with Jewish tradition and its understanding of art as Torah and midrash. “Torah” has a range of meanings, denoting the Five Books of Moses revealed at Mount Sinai, but also the later interpretive tradition, the studying of Jewish sacred texts, and even the mystical understanding of Torah as a (feminine) hypostasis of divinity. As discussed above, midrash is a classical (and renewed) Jewish mode of engaging Torah.

Consider two very different examples of midrashic art from the Renewal movement. The idea of art as midrash relates both to the making of the art and to its reception by the viewer. In an interview, Jackie Olenick spoke about both these aspects. Like many Renewal artists, Olenick combines images with biblical passages in Hebrew and English. She works in a consciously midrashic way, conceptualizing her work as a reflection on a passage from a canonical text. “I always start with a piece of text, oftentimes very personal, that is what I’m stuck on this year or this season. For the past few years I’ve been working on the verse from Ecclesiastes [3:1], ‘For every thing there is a season . . .’ I’ve got this beautiful piece [I’m working on] depicting all the changes of the seasons. It’s like my neshama is in it” (Olenick 2006).¹⁷

Because Olenick participates in a wide variety of art shows, some of which take place on Saturdays, she is prepared to work on the Sabbath. Though ambivalent, she

defends this practice: “I’ve connected up more people with my working on Shabbat than the rabbis do in the temples. It’s an audacious statement, but my work is always about Torah.” For her, “It’s a good show when a couple of people who come in start to weep because they are so touched. Then I’m doing my job.” Thus, Olenick sees spiritual engagement in both the creation of her work, speaking of putting her soul into her artistic interpreting of the Torah, and its reception, stating that her art achieves its goals when it draws people closer to a spiritual experience of Judaism.

A very different approach to midrashic art is found in the work of Bara Sapir, for whom artists create “a living Torah” to benefit “the entirety of the Jewish community, not just Renewal” (Sapir 2006).¹⁸ Sapir’s midrashic paintings and sculpture, which are more abstract and stylized than those of other Jewish Renewal artists, reflect her professional training. In her mixed-media sculpture *Jacob’s Ladder*, a response to Genesis 28:12, which describes Jacob’s dream of a stairway on which angels were ascending from earth to heaven, and descending in the opposite direction, pulsating shapes slide along “ladders” that seem to be channels of life-blood, thus situating the connection between heaven and earth within the body. Two of her pieces present a direct visual challenge to the idea of the Torah as an authoritative, male-authored text. In her painting *Tablets 2*, Sapir transforms the customary iconography of the two tablets of the covenant, with five commandments on each side, into a stylized heart, pulsating with vibrant bands of color and vivid with life—words are absent from this depiction—to create a Torah of the heart and the hand, rather than the mind (Figure 3). Her mixed-media ritual object *Torah Cover*, in contrast to the usual silver-embroidered velvet “garments” of the Torah scroll, takes the form of a corset whose gemstone-like belly conveys the idea of the Torah as pregnant with meaning (Figure 4). Sapir

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FIG 3

Bara Sapir, *Tablets 2*. Jerusalem. 2000.
24 × 36 in. (61 × 91 cm). Oil pastel and ink.
Collection of the artist. Used with permission.



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FIG 4

Bara Sapir, *Torah Cover*. Jerusalem. 2000. 23 × 17 × 17 in. (58 × 43 × 43 cm). Glass, mirror, wire, velvet, plaster of Paris, metallic cord. Collection of the artist. Used with permission.



is drawing here on a mystical understanding of the Torah as feminine, while suggesting how Jewish tradition constrains women.

Art as Spiritual Practice

Art in itself can be a spiritual practice for the artist—the very process of making the art can be a form of meditation—and the consumer, whether the art represents the experiences of prayer or meditation or invites the viewer to perform a ritual such as counting the Omer or daily prayer.

