

2 *The Creation and the Creator*

The desire to express the vitality of the divinity and to represent its power is common to all religions. It is through plastic art that this desire may be realized, by creating a tangible and spiritual bond with the divine power. This bond satisfies man's deep-seated need to reach out to that which is remote, cosmic, inscrutable and eternal.

The sculpted or painted representations of the deity, to be found in the temples and centers of ritual observance of most religions, are an expression of this need.

Jewish art is marked by an unremitting struggle between the tendency to express religious belief by visual means and the wariness of going against the grain of monotheism. An express ban on creating images, paintings and masks appears in the Bible several times.

Down through the ages, Jewish halakhic scholars have tried to set clear boundaries on what the plastic arts may or may not represent. The attitude of each generation towards reality is what determined the extent to which this ban was applied. It was the struggle between the desire to represent the vitality of the divinity, on the one hand, and the fear of idolatry, on the other, that ultimately led to the creation of symbols.

The Jewish artist turned to the symbol — simple in shape yet rich in allusions and hidden meanings — which would



encourage the viewer to conjure up, by association, ideas which could not be fully realized in a figurative way. Moses Cordovero, one of the leading Kabbalists in sixteenth-century Safed, referred to the ability of the symbolic representation to remain true to its monotheistic origins. He stressed the absolute abstraction of his religious outlook: “Its oneness does not lie in words or in speech but in thought and contemplation, so as not to set limits through language on that which cannot be limited nor to delineate that which cannot be delineated.”¹ Jewish visual symbols were not unlike Jewish mysticism as a whole in their apprehensive progress along the thin border between underscoring the divine presence and lapsing into myths which would jeopardize the monotheistic faith. Both the mysticism and the symbols emanated from the same approach — suggestive yet painstakingly cautious.

Generally speaking, the tendency of Jewish art is to focus on details capable of symbolizing the Creation, as proof of the power and might of the Creator. This basic approach drew its inspiration from the Bible. Psalms (104: 16-21) revels over the creation of the world and the divine order that prevails: the heavens, the waters, the land, the plants. They are interdependent and are all subject to the divine will.

“The trees of the Lord are full of sap;
The cedars of Lebanon, which he has planted.
Where the birds make their nests;
As for the stork, the fir-trees are its house.
The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats;
And the rocks for the conies.
He appointed the moon for seasons;
The sun knows its going down.
You make darkness and it is night
Wherein all the beasts of the forest creep forth.

The young lions roar after their prey;
And seek their meat from God.’’²

Man’s awe and admiration towards God’s creatures reinforce his faith in the spirit and doings of the Creator. The Psalmist therefore goes on to say: “O Lord! How manifold are Your Works! In wisdom have You made them all: the earth is full of Your riches.’’²

This attitude was reflected in Jewish thinking through the ages and influenced many works of art, both directly and indirectly. The present chapter examines such motifs as the zodiac, the Tree of Life, various animals, the conch, the crown and the letters of the Hebrew alphabet — representing the marvel of Creation and serving as a reminder of the Creator’s omnipotence and his presence on earth. At the same time they also served as a reminder of the neverending yearning for the Temple and Jerusalem, so that their universal symbolism was applied to the concepts of exile and redemption in Jewish tradition.

The Zodiac

Pictorial representations of the zodiac appear on the mosaic floors of fourth to sixth century synagogues in Palestine.

Despite the stylistic differences among them, all of these
pl. 7 zodiacs are modeled on the identical geometric pattern and
pl. 9 contain similar figurative details. The pattern includes the twelve zodiacal signs and their names. Helios, the sun-god, appears in the inner and central circles. All of the circles are enclosed by a square, and each of its corners presents one of the seasons in the form of a woman surrounded by the agricultural produce typifying that particular season. These
pl. 12 depictions are clearly identifiable in the ancient synagogues
pl. 8, pl. 9 in Palestine: at Hammath near Tiberias, Bet Alpha, Husifah and Na’aran. A similar geometric design, also based on
pl. 2 circles and squares, appears on the mosaic floor of the

pl. 3 synagogue at Japhia near Nazareth but does not include the figurative details.

It seems very surprising to find the zodiac, and especially the sun-god and his chariot, in the main sanctuary of the synagogue. After all, the zodiac is an age-old formal motif derived from the ancient Chaldean civilization. The astronomers of old described it as a heavenly circle representing the motion of the sun around the earth. In a sense, the zodiac was seen as a mathematical structure portraying the activity of the heavenly bodies. Just as the heavens, sun and moon were idolized in pagan civilizations, the zodiacal signs also became the object of idolatrous adulation.

pl. 1 Jewish philosophy has always been ambivalent towards stars and zodiacal signs. In the Bible two different approaches are mentioned. One regards the stars and planets as an object of idol worship and denounces “them also that burned incense unto Baal, to the sun and to the moon and to the planets and to all the hosts of heaven.”³ The other approach includes the heavenly bodies and the stars among the marvels of Creation and praises the greatness of the Creator:

“Praise the Lord,
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
Praise him in the heights.
Praise him, all his angels;
Praise him, all his hosts.
Praise him, sun and moon;
Praise him, all stars of light.
Praise him heavens of heavens
And waters that are above the heavens.
Let him praise the name of the Lord;
For he commanded and they were created.”⁴

During the period when the mosaic floors were being

designed, the influence of pagan religions was on the decline. Thus, the graphic design of the zodiac containing the seasons, stars, sun and moon can be taken as representing the planets, the wonders of the annual cycle and the harmony of the cosmos.

