

An artist's challenge: how to paint a Trial with G'd?

Dear fellow artists and art lovers,

In the past, I have posted an article about Rabbi Aryeh-Leib, aka the Shpoler Zeida (Grandfather from Shpola), a Chassidic Master who lived in the Ukraine from 1724-1811.

In the year 1780, a terrible famine struck the Ukraine, making the lives of its Jewish inhabitants even more miserable than they were already due to antisemitism, pogroms, a horrible bureaucracy, bad winters, and grinding poverty. The Shpoler Zeida was a descendant of the sixteenth century Rabbi Yehudah Loeb, the famous Maharal of Prague, after whom he was named (Loeb, Leib and Aryeh all mean *lion*). Rabbi Loeb created the legendary golem to protect his community from antisemitic attacks on the Prague ghetto. Just like his



famous ancestor, the Shpoler Zeida stood up like a lion to protect his people, not by making another golem but by suing in court whoever was responsible for the consequences of the famine, and that was, in his opinion, HaShem (G-d) Himself. The Zeida argued that the Jews, who are HaShem's children and servants, might not be perfect, although most did their best to serve HaShem as well as they could under the circumstances, but this was no excuse for their Father, or Master, to neglect those putting their trust in His care. He was still responsible for sustaining them during the famine. You can read about this court case in my article. ¹ The Zeida won and ships with grain arrived in the Ukraine, and the Jews were relieved. I thought this story would be a nice theme again for this blog in the time of the Coronavirus, a disaster that threatens the health and lives of the world population, not only the Ukraine. I live in New York, which is at this moment an epicenter of the virus. That is an unpleasant thought.

I have been busy painting the Shpoler Zeida for a long time. Two American geneticists, Dr. Jeffrey Mark Paul and Dr. Jeff Briskman, are publishing their extensive research project which includes tracing hitherto unknown descendants of the Zeida through DNA.

¹ https://www.academia.edu/22368052/The_Shpoler_Zeide_and_the_Trial_of_G-d

Their book includes a chapter of stories about the Shpoler Zeida. This is where I got involved as their artist/illustrator. My paintings and drawing are currently in an exhibition in OneBefore Escape, a wonderful Jewish Escape-room in Brooklyn, which dedicates a few rooms to the Shpoler Zeida. Unfortunately, everything is closed now because of the Coronavirus, but I will show the catalogue online.

For the cover of Dr. Paull's book, I have been asked to create a realistic portrait of the Zeida, of whose physical appearance we have neither a reliable description nor a portrait. Good, that grants me artistic freedom. Dr. Paull showed me some photos of descendants of the Zeida to give an impression of how he might have looked, which display handsome people with keen faces. I imagine the Zeida as a tall man with a leonine appearance, certainly at the time he was presiding over the Beit Din (Jewish court/case) of the Jewish people of the Ukraine versus the Divine Defendant.



Loving Rembrandt and having received an idea of Dr. Paull to show the Zeida standing in a ray of light from a window or the like, I decided to work with the *chiaroscuro* technique, creating a stark contrast by highlighting part of the scene and the figure of the Zeida while leaving the rest of the painting in the dark. I have, of course, a lot of time to experiment with this, because the Coronavirus measures and restrictions keeps me confined to my studio. Now, how does one proceed with the composition? The artist is faced with a couple of choices, like, from what angle to show the Zeida? A full frontal face? In profile? In a three quarter angle? From head to feet, or just the head and the shoulders? The hands must be shown for sure, they are important to express the Zeida's mood. Being a chassid, the Zeida probably wore one of those imposing, beautiful shtraymels (round fur hats) that many artists love to paint, as we see in, for instance, the work of Isidor Kaufmann. I see them often enough in my neighborhood on Shabbat. But during the trial the Zeida was most likely wrapped in a tallis and "crowned" with tefillin while standing in front of the King of Kings, blessed be He. So, occasionally I put the

shtraymel on a table, because it's too nice to leave out. The next question is, do I depict the Zeida by himself or are there other people in the painting, like members of his extra large Beit Din, which consisted of ten judges, or a scribe, rabbis, or spectators? In the painting on page 2 we see the complete Beit Din, standing and sitting at a large table. In a different part of the canvas, representatives of the People of Israel observe the procedures.

