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The Artist and the Chain

What defines a Jewish artist in the true sense of the word? One definition is: that's an artist who plays the very important role of connecting our present with our long past, inspiring us with enthusiasm for our Jewish life and traditions through visualizations. Last week I was at a shiva for such a Jewish artist. I saw paintings and drawings on the wall featuring a shtetl artisan and Eastern European Jewry.

In our long Jewish history, our ancestors — and we as well in many cases — wandered and moved — forcibly or voluntarily — from place to place, country to country, culture to culture, while preserving our own identity, Torah, and tradition. With all that traveling under often difficult circumstances it's inevitable that there are hiatuses in our collective or individual memories. I noticed that many American Jews with roots in Eastern European shtetls or the pale are not familiar with the culture of their (great-)grand-parents. Stories got lost, were never told, or not remembered. But we have paintings to visualize their lives, including Shabbat and Yom Tov where no photos were allowed, or poor people whose photos were never taken. There are stories that can only be visualized by artists. As for our earlier history, no Hagadah is complete without pictures. Images, art, make the stories alive. They connect us to all the Jewish dwelling places, no matter where we are now.

The artist whose shiva I attended brought the shtetl culture closer to us with his paintings. Besides, images or objects connected with our Yiddishkayt are a great inspiration for many of us. It's much more than "only" hiddur or wall-decoration. This artist did a big (and necessary) mitzvah with his paintings, making it easier for people to connect.

There is a beautiful story I contributed to the book P'ri Eitz Yitzhak in honor of Maggid Yitzhak Buxbaum, z"l (will be published in fall) and now I have mutatis mutandis this artist and his art in mind as well:

Shabbos Coats and Shtraymels

One of the most colorful Rebbes in Chassidic lore is Reb Zusya of Anipol. Rabbi Meshullam Zusya (Rebbe Reb Zusya, 1718–1800) was the younger brother of R' Elimelech of Lizhansk (the Noam Elimelech), a friend of R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi (the Alter Rebbe) and a student of the Maggid of Mezritch, next to whom he was buried. R. Zusya remained destitute all his life and suffered ill health. Still, he remained deeply pious and used to say: "Whatever comes from HaShem is good." Reb Zusya wrote no books of his own but stories about him are included in Menorat haZahav.

Reb Zusya and his older brother, Rabbi Elimelech, had a problem. Whenever they ate and sang together with the Chassidim on Shabbos they were enveloped in enthusiasm and holiness. But they asked themselves, what caused these great transports of joy? Was it Shabbos itself, or were they just carried away by the images of singing, the food, the white tablecloth, the fine Shabbos coats, the atmosphere, and seeing the Chassidim at the table? The whole picture, so to say.

They decided on a little experiment!



On a routine Tuesday, they prepared a wonderful Shabbos meal with everything you could wish for: gefilte fish with chrayn and a big piece of carrot on top, chicken soup that was so fat that little golden "eyes" floated in your plate, chopped goose liver, roast chicken, compote, vegetables, potato kugel, lokshen (noodle) kugel, bottles of schnapps, a Shabbos samovar for hot tea, long white candles, a goblet of wine, golden brown challoth, and a soft white tablecloth. How delicious! How splendid!

They donned their long satin coats and their beautiful shtraymels, the wide fur hats for Shabbos.

Before sunset they gathered with some Chassidim in their house. The dancing was so vigorous that the walls shook, and the room assumed a fiery radiance. The candles glowed, the wine flowed, many words of Torah were spoken, many songs were sung, and a sumptuous Shabbos meal was served. Who had seen such a great Shabbos before? The Chassidim would talk about it for a long time after.

Ah! It was inspiring! The Chassidim sang so loudly that they did not hear the hustle and bustle of a normal weekday in the streets. The apple vendor screamed "Appels, nice and cheap," the shoemaker on the corner hammered and sang his ditties, wagons rattled, whips cracked, horses whinnied, kids were screaming.

But inside the room it was just plain.....Shabbos!!!

However, Reb Zusya and Rebbe Elimelech couldn't accept that mere visual images, objects, food, or songs, even beautiful words of Torah, had caused their enthusiasm for this "Shabbos on a weekday!" Therefore they decided to make the long trip to their revered Rebbe, the Maggid of Mezritch, to ask his advice! When they poured out their heart to their Rebbe he smiled, because he was deeply impressed with their piety.

Listen to me," he said, "what is so bad about it, if you get into a Shabbos mood when you wear your shtraymels and your fine long coats on a weekday, seeing all your delicious Shabbos dishes in front of you? Your image of Shabbos? For you, all these objects are connected to Shabbos, and therefore they attract the spirit of Shabbos. You are — thank G'd — very receptive to their kedushah (holiness). I have known both of you for quite a while! You are serious about serving HaShem! I don't see a problem here. You want to serve HaShem, and you also enjoy Shabbos, which is connected with serving HaShem!

Beautiful! I wish you a good Shabbos and many more celebrations!"

Reb Zusya and his brother Rabbi Elimelech returned home in an upbeat mood!

May we all experience Shabbos as they did and celebrate every meal with joyful enthusiasm.

The deceased artist created with his paintings more than a hiddur. He visualized the chain for our collective memory. Seeing Shabbos paintings or drawings of frum scenes on a weekday connects us to shabbat. Seeing the shtetl connects us to our Yiddishkayt, our ancestors. It's a chain going back all the way to Har Sinai. Already when the Mishkan was made we realized we needed artists, and we still need them. May his memory be a blessing and his heritage keep inspiring us.

Shoshannah Brombacher, Brooklyn, May 2023

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