Nevertheless, awe of the cosmic bodies and a tendency to regard them as manifestations of the divine penetrated into Jewish circles as well. While the spiritual leaders managed to prevent any actual deviation from the normative religion, this awe of the cosmic had its effect on individuals and groups within the people. One example of this is the magical work *Sefer ha-Razim* (*The Book of Secrets*), attributed to the Talmudic period, alluding to the adulation of heavenly bodies. The writer addresses the “Great Angel Called the Sun” and says, “I worship You, Helios, who rises in the East. Good angel forever faithful, loyal leader, who causes the magnificent wheel to turn. You have fixed the sacred order (of the stars). Master of the poles, brilliant leader, king of the heavenly order.”⁵

The Talmudic sages, apparently aware of the influence of prominent symbols in neighboring cultures, emphasized that, “He who sees the sun in its season, the moon in its fullness, the stars in their orbit, the planets in their fixed order, will say, ‘Blessed be the Creator of the universe’.”⁶

The sages of old had no intention of belittling the greatness and power of the sun, moon, stars or signs. They merely wished to leave no doubt about the supremacy of the one God, as evidenced by the cosmic orders. It was this attitude that made it possible to include the zodiac as a central decoration in the synagogue. Not only didn't the zodiac within the synagogue run counter to the will of the normative religious leadership; it actually served the purposes of that leadership.

The descriptions of the zodiac in Jewish art then stress the

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pl. 9

5. *Sefer ha-Razim* (ed. M. Margalioth), Jerusalem, 1967, p. 12-13

6. *Yalkut Shimoni*, Leviticus 23

wholeness of the system and show a tendency towards abstraction. The number twelve runs through the compositional organization of all the mosaics, representing the zodiacal signs, the months of the year and the hours of the day or night. Other associations linked with the zodiac in the context of Jewish philosophy are covered in the chapter dealing with the religious-national implications of this motif.

The inclusion of zodiacs in the synagogue floor mosaics apparently took into account the prominence of astrological beliefs in those days and exploited certain popular artistic motifs. In Jewish art, however, these motifs were subjugated to the overall conception in which the presence and activity of the Almighty is symbolized in abstract indirect terms. The very fact that the motifs were situated on the floor, moreover, was a means of diminishing their sanctity and preventing the development of any cult which worships God's creations instead of God himself.

Medieval Jewish literature included many different portrayals of the planets and the signs. They were likened in turn to the righteous men, the tribes of Israel, the Patriarchs and the ceremonial objects in the Temple. In Kabbalistic mysticism, they symbolized the forces which mediate between abstract Divinity, on the one hand, and the world — and man — on the other. One approach widely held in the Middle Ages linked the heavenly bodies and the temporal cyclicity to the divine concern for man's moral behavior. It was this link that was represented in the popular work of the thirteenth-century Spanish poet and Kabbalist, Isaac ben Sahula:

22 “O great almighty God, today I have fathomed Your awful teaching, Your words and Your prophetic wisdom, for the wheels turn at the will of the Almighty and the stars have no will of their own to do good or evil. Their motion is filled with purpose and their seasons are set, to be as that simple thing that has shared in the secret of the divine... For

all men must revere Your magnificent deeds, and fear You, almighty God.”⁷

Pictures of zodiacal signs were common in medieval illuminated manuscripts, whether as individual signs ornamenting the pages on which the prayers for rain appeared or as a calendar connecting the names of the signs with the months and holidays in a single circle. In eighteenth-century Italy, this motif was widely used as a decoration for marriage contracts. The geometrical design of the zodiac — with the names of the signs and the four corners symbolizing the four winds and the four seasons — also appeared frequently in Kabbalistic scrolls of invocation which were in popular use in the Jewish communities of Europe and the Moslem countries. This design sometimes appeared alongside the Tree of *Sefirot*,⁸ the graphic-symbolic representation of the Kabbalists’ way of regarding the world.

It was in southeastern Poland of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, however, that the zodiac was discovered anew as a central and prevalent motif — on the painted ceilings of the wooden synagogues.