And that window that is so important for the dark-light effect in other paintings, should that be high up in the wall, symbolically referring to HaShem? In the painting on page 2, I symbolized the Heavenly Defendant by a large tallis and mystical Divine names, in other works He is not visible at all and only His presence can be felt, as we read from the look of awe on the faces of the Beit Din judges. It is



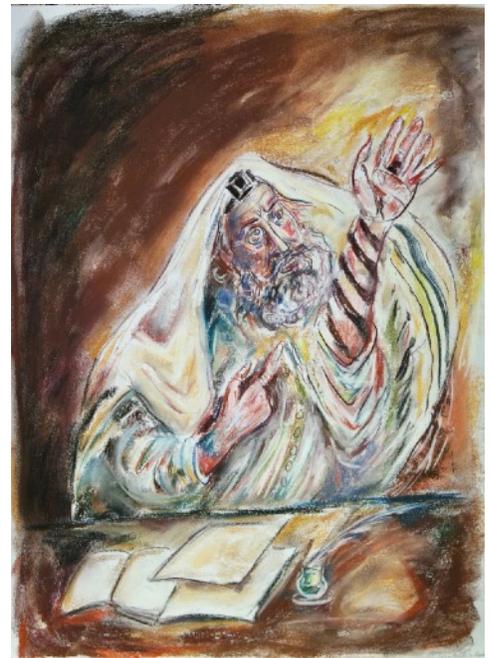
always a problem how to depict G'd, since He is incorporeal and does not stand in front of the judges' table, like ordinary defendants.

The expression on the face of the Zeida and the position of his hands tell us a lot about his emotion of that moment, which changes with each part of his plea, judgment, and questions during the trial. In one work, the Zeida looks determined to make a strong case. He is angry, but in a restrained and controlled way and for a good cause. In an other work, he looks intimidated by the Defendant, the likeness of whom he has never seen in front of his table before. For many rabbis, the idea of taking HaShem to court would be pure hybris. But the relationship of the Zeida and HaShem was so firm, confidential, and intimate, that he could sue Him out of

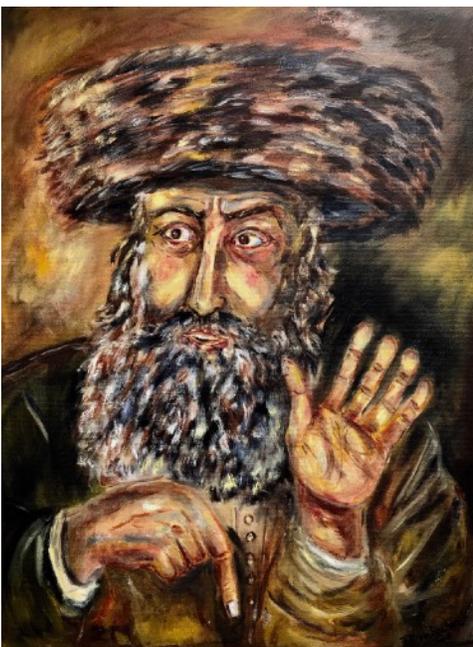


pure love for his fellow Jews. In this canvas, the Zeida wears his shtraymel. In a different painting, the Zeida is fiery, angry, and full of vigor. His dark beard with threads of silver, a sign of wisdom and maturity, resembles the manes of a lion. In the painting where he raises his left arm wrapped in tefillin he looks stern and solemn, very determined and aware of his grave position. I made some sketches in pastel of this pose, (on this page). He doesn't like what he is doing but he does it, because it is very important. Losing this court case would not only be bad for him but have dire consequences for all these innocent people who will starve to death if the Ukrainian famine lasts much

longer. In some works, the Zeida stands straight, as an imposing Av Beit Din, the President of the Court, but also as a rabbi, a Jew among other Jews, who is fully aware of the unusual nature of this court-case. In the painting shown at the top of this article, the Zeida is old. He has a pensive look on his face. The court case is over and the situation has been solved many years ago, but his shoulders are still bent under the weight of his memories.



I won't be finished any time soon with my series of the Shpuler Zeida but will keep exploring this subject.



