In My Opinion...  

Government-Sponsored Prejudice: a lethal contagion

In late 2019, a novel coronavirus jumped from an animal to a human being in Wuhan, China. China chose to mis- and dis-inform, setting off a global pandemic before gaining any control. The White House followed suit, but without gaining any control, having previously reduced the resources needed to manage a mass contagion. By mid-March, criticized for promoting chaos, confusion and quack medicine, the White House reportedly tried to pin its blunders on China, labeling the virus (and by association, the home-grown chaos), “Chinese.” Almost immediately, we learned that Chinese students had become targets of prejudice. More precisely, they had become targets of government-sponsored prejudice; a lethal contagion.

Jews are intimately acquainted with government-sponsored prejudice. Six million died from it in recent memory. More recently, government-sponsored Turkish TV announced that “Jews and Zionists” created COVID-19 as a biological weapon “to seize countries and neuter the world’s population.” Meanwhile, back home, our own government was blaming “the Chinese.” The indictment spread virally, not only on extremist platforms, but on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. According to CNN, by late March, Facebook had placed warnings on 40 million COVID-19 posts, many of them dangerous.

Government-sponsored prejudice can also deflect blame by manipulating minorities to blame each other. It’s relatively easy to tap the justified fear and frustration of any minority, especially if rightfully outraged by unfulfilled Civil Rights promises, by disproportionate death in healthcare crises, and by the inevitable conclusion that no one cares; that minority lives don’t matter. During the terrifying AIDS pandemic, for instance, a government spokesman broadcast to the black community that Jewish doctors were injecting AIDS into black babies. In any healthcare crisis, that sort of government-sponsored manipulation is all it takes to distract and divide us. It follows—if minorities don’t watch out—that growing fear and frustration will make it increasingly easy to turn us against each other, deflecting blame from those who really deserve it.

Clearly, inter-minority prejudice is a plague that heals none, and contaminates all. No community is absolutely innocent of prejudice, but most of us are better than that. Not all, perhaps. But most, yes.

Laboratories in 45 countries are now seeking a vaccine for COVID-19. But at home, or on campus, all we need do is reject government-sponsored prejudice, no matter what our political party, or who is targeted. With minimal effort, we can stand together, every color, creed, orientation and nationality, and in our shared humanity, rid the world of a lethal contagion.

Judith Neulander  
Editor, JDST eJournal
The Ira and Ruth Bressler Prize
To a student who has done outstanding work in the area of Jewish Studies.

**Hometown:** Medina, Ohio  
**Academic Interests:** I'm studying Art History, and I'm an intern at the Cleveland Museum of Art  
**Extracurricular activities:** I like to paint classical portraits, and collect plants

**Hometown:** Solon, Ohio  
**Academic Interests:** Cognitive Science, History, and Psychology  
**Extracurricular Activities:** On campus, I am a member of the Cognitive Science Student Organization and the Psychology Student Organization. Off campus, I volunteer with the Cuyahoga Valley National Park where I help clean up the walking trails.

The Eudese and Elmer Paull Prizes
To one or several undergraduate or graduate students who demonstrate an interest in Jewish Studies or Jewish contemporary life.

**Hometown:** San Jose, California  
**Academic Interests:** Biochemistry and Cognitive Science  
**Extracurricular Activities:** I currently serve as the VP of Outreach and Public Relations for the Cleveland Hillel Undergraduate Leadership Council and love stopping by between my classes to catch up with friends over a bagel! I am also a member of the Theta Beta Chapter of Delta Gamma and serve as the Director of New Members. In my free time, I love to cook, explore coffee shops in the Cleveland area, and spend time outdoors when the sun is out!

**Hometown:** Chicago, Illinois  
**Academic Interests:** Political Science, Philosophy, and History  
**Extracurricular Activities:** I am former Co-Chair of Outreach at Hillel Undergraduate Leadership Council (HULC) as well as Co-Founder, former Treasurer, and former Risk Manager of Case for Israel. I am also a Member At Large and student voice on the Hillel Board of Directors.

**Hometown:** Albany, NY  
**Academic Interests:** Major in Materials Science and Engineering; Minors in History, Geological Sciences  
**Extracurricular Activities:** I am the Executive VP & Secretary for Hillel, a TA for Chemistry of Materials, and the Director of PR for the Undergraduate Materials Society. I also play the tuba in the CWRU Pep Band where I am the Risk Manager and Spartan Marching Band where I was a Low Brass Section Leader this past fall.