More than a thousand years elapsed between the zodiacs found on the mosaic floors of the ancient synagogues in Palestine and those of Poland. Nonetheless they share a common factor, namely, the desire to draw inspiration from the divine power to express the perfection of Creation. “Lift up your eyes and see who created all this, for the greatness of the doings prove the greatness of the doer.”⁹ This is the message in *Kenaf Renanim*, a Jewish homily that was widespread in nineteenth century Poland. The zodiac portrayed on the ceiling of the synagogue in Hodorov was

7. Ben Sahula, *Meshal Kadmoni*, 77, Tel-Aviv, 1953

8. Hebrew Kabbalistic term for the ten stages of emanations forming the realm of God’s manifestation in his various attributes.

23 9. Lurie, Hanoch Sondel, *Kenaf Renanim*, Warsaw 1889 (Prologue to “Perek Shirah”)

pl. 60 wreathed in many motifs from the worlds of flora and fauna, which celebrate the wondrous variety of the Creation. In the center of the zodiacal signs is an eagle, associated with heights and reminiscent of the sun-god depictions in the ancient mosaics.

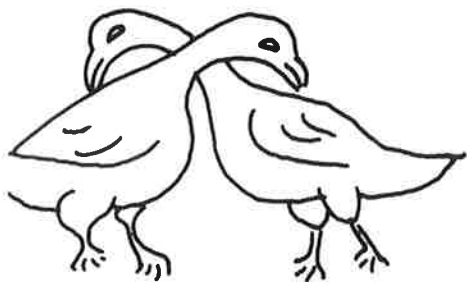
pl. 66 The Jewish communities were victims of recurrent persecutions and pogroms during the period when the Polish wooden synagogues were being built and decorated with richly symbolical motifs. Their self-confidence and security had been undermined and many of them fell under the sway of messianic leanings. The Kabbalah gained ground, a mystical mood permeated Polish and Eastern European Jewry and folk beliefs about angelic creatures linking God and Creation also gained currency. The power of the symbols was on the rise.

Thus, while careful to refrain from any hint of idolatry or any assimilation of folk traditions, the paintings did contain allusions to the Creator, the presence of the Creator, Divine Providence and the hope of redemption.

Within this system of symbols, the zodiac stirred associations with the heavenly hosts, the flawlessness of Creation as a reflection of the Creator, the angels wavering between the heavenly and the earthly, the Divine Providence, the righteous ones, the tribes of Israel and finally, the Temple which will be dealt with more thoroughly in the Exile and Redemption chapter.

Animals

Ever since the beginnings of human civilization, the animal world has been an important subject in art. Animals were painted on prehistoric caves and on tree-barks in the habitats of remote tribes. They were included in the sculpture and painting of the Africans and in the art of ancient Asiatic and European civilizations. Some of the animals were portrayed in a realistic style representing man's impressions of nature. At other times, the depictions



were more allegorical or metaphorical. In many civilizations, animals' natural characteristics were regarded as supernatural and the artists would try to convey these as well, so that allegories, legends and visual descriptions of animals would relate their traits or shapes to such abstract and cosmic entities as the sun, the stars, the sky, fire, strength, patience, kingliness, stability and spirituality. The struggle among different creatures was taken to symbolize a struggle among conflicting powers, with the victory of one over the other providing a visual representation of the victory of human aspirations. Thus, for instance, the victory of a winged creature in its battle with a wingless one was associated with the victory of spirit over matter, of the transient over the stable. Motifs taken from the animal world have also symbolized the elements of the universe — earth, air and water — and their inclusion in a joint composition represented the harmony of creation.

pl. 72 Jewish art reveals universal elements in its visual representations of animals. Many of the descriptions show animals in pairs, an arrangement that was regarded as one of the basic elements of the universe since the symmetry is said to underline the balance of Creation. Pairs of lions, pl. 71 peacocks, deer or birds facing one another are very common pl. 81 in the decorations of synagogues, the holy ark, paper cuts and ceremonial objects. They appear in various positions, pl. 38 standing, reclining or leaping on either side of a *menorah* or pl. 101 gate, the Tree of Life, a crown or the Tablets. By contrast pl. 39 with the harmonious animal pairs, other animals are depicted in a state of struggle: the predator and its prey or a pl. 65 winged animal and a four-legged one.