Elizheva Hurvich made her quilted *Omer Calendar* during the counting of the Omer in 2000 (Figure 5). According to Leviticus 23:15, Jews are to count the forty-nine days between reaping the first sheaf of the barley harvest and bringing it as an offering to the Temple, a process that begins during Passover and continues to the holiday of Shavuot.¹⁹ It thus marks the transition between the Exodus of the Israelite slaves from Egypt to the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, traditionally associated with Shavuot. On each day, one

FIG 5

Elizheva Hurvich, *Omer Calendar*. Berkeley, California, 2000. 28 × 32 in. approx. (71 × 81 cm). Upholstery fabric, cotton embroidery thread, beads. Collection of Sally Gottesman. Used with permission of the artist. Photographer: Benjamin Tiven.



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recites the blessing for the counting, and then counts the day: for example, “Today is the ninth day, making one week and two days of the Omer.” In the medieval period, the counting acquired mystical significance. Because it was considered important not to miss a day’s counting, calendars for keeping track of the days were created. While some were simple booklets or scrolls, others were elaborately illustrated.

Hurvich has made several Omer calendars, including one with the punning title *O Mère*, (Oh, Mother).²⁰ “I really love counting the Omer. . . I love the challenge of remembering each day,” Hurvich stated (2003). Rather than count on the basis of a calendar created in advance, as is the usual practice, Hurvich, inspired by the repetitive, meditative, and modular character of the quilt, used the process of counting to create the “calendar,” as she explains:

This *Omer Calendar* was created in the Jewish year 5760 (2000), during the seven-week counting period between Passover and Shavuot. On one side, seven rows of seven patchwork squares represent the forty-nine days which bridge the two holidays. . . On the other side, embroidered in Hebrew, is the blessing one recites every night to fulfill the commandment of counting for these seven weeks. . . (Leviticus 23:15, which reads: “You are to count from the day after the day of rest [Passover] from the day you brought the Omer-waving offering until you’ve counted seven complete weeks. On the day after the seventh week, you will count fifty days. . .”)²¹

The calendar invites the viewer into the practice of counting the Omer and meditating on the meaning of each day: “Each square can serve as a visual meditation for the day.” Yet the Omer meditation suggested by Hurvich also undermines the usual understanding of the period of the Omer as a straightforward progression from Passover to Shavuot:

This piece is made out of patchwork fabric. It can be read from the left to right, or reverse. Its way of telling time is no[t] a tradition[al], linear, numerical reading. Like the tradition of “women’s” arts, which speak in the tastes of food, in cookbooks, quilts, children’s clothes and costumes, in a day-to-day life, this piece is soft, with uncertain “boundaries,” as the embroideries move from square to square, without much regard for the grid format.

Although some formal features of this work resemble other Omer calendars, which may also take the form of seven-by-seven squares, Hurvich suggests a different vision of counting of the Omer: a “women’s Omer.” The handmade quality of the piece is one of its most striking features; the viewer can picture the hand stitching the fabric. Hurvich’s palette is feminine, with soft blues and purples; her medium is soft fabric. Typical of other Jewish Renewal artists’ work, she breaches the boundaries of the squares. In these ways, she emphasizes the quotidian nature of women’s lives and the ways in which women’s art is embedded in life’s routines.

Like the quiltmakers, for whom the repetitive nature of their artistic process can be a spiritual experience in its own right, Stephen Shaffer characterizes the weaving of tallitot as “meditative” (in contrast with setting up the loom): “My tallit—every fiber has passed through my fingers . . . Weaving tallitot is much different than weaving bolts of cloth or scarves. I put a lot more intention into it. I daven at the loom before weaving, and I say tehillim [psalms] for it . . . to keep that connection flowing. Art and spirituality flow together.” Indeed, a brochure that Shaffer distributed at the 2005 Kallah pictures him seated at his loom, a kippah on his head, intimating the similarity between weaving and prayer. “I just feel really blessed,” he says, “being able to weave tallitot, bringing my vocation and my avocation together. Being able to work with spirit, and actually make a living at it, is a real blessing. It keeps me focused on spirituality every day through my work.”

Shaffer fashions his tallitot in accordance with his understanding of the color symbolism of Kabbalah, which he learned about from *Meditation and Kabbalah* by Aryeh Kaplan (1982: 179–182).²² Because Kaplan names only the colors, without specifying shades, Shaffer finds room for artistic creativity within the constraints of his medium (Figure 6). Malchut, the tenth sefirah, is associated with the color blue, but as Shaffer explains, “In the blue or the green, there are probably twenty or thirty different shades. What I’ve loved about weaving is making the color and the texture. I’ll take all the blue yarns and put them in a group. It doesn’t say anything [in Kaplan] about shades of blue, so I take artistic

FIG 6

Stephen Shaffer, tallit: *Binah–Understanding*, 40 × 72 in. (101 × 183 cm). Woven blend of cotton, silk and rayon. This image appears on Shaffer's website (www.geocities.com/peasantweaver) along with the following description: "Completely good, sweet and holy, *Binah* represents the aspect of God that can take the undifferentiated seed, hold it in the womb as it gestates, and create a fully developed child. It surrounds, nurtures and creates. It helps us understand our basic essence and the laws of creation. *Binah* helps you gaze at the wholeness of reality and intuit its details and particulars. It connects and allows disparate parts to emerge as an integrated whole. It is both beyond time and space and yet allows us to touch a hint of God's universe. You can embody these qualities while wearing the green tallit of *Binah*." Used with permission of the artist.



liberty." The spiritual experience of weaving prayer shawls is intensified by keeping in mind the connection between the color and its mystical meaning as he works: "I'm aware that I'm weaving Gevurah [the fifth sefirah, associated with the color red], for example." When he is in production for a large gift-shop order, Shaffer ordinarily weaves five tallitot of a particular color at a time. "It takes a day to put the loom together whether you're making one or five." Each tallit takes him about two days, when all of the labor—ordering materials, marketing, weaving, and finishing—is considered.

Whether or not the process of making the work is a spiritual experience in its own right, the spirituality of the work may reside primarily in conveying the experience of meditative prayer. In many of Jackie Olenick's paintings, the viewer has the feeling of floating above the plane of the picture, looking down on an expanse of hills and valleys; a biblical verse is embedded in the landscape. In *Come My Beloved to the Field*, the verse (Song of Songs 7:12) draws the viewer into the picture, suggesting a journey (Figure 7). A similar use of text is found in the more abstract challah cover by Anita Rabinoff-Goldman, in which the words "Shabbat Shalom" (Sabbath of Peace) appear to float across a stylized sea, suggesting the journey from the weekday world to the peace of the Sabbath on the farther shore (Figure 8).

In other paintings by Olenick, the figures themselves float through the heavens. *Rosh Hodesh Women Celebrate at*

FIG 7

Jackie Olenick, *Come, My Beloved, to the Field*. Boca Raton, FL. 2006. 30 × 40 in. (76 × 101 cm). Acrylic. Collection of the artist. Used with permission. On her website, Olenick explains that this painting is also available in a "limited edition fine art giclée print . . . This painting sets the mood for romance, connection to the Holy and to love . . . It is an illumination of the enduring words from Song of Songs which remind us of our connection to the Holy One every minute of our lives." The image is also available in smaller formats, which can be customized for lifecycle events.



FIG 8

Anita Rabinoff-Goldman, challah cover: *The Sea and Sky*. Feura Bush, NY. 2005. 16 × 20 in. approx. (40 × 50 cm). Silk, rayon, metallic thread. Used with permission of the artist. On her website (www.pomegranatejudaica.com) Rabinoff-Goldman explains: "The color of the Mediterranean sea and the bluest skies come together in this challah cover. It is constructed of beautiful fabrics including hand-dyed silk noil and hand-painted silk organza embellished with rayon and metallic thread. The words "Shabbat Shalom" are imprinted in Hebrew. Pomegranate Judaica has a selection of *Sea and Sky* challah covers. Each cover's design varies slightly."

the New Moon grows out of the relatively recent practice of Jewish women gathering at the New Moon (Rosh Hodesh in Hebrew) for song, prayer, study, storytelling, and celebration²³ (Figure 9). Rosh Hodesh groups are understood as reclaiming an ancient connection between Jewish women and the phases of the moon. In this painting, three female figures