**Hometown:** I am from Burlingame, California  
**Academic Interests:** I am a double major in Biology and Applied Mathematics specializing in biostatistics on the Pre-Med track. In the future, I want to be a pediatric surgeon.  
**Extracurricular Activities:** I am the community service chair on the board of Hillel and I am also a participant in a couple of community service organizations. I am a member of the Greek community on campus, as well as a player in the tennis club on the CWRU campus.
“Kinetic” art refers to art that moves through space, either in some of its parts, or as a whole. “Optical” art refers to art that plays with visual perception, allowing the eye to see a static image change, as the viewer’s focal point changes. Israeli artist, Yaacov Agam, is a leader in the field of modern kinetic and optical art. Born in 1928, he grew up in a household where his father, an Orthodox rabbi, initially discouraged his artistic pursuits. As a young artist his career might have been stopped by the Commandment against figurative imaging. But Agam found resolution in the Kabbalah, the folios of Jewish mysticism that encourage vision and sensation beyond the fixed experience of the mundane world. He embraced an entirely non-figurative form of transcendent art that could not be fixed in space, or time. His reference to mystical dimensions in his work; to time as a fourth dimension, and to an integrating fifth dimension, have drawn some accusations of grandiose, pseudo-intellectual self-promotion. But this may be a pointless digression from Agam’s real contribution to modern art: an aesthetic of ever-changing visual dimensions, through a distinctly Jewish lens.

Agam studied at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem. In 1949 he traveled to Zürich where he encountered three major influences (Ronen 2007). First, he came under apprenticeship to Johannes Itten, a Bauhaus theoretician who influenced his reliance on primary colors and geometrical composition. He was similarly influenced by Siegfried Giedion, an architectural critic whose writings dealt with the concept of time, space and mechanization in contemporary art. Finally, he was influenced by Max Brill, an abstract artist with an interest in the relationship between aesthetic and mathematical theories. Influences from all three can be seen throughout Agam’s work.

But Agam’s interest in mathematical theory extends to mystical Jewish numerology, especially involving the number nine. Called “gematria,” Jewish numerology builds upon the fact that letters in the Hebrew alphabet correspond to numbers, giving all Hebrew words a numerical equivalent. For instance, the word “chai,” meaning “life,” consists of two Hebrew letters that add up to the number eighteen, so the number eighteen symbolically references the word “life,” just as the word references life itself. Hence, Agam sees nine as a factor of life, and therefore holy (Park West Gallery 2010). For example, Agam’s sculpture, “Beating Heart” is composed of nine identical curvilinear shapes, each about the size of a hand. These nine are positioned on a mirrored base that reflects them in an inverse dimension, creating an integral image bigger than the sum of its parts: a total of eighteen visible images, referencing life.

The pieces can be stacked, or moved to create a countless number of highly distinct variations, both as static forms, and in forms that rock back and forth together, or in different rhythmic sections, bringing to mind Agam’s allusion to the human heart, keeping time and sustaining life with its rhythmic beating. It is an ideal example of non-figurative, unfixed art, and of Agam’s play with movement, time and the perception of different dimensions. But it is also a uniquely Jewish expression of reverence for life.

Agam’s nine-branched “Levels Menorah” is an example of distinctly Jewish optical art, made of polished chrome, set into a base. Each candlestick is a minimalist rod topped by a cup sitting on a “saucer,” or bowl-shaped ring, to catch melting wax. Seven of the nine candlesticks are bent to form a centerpiece, and are flanked on either end by a straight candlestick. In gematria, the number seven refers to the whole of Creation, as to the exhaustion of possibilities within the natural world, completed within the discrete “whole” of seven days. The center rods, standing side by side, are bent to create seven horizontal bars. The widest bar is on the bottom, each bar narrowing up to the top, allowing us the sensation of different “levels” moving forward or backward in space, as framed by the two straight rods at either end. Depending on our focal point we can see the narrowest top level as closest to us, or the widest bottom level as closest to us, changing our experience of where we are in space and time. It alerts us that there is more than the mundane to be experienced in the mundane realm, and in that way, it refers us to what Neulander calls the realm of “infinite possibility” (1992: 10;13); the unseen, or sacred realm.
Agam moves effortlessly from the small to the monumental, as with his “Fire and Water” fountain in Dizengoff Square, Tel Aviv. As the tiers of the major installation turn, the designs change in shape and color, revealing formerly hidden imagery. At the same time, music plays, and fire and water shoot up at fixed, but non-synchronized moments, in what Agam describes as a visual expression of the harmonizing “fifth dimension.” But the fountain is also a representation of what can confidently be called Jewish art. That is, the Hebrew words for “fire and water” are esh ve’mayim, almost identical to mi shamayim, meaning “heaven,” which Agam identifies as the inspiration for the work. He describes the fountain as a “spiritual thing”—a direct link to God’s Covenant with Noah, in its performance and its rainbow of primary colors, lifting peoples’ spirits. In Agam’s own words, his art is constructed as “visual prayer” (Park West Gallery 2010).