The animal's position in the composition has a bearing on its symbolic meaning in art in general and in Jewish art in particular. The seventeenth-century Hodorov synagogue, for example, includes four paintings in which one animal is pl. 63 preying on another in each of the four arched corners of the pl. 64 ceiling. The location of these scenes in the lowest part of the ceiling arches is deliberate. They act as a symbolic contrast

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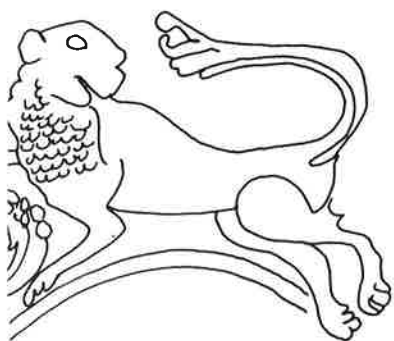
to the balance and spiritual elevation represented by the graphic shapes next to them; alongside the animals of prey is a lion in confrontation with a unicorn on the one side of the ceiling and a peaceful bear holding the Tree of Life on the other.

pl. 62

The confrontation of the lion and the unicorn is a complex and universal symbol. Many stories in Jewish sources, among others, describe them as two powerful forces, whose struggle creates tension but can be brought into line by a superhuman power. Jewish tradition in fact combines the shape of the unicorn (usually depicted in European art as a white horse with a long straight horn) and a wild ox (mentioned frequently in the Bible and Talmud as an allusion to the presence of a supernatural power). The combined lion-unicorn motif, then, represents the symbolism linking the earthly with the celestial and the ambivalent forces that tend, on the one hand, to erupt in a surge of powerful impulses and, on the other, to exercise restraint and, with divine inspiration, to create a harmonious balance.

Jewish literary works about animals — especially fables and allegories — were widespread in Europe in the Middle Ages. Among them were *Mishlei Shu'alim* by Berechiah ha-Nakdan and *Meshal ha-Kadmoni* by Isaac ben Sahula, both dating from the thirteenth century. The anonymous Hebrew tract *Perek Shirah* was especially popular and became the subject of many different commentaries and interpretations. This work contained hymnic sayings in praise of the Creator by His creatures. In the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, every sentence was supported by homiletic interpretations which were philosophical, allegorical and didactic in nature and were influenced by Kabbalistic mysticism. Each of the animals described in *Perek Shirah* shares in the cosmic adulation of God. Each form of animal life acquired a rich symbolism incorporating a moral lesson.

26 Jewish art absorbed the atmosphere and contents of these interpretations and it was in this spirit that many of the



animal decorations were made for synagogues and ceremonial objects. The Jewish artist was influenced by the Bible, the Talmud, the Aggadah, the Kabbalah, the Scriptural interpretation and the homilies, on the one hand, and by developments in Christian European art and Moslem civilization, on the other. When it came to adopting shapes and forms favored by the surrounding culture, however, Jewish artists were extremely cautious. One example of the conflict between faithfulness to a Jewish source and wariness of it because it had been tainted by Christian idolatrous influences was the motif of the *Merkavah* (the chariot which bears the Throne of God). “As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man and the face of a lion, on the right side; and they had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle.”¹⁰

Many Jewish homilies were devoted to these verses, among them the following, attributed to Rabbi Avin: “Four sorts of proud creatures have been created into the world: the proudest of creatures — man, the proudest of fowl — the eagle, the proudest of animals — the bull, the proudest of beasts — the lion, and all have assumed kingship and have been granted greatness and all have their rightful place under the Chariot of God Almighty.”¹¹ Yet, despite the symbolic importance of the *Merkavah*, it was rarely included in Jewish art in its entirety. The popularity of this motif in Christian art as a symbol of the four evangelists closest to Jesus deterred Jewish artists from using it, but the lion, the eagle and the bull did often appear as isolated motifs. The first two motifs were especially popular, stemming from the influence of early Middle Eastern civilizations.

The *LION* motif was common in the ancient Middle Eastern civilizations as a battling, fighting and attacking force. In the Bible it is portrayed as a power capable of destroying and punishing but also saving and protecting. Its inherent

10. Ezekiel 1:10

11. *Exodus Rabbah*, 5, 23-24

anger, burning furiously within, was presented alongside the composure and calm it generated once its hunger had been satisfied. The lion's tremendous, supernatural roar was referred to several times in the Bible and gave rise to descriptions and symbolic references that bordered on the divine: "The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?"¹² This is borne out by the fact that most lions in ancient Jewish art were shown guarding the holy ark or at the entrances to the chapel. Such scenes can be found in the sculpture of the ancient synagogues at Sardis (in Asia Minor), Chorazin and Bar'am (in Palestine) and in many mosaics dating from the early Byzantine period.

pl. 74
pl. 12

The writings of the Sages in which lions are cited as the basis for comparison in a moral lesson are moralistic in tone. They often draw an analogy between the lion and the righteous individual, who is the basis upon which the world exists.

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pl. 105
pl. 103

Many of the lions in medieval Jewish art are depicted leaping up on either side of the Tree of Life, next to the crown. During the last two centuries, they are primarily portrayed carrying the Tablets. This formal arrangement uses the lions as a multifaceted representation of the material reality of the Creation, of the Jewish people adhering to the Torah, and of the spirit and workings of the Creator. The lions are the link between the earthly elements and the infinite, celestial and metaphysical.

In a sense the *EAGLE* is a counterpart of the lion. Just as the lion is commonly regarded in folklore as the king of beasts, the eagle is regarded as the king of birds. In the Bible, an eagle often appears as an allegory to divine protection or as a symbol of heights and security.

In ancient synagogues, engravings of eagles were found over the doorposts at the entrance. A similar eagle motif had been popular in Middle Eastern pagan civilizations, where

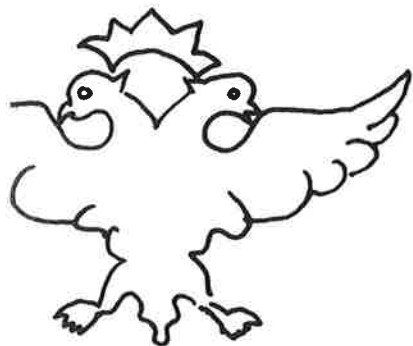
pl. 78
pl. 79

pl. 97 the eagle symbolized the sun and the sky. In recent centuries, Jewish artistic compositions depicted the eagle in a high position, with its wings spread as it towers over the other motifs.

pl. 103 The mystical symbolism of animal motifs, chiefly of the eagle, was especially pronounced on holy arks, Torah breastplates, painted ceilings, Hanukkah *menorahs* and other objects whose design had become increasingly intricate under the influence of the baroque style. The ceiling of the Hodorov synagogue showed the eagle in the center of the zodiac. The eagle, which for centuries had been associated with the sun, fire and sky, was incorporated here into the cosmic view of the zodiac.

pl. 66 This eagle is surrounded by a circle containing the following inscription: “As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings.”¹³ The verse hints to the divine activity embodied by the eagle as a symbol. The Hodorov eagle has two heads and a crown. This portrayal is common in European art and heraldry due to Byzantine and oriental influences. In many civilizations, the dualism represented by the eagle’s two-headedness stood for the spiritual ambivalence which strikes a balance between good and evil. In the Christian kingdoms it alluded to the duality of the throne: both royalty and divinity. In Jewish culture, the dual shape of the eagle was influenced by the idea of the dualism in Divine Providence, manifested by God’s grace and judgment. Divine Providence had been an important element of the eagle symbol in ancient tradition and was influenced in recent centuries by the concept of reward and punishment as functions of man’s behavior. The crown above the eagle’s heads hints not only to kingliness, Torah and the priesthood but also, to a leaning towards Infinity as an abstract value associated with divine sanctity.

In many works of Jewish art, the eagle is portrayed in the



- pl. 98 upper part of compositions which include other animals as well (such as birds, elephants, deer, storks and hares). It is a position that highlights the eagle's special status in the relationship between God and his creatures.
- pl. 85 Of the many animal symbols, it was the *ELEPHANT* as an
 pl. 73 artistic motif that evolved over the ages into the image of tranquility, forbearance, wisdom and, above all, endurance — enabling it to bear the burden of life with resignation. This image, symbolically conveyed by a tower and by knights engaged in battle, worked its way into Jewish art and became part of the system of symbols representing the rich variety of Creation.
- The symbols of Creation also include many other motifs such as the *STORK*, which the Bible notes for its migrations and its faithful adherence to exact times and seasons. The Sages identified it with the concept of grace. The *DEER* stands for tranquility and is associated with providence in
 pl. 70 the Kabbalah. Despite its restless character, the *BEAR* is usually depicted in Jewish art facing forward, with emphasis on its calm and static nature. These traits hint at the messianic symbolism attributed to the bear.
- This approach led to the inclusion of animal depictions in monumental works whose formal and stylistic conception was unique in its avoidance of depth, perspective and
 pl. 76, 77 isolated details. Instead, very often and in different periods, it led to the development of symbolic arrangements characterized by a “ruglike” integrity. These can be seen on
 pl. 74 many of the mosaic floors of fifth — sixth-century Palestinian synagogues, where a wide variety of animals appear among the tendrils of a vine and other motifs, and on the ceilings of Eastern European synagogues, where
 pl. 86, 89 symbolic motifs from the world of flora and fauna retain these ruglike arrangements.
- This basic approach, with its emphasis on integrity as an all-embracing and multifaceted symbolic expression, incorporating different animals of dissimilar character, also
 30 influenced the smaller movable works of Jewish art.



The Tree of Life

The tree was a widespread visual symbol in the ancient Mediterranean civilizations and in the Buddhist, Moslem, Christian and Jewish cultures as well. Because of its organic qualities, the tree was used to represent life, death and resurrection. Very often, it also stood for growth, physical and spiritual development and maternal attributes, manifested in its protectiveness, shade, shelter and nourishing fruit, its capacity for giving life and its tenacity. The tree is also reminiscent of the four seasons and of the lifecycle of man. On occasion, it tied in with the symbolism attributed to water, birds, the stork and the snake as well. The Tree of Life is a prime example of the synthesis between the universal symbolism ascribed to the tree and the specific influences of Jewish culture. In the Bible, the tree is one of the elements of Creation: "And the earth brought forth grass and herb yielding seed after its kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself after its kind: and God saw that it was good."¹⁴ A great many legends and homiletic interpretations allude to the special symbolism which Jewish tradition assigns to the Tree of Life, apart from whatever universal associations it evokes. The Tree is seen as a symbol of the Torah: "It (wisdom) is a Tree of Life to them that lay hold upon it."¹⁵ There have been many interpretations given to this verse, relating it to other scriptural descriptions of the tree. One view maintains that those who uphold the Torah also uphold the tree which gives life. Other scholars find reference to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, with its promise of eternal life. In the Kabbalah too, the Torah is likened to the Tree of Life. Both are conceived as self-contained and inaccessible. The idea of a Tree of Life and the way it was envisioned and described in sacred Jewish writings formed a basis for the development of this motif in Jewish, Christian and Moslem art. The frequent botanical motifs on the sides of

14. Genesis 1:12

15. Proverbs 3:18

pl. 4 sarcophagi and ossuaries in Palestine lead us to assume that the plastic depiction of the Tree of Life in Jewish art dates all the way back to the first century. The very appearance of the botanical motif on the sarcophagi and the particular positions chosen for it (with the tree sometimes being replaced by a sort of column) create a link between the symbolic quality of the tree and the mystical and cosmic connotations surrounding the concept of life and death. The tree, after all, is usually situated in the center of the sarcophagus, serving as both a separation and a link between two round forms. Its base touches the base of the sarcophagus while its top branches border on the upper edge.

pl. 74 In the synagogue decorations of the first centuries C.E., the depictions of trees representing the Tree of Life take on the form of a palm tree. This may in part be due to the influence of the verse, "The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree."¹⁶ The symbolic link between the tree and the righteous man is also found in the writings of the Sages: "Just as a date tree which has been uprooted cannot be replaced, so too it is with men of righteousness."¹⁷

pl. 92 The fifth-century synagogue of Hammam-Lif in northern Africa contains a particularly rich and picturesque example of the link between the palm tree and the symbols of the Garden of Eden. It is a mosaic which forms a very full and detailed depiction of the Creation. The mosaic comprises five parts and is framed on either side by a blend of twigs, animals and fruits, intermeshed in a ruglike fashion. In the center is an inscription flanked by two *menorahs*. The inscription itself forms the dividing line between two scenes which are of special interest in connection with the tree motif. The lower one contains two palm trees separated by two peacocks — usually regarded as the bird of Paradise. Although the mosaic has been partly destroyed, one can still discern above the inscription a circle, with its allusions of



16. Psalms 92:13

17. *Numbers Rabbah*, 3

cosmic imagery. Above this is a graphic shape which might be associated with the hand of God, and a large fish which may well be regarded as a leviathan, especially in light of its proximity to the head of a legendary bull (*Shor ha-Bar*) holding a flower in its mouth. The other parts of the legendary bull have been destroyed, but were undoubtedly connected with the legend in which the bull and the leviathan would be the food of righteous men in messianic times. There is no reason to doubt that the palm trees on this mosaic floor served as symbols of the Tree of Life and of the Tree of Knowledge. This description, with its emphasis on life on earth and its abundance, coupled with the mystical and messianic symbols, elevates the Tree of Life to the status of a manifold symbol, embracing present and future, earthly and heavenly, worldly and imaginary, and enhancing man's belief in the Creator of all worlds.

The symbolic quality of the Tree of Life gradually grew deeper and broader under the influence of Kabbalistic mysticism. The tree is among the central motifs in Kabbalistic symbolism. As the Tree of Life, it ties in with the cosmic portrayal of the Kabbalistic *Sefirot* and the symbolic role of the righteous man. The tree, described initially as planted by the Almighty, evolved in the Kabbalistic *Sefirot* into part of the image of God and a vehicle through which the Godly powers flow into Creation. "It is I who have planted this tree that all the world may delight in it, and with it I have spanned the All and therefrom do the souls rise up joyously."¹⁸

As a result of the expansion and growing abstraction of the symbolic meanings attributed to the tree, its artistic depiction grew less and less defined in shape. Thus, while the Tree of Life in ancient times had been represented by a palm-tree or vine or olive tree, as of the sixteenth century any form reminiscent of plant growth, organic unity and continuity was considered appropriate for symbolizing the

pl. 60

concepts associated with the Tree of Life. The colorful, flower-laden tree on the painted wooden ceilings of the Polish synagogues recalls the influences of Slavic folklore. Gilded, plantlike shapes on the holy arks in Italian synagogues were modeled on the convoluted forms of the Italian Baroque. In most cases, these symbolic trees were bound up with the shapes of columns and gateways. The Tree of Life also became a central motif in the paper cuts and gravestone reliefs. Quite often, especially in Eastern Europe, their shape was a somewhat metaphoric merging of plant and *menorah*. The freedom given in the choice of design for the Tree of Life allowed a wide variety of combinations, such as a tree combined with a *menorah* or with a running stream. Other combinations centered on a plant motif alongside images of an eagle, a crown, birds, or hands raised in benediction.

pl. 98, 99

pl. 23

The associations linking the Torah with the organic qualities of the tree were also reinforced: "For the Torah is called a Tree of Life. Just as a tree has its branches and its leaves and its bark and its core and its roots and each of these is called a tree and there is no setting them apart, so it is with the Torah. The Torah too has its inner parts and its outer part but all are Torah. All are the one tree and there is no setting them apart."¹⁹ In the Kabbalah, the unity of the Tree of Life symbolizes control over the Power of Judgment and attests to divine strength.

The proliferation of the Tree of Life motif in Jewish art, then, may be explained by the broad and multifaceted symbolism assigned to it by Jewish mystical thinking.

The Conch

Three motifs competed for the uppermost position in the decorative designs on many holy arks and ceremonial objects in Europe: the eagle with outspread wings, the conch which

19. *Sefer ha-Rimon*, 26. Based on G. Scholem: *Elements of the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, p. 49 (Hebrew)



widened from the base upwards and, from the late sixteenth century, the crown.

The conch was a very common motif in the art and architecture of the Hellenistic civilizations and was adopted by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Greek mythology, the conch is associated with the birth of the goddess of love, Aphrodite, from the waves of the sea. Its shape evokes an image of protectiveness and security. In pagan shrines, it had been common as a decorative motif in the upper sections of the stone niches containing statues of the gods. It was because of this position, then, that the conch came to be regarded as sacred.

Monotheistic cultures soon adopted the conch motif as well, having observed its use as an architectonic element. In Jewish art, it served as an abstract element with symbolic overtones of sanctity. In the synagogues of the Galilee in the first centuries C.E., the conch was incorporated into the embellishments on the facade facing Jerusalem. Large conches sculpted in basalt appear, for example, in the third-century synagogue at Chorazin, to the north of the Sea of Galilee.

Its position at the top of the niche which served as an ark (e.g., in the third-century Dura Europos synagogue in Asia Minor) stressed the spiritual meanings given to the conch in Jewish tradition. From this position, it served to protect the Torah and to bestow a feeling of security on behalf of the invisible almighty power.

In early Christian art, the conch appeared in the upper section of the niches used for figures of emperors or Christian saints — a direct continuation of the pagan Hellenistic art. Jewish art tread the narrow line between the desire to give visual form to the divine and the wariness of any physical, figurative descriptions. It incorporated the conch motif in central and sensitive parts of the synagogue, on ceremonial objects associated with the Torah (such as breastplates, Torah covers, curtains for the holy ark) and on articles designed for holiday use.

The conch, then, came to stand for protection, security and a link between the earthly-existential and the heavenly-mystical. Because of the many instances of conches on ancient sarcophagi, its shape also came to be associated with the passage from this world to the next. The myths which associate it with birth also caused it to be thematically bound to the concept of resurrection.

pl. 49

The Crown

While the word *crown* figures prominently in medieval Jewish literature, it was not before the late sixteenth century that it assumed an independent role as a symbol in Jewish art. The crown that has become a central motif in this art during recent centuries is similar in form to the crowns of the kings of Europe. It is extremely common on ceremonial objects related to the Torah scroll and is often portrayed as being borne by lions or hovering over them in the upper section of the embroidered curtains for the holy ark, or of the symbolic compositions on breastplates and holy arks in synagogues. The most common of all are the three-dimensional Torah crowns, usually made of precious metals, sometimes decorated with semi-precious and precious stones. Torah crowns of this type were used primarily in Central and Eastern Europe beginning in the seventeenth century.

pl. 103

pl. 43

pl. 106

pl. 107

The three-dimensional crown, designed to draw attention to the loftiness of the Torah and to crown it both physically and spiritually, includes a variety of formal designs of special symbolic significance, related to the values of the Torah itself. Many of these design compositions from the seventeenth century were influenced by the baroque style. Some of them are arranged in layers, with organic transitions from one shape to the next and strict attention to the harmonious integrity of the whole. The structures merge upwards into one another, giving the compositions a feeling of ascent from heavier elements near the base to lighter,



airier ones at the top. The most common of the many formal and symbolic motifs in these layers are the eagle, the lion, the zodiac and botanical motifs such as the Tree of Life. The composition sometimes ends at the top with a bird next to a stream of running water. The decorative composition on the three-dimensional crowns also includes additional crowns which divide the design into registers.

pl. 97
pl. 107
pl. 106

The use of these decorative designs is undoubtedly based on more than merely aesthetic considerations or the desire to glorify the Torah. The expression “crown of Torah, crown of priesthood and crown of royalty,” which sometimes appears alongside the visually portrayed crowns, hints at the deeper and broader symbolism of the crown motif. Rabbinic literature linked the crown to the Divine Presence. The verse, “When the crown arrives, all of the soldiers above shudder and roar like a lion,”²⁰ evokes associations of Godly power. In the Kabbalah, the crown stands for the first *Sefirah*. Scholars of the Kabbalah disagree on the meaning of this *Sefirah*. Some believe it headed the system of *Sefirot* and approached infinity. Others regard it as infinity itself, devoid of any element of activity. According to this view, the first *Sefirah* is the One, the Eternal, “which was, is and will be.” The system of mystical *Hitnozezuyot* (sparks of light) mentioned in the Kabbalah sees wisdom as coming from the crown.

From the sixteenth century, Kabbalistic literature has made extensive use of the Tree of *Sefirot*, symbolizing divine activity, as a graphic device. Graphic depictions of the Tree of *Sefirot* became one of the fundamental components of practical and popular Kabbalism. Likened to the Tree of the World and the Tree of Life, which generate the divine powers needed by Creation, the roots of the Tree are planted in the uppermost *Sefirah*, which is the crown. It appears then that the crown accrued heavy symbolism as a result of this status of proximity to the divine, to that which cannot be figuratively portrayed in monotheistic Judaism.

pl. 29

The diversity of its symbolic associations can be explained by ideas which were influenced by Jewish mysticism and by its attempts to come to terms with the complex relationship between God and His creations.

The Letters of the Hebrew Alphabet

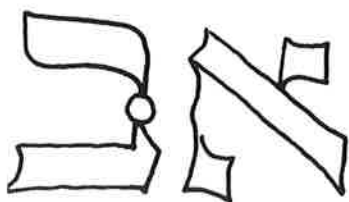
Jewish tradition has always held the letter and the printed word in high esteem. The work of the scribes was considered sacred. Copying a Torah scroll — or, for that matter, the writing of a single letter in the Torah — is the fulfillment of a divine commandment. The Hebrew scribe was admonished to take painstaking care in plying his trade; any deviation was regarded as detracting from the sacred integrity of the Torah. The apprehension and wariness in copying out the letters of the Torah reflect a reverence for the Torah, both as the existential core of Judaism and as a symbol which often took on cosmic dimension. This symbolism attached to the letters themselves. Different Scriptural interpretations and homilies attributed independent properties to the letters and stressed their role in creation. The Kabbalists even regarded the letters as a tool wielded by the Creator: “For when the Holy One, Blessed be He, resolved to create the world, the letters had not yet been given meaning. For two thousand years before He created the world He had looked at them and amused Himself with them, and when He decided to create the world, they all appeared before Him, starting with the last.”²¹

pl. 146, 147

This account from the *Zohar*, a major work of Jewish mysticism, goes on to describe how each of the letters appears before the Creator, asking Him to use it as the means of creating the universe. When all is said and done, the second letter, *bet*, is chosen. The opening word in Genesis is *Bereshit*, which begins with a *bet*; the letter *bet*

pl. 144

pl. 145



does, in fact, launch the act of Creation.

The special and symbolic status of the letters in Jewish culture affected their use in art. One passage refers to Bezalel, the first Jewish artist mentioned in the Torah: “Bezalel knew how to join together the letters that had been used to create Heaven and earth.”²² Jewish tradition holds that the shrine which Bezalel the artist was commanded to create was a cosmic symbol. According to the mystical school of thought in Judaism, it represents the microcosm. The view that the elements of the harmonious universe are based on the twenty-two Hebrew letters gained a following among Kabbalists during the Middle Ages. The letters came to be regarded as increasingly symbolic and were often shaped like the signs of the zodiac, the months or parts of the body.

Thus, the symbolism attributed to the Hebrew letters worked its way into Jewish art and influenced the way in which the letters were shaped and embellished, as well as their prominence in the different art forms. Two main styles, *Ashkenazi* and *Sephardi*, evolved in the design of the alphabetic characters. These are related to the style of the respective cultures around them and to the writing implement used — the stylus or the quill.

The illuminators of medieval Hebrew manuscripts embellished the letters, sometimes even incorporating animals or botanical motifs within them. The first words in the paragraph were often enlarged and ornamented. The practice of adding elements of flora and fauna to the Hebrew letters was a means of combining the description of God’s creatures and the letters which were instrumental in the act of creation. In Jewish art, this combination was manifested in the development of micrographics as well.

pl. 57

pl. 58

pl. 115

Micrography involved the use of shapes like cosmic circles, rosettes, lions and, later, human figures in miniature writing, making it possible to strike an organic merger

between the words and letters and their meanings, on the one hand, and the shapes and symbols, on the other. This type of craftsmanship, which gained ground during the Middle Ages, has survived to the present.