FIG 9

Jackie Olenick, *Rosh Chodesh Women Celebrate at the New Moon*. Boca Raton, FL. 2005. 20 × 24 in. (50 × 61 cm). Acrylic. Private collection. Used with permission of the artist.

float among the clouds. Celestial blues and purple, and the crescent moon illuminating the night sky, suggest a numinous beyond, a space of spiritual journeying. The woman at the center is playing a lyre, while the other two figures drift languorously beyond the boundaries of the picture in a space without time or gravity, a dream space, a space of memory and spiritual imagination. Are these the heavenly sisters of the Rosh Hodesh group members? Or are the group members themselves transformed by their gathering into celestial beings? Icons of music—hands holding musical instruments, the lyre, flute, and tambourine—are prominent. Has the singing and chanting of the Rosh Hodesh women brought them to a meditative state? Whatever the answer, the picture suggests the transformative power of women’s prayer and ritual.

While Hurvich’s *Omer Calendar* and Olenick’s paintings invite the viewer to contemplate and meditate, the tallitot made by Rabinoff-Goldman and Shaffer are to be used in prayer, to be handled and worn. According to Rabinoff-Goldman’s website, Pomegranate Judaica, “Wearing a tallit allows us to establish a sacred space in which to pray” (Figure 10). She describes the work of creating a piece of Judaic art as transcendent, going beyond the simple act of sewing something functional and beautiful: “I use fabrics as a painter would use color to create unique pieces designed to enhance your spiritual experience”;²⁴ that is, her tallit is an example of *hiddur mitzvah*. While Rabinoff-Goldman has two lines of ready-to-wear tallitot, she also works with customers to make custom tallitot. “The creation of a custom tallit can reflect a person’s favorite Torah portion or Hebrew quote. A color or motif can also be the source of design inspiration. Pomegranate Judaica will work with you to create a tallit that is personal and significant.” This suggests a view of prayer that is attuned to individual meaning and aesthetics, rather than governed, like the practice of traditional Jewish prayer, by ritual obligation, and by the dictates of the community.

Rabinoff-Goldman’s tallitot are seductively beautiful; truly wearable art. She reworks the tallit form, preserving the *atarah* (literally, diadem)—the decorative border of the tallit, worn at the neck—and emphasizes the corners with decorative elements, often preserving the traditional ornament of stripes as well. Like Hurvich and Olenick, Rabinoff-Goldman favors celestial blues and purples, as well as earth tones. As with other Jewish Renewal artists, the natural world is her home, in color and iconography, although her forms are less organic and more geometric. The softness is in the fabric, rather than the design. While they might strike some observers as couture rather than prayer garb, we may ask if the wearers perceive her tallitot as fashion items, ritual items, or both, or subsume the distinction in the category of *hiddur mitzvah*.

Shaffer’s tallitot are more like simple shawls with *tsitsit* (ritual fringes), but they invite the worshiper to a very particular sort of prayer. In his brochure, Shaffer writes, “I use a blend of cotton, silk and rayon to achieve a soft, flowing and embracing curtain between the inner world of prayer and the



FIG 10
Anita Rabinoff-Goldman, tallit: *Jewe/s*. Feura Bush, NY. 2004. 36 × 72 in. (91 × 182 cm). Raw silk base with silk appliqué. Used with permission of the artist.

world surrounding the individual . . . Let the outside world slip away as you enter the private inner world of prayer” (n.d.). When he finishes each tallit, Shaffer performs a ritual in which he consecrates the use of the prayer shawl to its new owner, donning it as a sacred garment in the traditional way for the first time:

After a tallis [an alternative pronunciation of tallit] is all finished, I do the berakhah [blessing] on tsitsit, wrap myself in the tallis, do a Shema [the central Jewish declaration of faith], and if people [who ordered a tallit in a particular color] have asked me for a special prayer, I do it at that time. Sometimes people ask me, when I’m putting it together, to do special prayers for them, such as, “Can you bless my tallis so I can find my bashert [predestined mate]? Sometimes people ask for health. If it’s a generic tallis, not for a specific person, after the Shema, I just pray that whoever prays in that tallis, their prayers will reach Hashem [God]. I don’t make any claims to be a tsaddik [righteous or holy man] or anything, but if I say these prayers and it happens, it’s Hashem who made it happen. I don’t take any credit.

When Shaffer sells tallitot to customers in person, he tells them about the Kabbalistic meanings of the colors he uses but, he explains, “I’m careful to say that the colors are just for meditation purposes. They’re not emanations . . .” Nonetheless, his brochure stresses that each tallit is woven with intention and prayer, “infusing [it] with the quality and essence of its sefirah.” The explanations on his website of the symbols and qualities associated with each sefirah invite the wearer who dons these garments to meditate on or embody these qualities in some fashion.

While this essay has examined Jewish Renewal’s artistic mode of engagement with Jewish spirituality primarily through the work of artists, an artistic sensibility pervades Renewal even among those members who are not professional artists. In the words of Susan Saxe:

The beauty of the whole thing is that artists love us and we love artists. In some ways we ARE ALL artists. It constantly amazes me how many of us who make our livings at something else also write or sing or dance or play or knit or sew or paint or do calligraphy or ceramics . . . It’s just so US. Just look at how many people [at the Kallah] turn out for our various choirs or participate in the community arts project. (2006a)

The people who are attracted to ALEPH are precisely those for whom the artistic approach to the spiritual resonates. Where some contemporary Jews, faced with a biblical passage describing the vestments of the ancient High Priest (Exodus 39) might wearily note the irrelevance of the passage to contemporary Jewish life, members of a Jewish Renewal congregation visualized the artistry of the priestly garments, “embroidered in blue, crimson, and purple yarns,” imagining what it would be like to don such wonderful robes.

Visual imagination is, as we have seen, Jewish Renewal’s way of engaging Judaism. Imagining the Torah, creating

midrash, Jewish Renewal artists make paintings, embroider calendars, and weave magnificent vestments. True to the neo-Hasidic vision, Jewish Renewal art emphasizes intense inner spiritual experience, and makes use of Jewish rabbinic and mystical resources in the service of living and embodied tradition. Much of the artwork is deeply feminist, transforming aspects of Jewish tradition seen as patriarchal, and opening new paths for women's spiritual engagement.

If, echoing Shandler's words quoted at the outset of the essay, we describe Renewal's engagement with Judaism as "limited and fragmentary," it is not unlike most forms of contemporary Jewish life, all of which are responses to the ruptures of modernity and, most devastatingly, of the Holocaust. However, the artistic mode of Judaism created by Renewal Jews is more "aestheticized and charged with affect" than most. Its "invitation to improvisational play" does not necessarily stand in contrast to serious engagement. Rather, learning takes place in the artistic mode, a form of "deep play" (Geertz 1973) that is central to religious practice. Through art, Renewal Jews practice play.

notes and references

¹ This essay is part of a larger project—an ethnographic study of ALEPH. I am grateful to the organizers of the conference on Material Jews, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler, for the invitation to deliver the original version of this essay, and to both of them for later conversations about Renewal art. My appreciation also goes to the members of the Lehigh Valley Feminist Research Group and the Women's Studies Faculty Forum of Lehigh University for helpful comments on presentations of this material. Finally, as always, my thanks go to the members of ALEPH, especially to the artists I interviewed, and to Susan Saxe, Chief Operating Officer of ALEPH, for taking the time to share their insights and art with me.

² See, for example, Michaelson (2006), who asks whether religion is supposed to "educate

intellectually or inspire emotionally, rein in our unruly passions or tap into them for the sake of transformation."

³ For more discussion of ALEPH, see Weissler 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, and Weissler 2005. Only a few scholarly articles about Renewal have been published; see especially Magid 2004 and Magid 2005, as well as Roper 2003 and Sautter 2002. For a discussion of gender questions in particular, see Friedman 2006 and Goldberg 2002.

⁴ Hasidism is a Jewish religious revival movement that emerged in the Ukraine and Poland in the eighteenth century and continues today among communities in North America, Western Europe, Israel, and Australia.

⁵ On rituals, see, e.g., Eller 1993, 112–114; Wuthnow 2003, Wuthnow 2006, Salomonson

2002. See also Cameron 1992, one of many works for artists making a connection between art and spirituality.

⁶ E.g., “I have repeatedly urged you about your own daily *davvenen* . . . and [Torah study]” (Schachter-Shalomi 2004). Schachter-Shalomi also issued an experimental edition of *A Weekday Siddur in Translation for Praying in the Vernacular* in 2003, in order to make daily prayer more meaningful to those members of ALEPH who do not have a good grasp of the Hebrew liturgy.

⁷ Her views as an educator are consistent with what we will discover of her artistic work. In the Kehilla school, she endeavors to stave off the petrification of Renewal into a new orthodoxy, by educating the students to improvise. “I think the death of Jewish Renewal will be if we . . . take as sacrosanct [what we have already invented]” (Hurvich 2003).

⁸ This and the following citations are from Olenick 2006.

⁹ Bezalel is named in Exodus 31: 1–11 as “endowed [by God] with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft,” and as the supervising craftsman for the construction of the portable sanctuary, the sacred center of the life of the Israelites in the desert.

¹⁰ This and all following quotations and information are from Rabinoff-Goldman 2006 and from her website, www.pomegranatejudaica.com.

¹¹ Except as noted, all the material in this section comes from Shaffer 2006a and Shaffer 2006b.

¹² According to Shaffer (n.d.), distributed at the 2005 Kallah, he creates tallitot in the colors associated with six of the ten sefirot: Binah (green), Chesed (white with silver), Gevurah (red), Tiferet (purple), Yesod (orange), and Malkhut (blue). The brochure contains pictures of Shaffer and three of his tallitot, an explanation of his approach to weaving, and a price list.

¹³ All information in this section is from Sapir 2006 and from Sapir’s website, www.barasapir.com.

¹⁴ Although ALEPH was founded by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, there is some crossover with the followers of Shlomo Carlebach. Carlebach’s disciples, however, are usually Orthodox in their observance, unlike members of the Renewal movement, who are more eclectic in their Jewish practice.

¹⁵ This was an audience response to Weissler 2003a.

¹⁶ See, e.g., http://dmoz.org/Society/Religion_and_Spirituality/New_Age/Shopping/Art/.

¹⁷ For examples of Olenick’s work, see her [website www.cybershuk.com](http://www.cybershuk.com).

¹⁸ For examples of Sapir’s work, see her [website www.barasapir.com](http://www.barasapir.com).

¹⁹ There is some ambiguity in the biblical text concerning the date of the bringing of the Omer offering, but since rabbinic times the date has been fixed on the second day of Passover.

²⁰ Another calendar was created by a women’s group, of which Hurvich was a member while living in Philadelphia, as a joint project during the counting of the Omer; it is now in the collection of the National Museum of American Jewish History.

²¹ This and following citations are from www.elizheva.com, accessed November 28, 2006. The translation of Lev. 23:15–16 is Hurvich’s own. The verse is usually rendered: “And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering—the day after the Sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days . . .” (Jewish Publication Society Translation; the “Sabbath” is traditionally understood in this verse to refer to the first day of Passover.)

²² Kaplan (1982) contains translated excerpts from Chapter 10, The Gate of Colors, of the sixteenth-century kabbalist Moses Cordovero’s *Pardes Rimonim* (1962: 59a–61b).

²³ The formation of Rosh Hodesh groups was sparked by Agus

- (1976). Such groups have become quite widespread; see also Berrin (1996) and Tanenbaum et al. (2000).
- ²⁴ All quotes in this paragraph are from Rabinoff-Goldman's website, www.pomegranatejudaica.com, accessed January 15, 2007.
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