Not all people subscribe to the dimensions Agam credits to his work. Not even all scientists agree on the validity of postulated dimensional planes. So it might seem especially narcissistic for an artist to develop new material on the assumption that any postulated theory represents reality. After all, what makes an artist qualified to verify the existence of an uncertain dimension, or for that matter, an inaccessible realm? But if we grasp the spirituality of his work, the validity or invalidity of other dimensions becomes largely irrelevant to the deeper contribution of his art. Agam’s art brings order out of chaos by transforming mundane elements into objects that defy the rulebook of mundane expectation, especially when the permutations of a given system appear to have been previously exhausted. Whether we are Jewish or not, whether we are spiritually moved or not, Agam’s contribution remains inarguable; he is able to shift our perspective to a pivotal point at which the unseen becomes visible.

**Fire and Water Fountain**, Dizengoff Square

**References Cited**


PROFESSOR EMERITUS PETER HAAS SPEAKS ON ANNEMIE WOLFF’S HOLOCAUST PORTRAITS

In January 2020, Peter Haas, Professor Emeritus of Judaic Studies, discussed a collection of 400 previously unpublished portraits of Amsterdam’s Jews, on the eve of their deportation to concentration camps. He is seen here showing a portrait of his mother, part of the collection taken by photographer Annemie Wolff, between 1943-1944.

JACOB ROTH, ON AND OFF CAMPUS

Jacob Roth graduated this spring, a Political Science major with a minor in Judaic Studies. He was coordinator of “Pete for America” on campus, and is seen here with Mayor Pete Buttigieg.

At the outbreak of Covid-19 in New York, Jacob completed his studies early, and left campus to serve in his role as a New York State EMT.

Your friends and teachers are rooting for you, Jacob!

LET’S HEAR FROM YOU!

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Case Western Reserve University 5
Courses of Interest for Fall 2020

JDST 101/RLGN 213
JEWS AND JUDAISM
Jay Geller

This course provides an introduction to Jewish religion, culture, history, and life. It does not presuppose any previous study of Judaism or experience with Judaism, and it prepares students for additional coursework in Judaic studies, Jewish history, or religious studies with an emphasis on Judaism. Required for the minor in Judaic Studies.

JDST/RLGN/ANTH 233
INTRODUCTION TO JEWISH FOLKLORE
Judith Neaulander

Jewish myth and magic, festival and foodways, art, music and more, will give access to the spirit and mentality of the many different peoples who have carried these traditions, from remote Middle Eastern antiquity to the present day in Israel and the USA. We will follow Jewish folklore as it shapes, and is shaped by, the vast expanse of western history and civilization.

For courses in Hebrew and Arabic visit the Modern Languages and Literatures website:
http://www.case.edu/artsci/dmll//
Sampling of Final Paper Titles

A sampling of titles for final research papers in The Jewish Image in Popular Film - JDST 238 and Jewish Traditional Art and Architecture - JDST/ARTH 220 reflects the diversity of interests in a typical RLGN/JDST classroom.

THE JEWISH IMAGE IN POPULAR FILM - JDST 238

From Private Benjamin to Borat: Jewish Humor as Social Criticism
   Alan Kronenberg

Gibson’s Passion: Ideological Agendas -vs- Historical Accuracy
   Ethan Moroh

Social Justice through Comedy: The Jewish Perspective
   Andrew Tuchler

Film as Social Practice in Relation to Anti-Semitism
   Jacob Roth

The Jewish American Princess: A Stereotype in Comedic Film
   Ruschi Argawal

JEWISH TRADITIONAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE – JDST/ARTH 220

Reconstructing Our Visual Reality: An Ethical Look at Holocaust Memoriam
   Hallana Beck

Frank Stella’s Polish Village Series: Borrowing from Jewish Architectonics
   Zachary Courtney

“I Never Saw another Butterfly”: Terezin and its Art
   Shane Cooley
By bringing a variety of fields and disciplines to bear on its subject, the Judaic Studies Program at Case Western Reserve University conveys to students the complex interaction of forces that create Jewish ethnic identity. Students completing the program will have a broad knowledge of the field along with the tools necessary for continued academic study of Jewish civilization in all its manifestations.

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giving.case.edu

In Feb. 2020, Prof. Alanna Cooper contributed to a podcast of the Association of Jewish Studies, on the history and legacy of the many languages of the Jews.