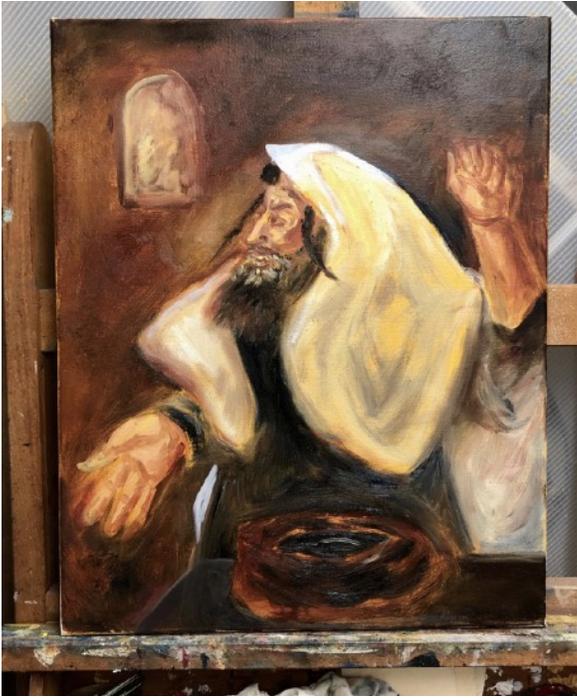
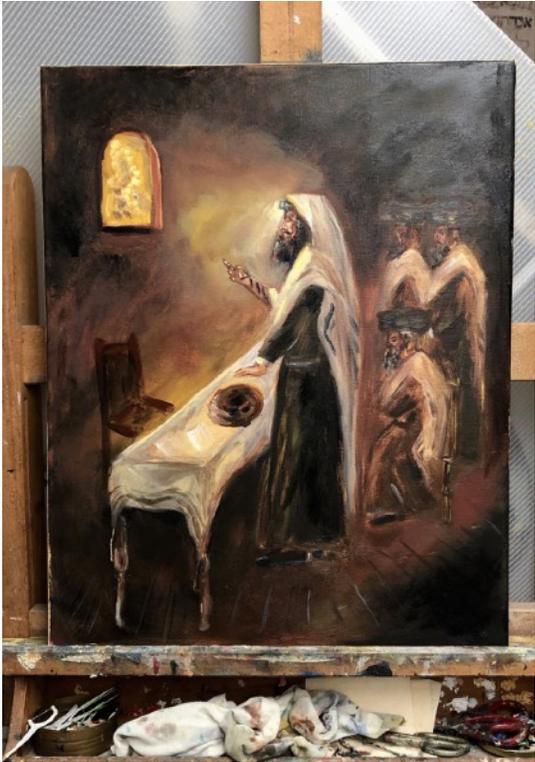
Stay safe, stay inside, and think of the trial of the Shpuler Zeida. I will show you all of the paintings again after they have been finished and appreciate your feedback.

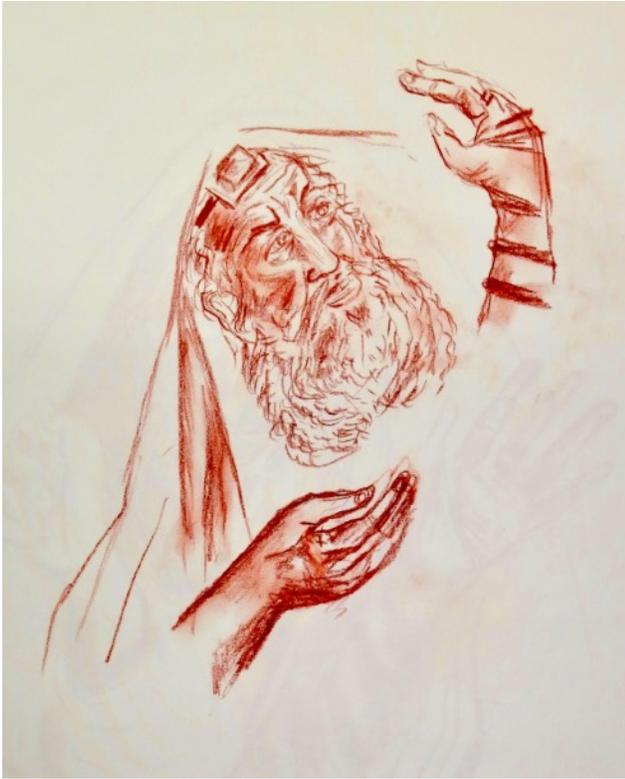
Shoshannah Brombacher PhD, vice-president of the
AGJA,
Brooklyn, March 27, 2020

Finished oil paintings, without *chiaroscuro*:



N.b., these oils paintings are not finished yet. They are standing around my studio, taking turns to be on my easel, then I put one away to let it dry between layers—which takes time in my chilly basement—and start working on the next one.





Two sketches in conte pencil:

