

בס"ד

**A modern Shiviti. Old wine in a new jug, or: an old text on a new canvas.**

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*Oil on Canvas. 31.5 X 24 inches (80 X 60 cm). 2024*



A Jewish artist faces many challenges. Some come involuntary, like the political situation in the world, the terrible war in the Middle East, and growing antisemitism. This weighs me down, depresses and restricts me in more than one way, but I cannot escape them. Other challenges, however, I embrace. Like the following one.



I want to make a work of art for my synagogue. If it is to be hung in the sanctuary itself, the rabbi requested that it should not display any human shapes or figures, based on the biblical command to “not make graven images and worship them.” This includes especially statues, three-dimensional objects. But what about modern two-dimensional paintings that are not worshipped? This is a subject for another long article. It suffices to say here that images of humans have no place in my synagogue. However, 99% or more of my work includes humans and not painting any feels confining. I have to make a special composition with colors, lines, and objects as a substitute for human shapes to make it *lebedik*, lively. I decided to create a Shiviti.



What is a Shiviti? This is an image of the Temple Menorah consisting of, decorated with, or accompanied by the words of a Psalm, Teh. 67, and surrounded by biblical and kabbalistic verses. It is traditionally written on paper or parchment, sometimes on leather or engraved on metal.

A Shiviti is intended as a focus during meditation and prayer, and contains supplications for protection and sustenance. The Shiviti has its origins in kabbalistic circles but became popular in Chassidic and Sephardic homes and synagogues, where it is displayed next to the Aron for the *shaliach tzibbur* to focus on. A growing number of Ashkenazi synagogues and homes now have a Shiviti as well,



sometimes doubling as a *mizrach* to indicate the direction of prayer, toward Jerusalem. Sizes vary from very large in a synagogue to tiny pocket-size.

I was gifted one by my husband, written on papyrus. It hangs behind the place where I light my Shabbat candles.

The space over the candelabrum on the generally rectangle shaped paper or parchment displays the first half of Teh. 16:8:

שְׁוִיִּתִּי יְהוָה לְנֶגְדִי תָמִיד (כִּי מִיְמֵינִי בִלְאֻמּוֹט):

*I am ever mindful of HaShem's presence;  
(He is at my right hand; I shall never be shaken.)*

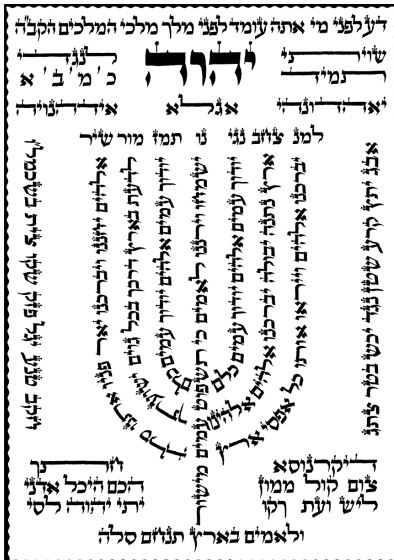


Image: המנורה כתובה by Ba'al haKokhav, converted to vector art by Andrew Meit (CC0)  
Source: <https://opensiddur.org/?p=3393>

HaShem is written in large letters and in full, the Tetragrammaton or *Shem hameforash*, the Ineffable Name. The first word of this verse gives the Shiviti its name.

The letters in a Shiviti may be adorned with *tagin*, the little crowns on the letters שׁעטנׁוגז (Sha'aTNeZGaTZ) in a sefer Torah, or they may be plain.

The top border generally displays a text based on Pirkei Avot,

דע לפני מי אתה עומד לפני מלכי האמלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא:

*Know before whom you are standing, before the King of the Kings of Kings, the Holy One, blessed is He.*

The side borders contain Torah verses and/or Tehillim and/or the kabbalistic prayer *ana bekoach*, which is the mystical 42 letter Name of HaShem, in addition to

kabbalistic symbols or letter-combinations forming other Holy Names.

Often, the text of *ana bekoach*, which can be found in the siddur, is not written in full but as letter-combinations of the first letter of each word:

אבג יתץ קרע שטן נגד יחש בטר צתג חקב טנע יגל פזק שקו צות

The third and fourth three letters form the words קרע שטן, rip the Accuser.

Some Shivitis display the text in full:

אָנָא בְּכַח גְּדֻלַּת יְמִינְךָ תַּתִּיר צָרוּרָה:  
קַבֵּל רַנַּת עַמֶּךָ שֶׁגִּבְנוּ טְהַרְנוּ נוֹרָא:  
נָא גְבוּר דּוֹרְשֵׁי יַחֲוּדְךָ כַּכֶּבֶת לְשִׁמְרָם:  
בְּרַיְכֶם טְהַרְם רַחֲמִים צְדָקָתְךָ תַּמִּיד גְּמִלִם:  
חֲסִין קְדוֹשׁ בְּרַב טוֹבָךָ נַהַל עֲדָתְךָ:  
יַחֲוִיד גְּאָה לְעַמֶּךָ פְּנֵה, זוֹכְרֵי קִדְשֶׁךָ:  
שׁוֹעֲתֵנוּ קַבֵּל וּשְׁמַע צַעֲקוֹתֵנוּ יוֹדַע תַּעֲלוּמוֹת:

*Please, by the force of Your great right hand, release the bound one.*

*Accept the prayer of Your people; strengthen us, purify us, Awesome One!*

*Please! Mighty One, those who seek Your Unity, preserve them like the pupil [of Your eye].*

*Bless them, purify them, have compassion on them; Your benevolent righteousness [may You] always bestow upon them.*

*Mighty, Holy One, in Your abundant goodness, lead Your community.*

*Unique One, Exalted, turn to Your people who are mindful of Your holiness.*

*Accept our prayer and hear our cry, [You] Who knows hidden thoughts.*

Shivitis may display Torah verses referring to the Temple Menorah in the vertical borders, like Shemot 25:37, וַעֲשִׂיתָ אֶת-נִרְתִּיהָ שִׁבְעָה וְהַעֲלֶהָ אֶת-נִרְתִּיהָ וְהָאִיר עַל-עֵבֶר פְּנֵיהָ: *Make its lamps seven, the lamps shall be so mounted as to give the light on its front side.*

And Bamidbar 8:2,

דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּהַעֲלֹתְךָ אֶת-הַנִּזֹּת אֶל-מוֹל'פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יֵאָרוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנִּזֹּת: *Speak to Aaron and say to him, "When you mount the lamps, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lamp stand."*

But there are many variations and different verses shown.

Some Shivitis display lions, many a Magen David, the Shield of David, along with supplications for protection and sustenance in the bottom border, like the names of the angels Dikarnusa and Chatakh, who are appointed by Hashem to be in charge of one's livelihood, and Dan's supplication in Bereshit 49:18, לִישׁוּעָתְךָ חַיִּיתִי יְהוָה: *I wait for Your deliverance, O HaShem!*

Some repeat Teh. 67:5, which is already included in the Menorah, בְּאַרְץ וּלְאֻמִּים | תְּנַחֵם סְלָה: , *You guide the nations of the earth. Selah* at the bottom.

Often, the words צוֹם (*fast*) קוֹל (*voice*, here in the sense of uttering a prayer), ממוֹן (*money*, here in the sense of giving *tzedakah*, charity) are written on one side of the base of the Menorah and the words חָכָם (*wise*) אֲדֹנָי (HaShem), and הִלֵּל (*praise*) on the other side, referring to the assurance in the Yom Kippur liturgy that fasting, prayer and giving *tzedakah* will thwart off or bend a harsh judgement. There are those who consider a Shiviti to be a *segulah*, a protection.

The focus must be on prayer and Hashem.

The Menorah in the center of a Shiviti is, if it does not consist of calligraphy exclusively, fashioned according to the description of the golden Menorah in Shemot 25:31-37, its base and its shaft, its cups, calyxes, and petals of one piece, with three branches from one side of central shaft and three branches from the other side. Each branch has three cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals and the shaft has four cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals.

The text of Teh. 67 is written in, as, or around the branches. This Psalm consists of 49 words in the body (verses 2-8), and an introductory verse:

1 לְמַנְצֵחַ בְּנִגִּינַת מְזֻמֹּר וְשִׁיר:

*1 For the leader; with instrumental music. A psalm. A song.*

2 אֱלֹהִים יִחַנְּנוּ וְיִבְרַכְנוּ יְיָ אֵר פָּנָיו אֲתָנוּ סְלָה:

*2 May G'd be gracious to us and bless us; may He show us favor, selah*

3 לְדַעַת בְּאַרְץ דְּרָכֶךָ בְּכָל-גּוֹיִם יִשׁוּעָתֶךָ:

*3 That Your way be known on earth, Your deliverance among all nations.*

4 יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים | אֱלֹהִים יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כָּלֵם:

*4 Peoples will praise You, O G'd; all peoples will praise You.*

5 יִשְׂמְחוּ וְיִרְנְנוּ לְאֻמִּים כִּי־תִשְׁפֹּט עַמִּים מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וּלְאֻמִּים | בְּאַרְץ תְּנַחֵם סְלָה:

*5 Nations will exult and shout for joy, for You rule the peoples with equity, You guide the nations of the earth. Selah.*

6 יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים | אֱלֹהִים יוֹדוּךָ עַמִּים כָּלֵם:

*6 The peoples will praise You, O G'd; all peoples will praise You.*

אַרְץ נְתַנָּה בְּבוֹלָהּ יְבָרְכֵנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵינוּ:

7 May the earth yield its produce; may G'd, our G'd, bless us.

8 יְבָרְכֵנוּ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּירָאוּ אוֹתוֹ כָּל־אֶפְסַי־אֲרָץ:

8 May G'd bless us, and be revered to the ends of the earth.

The introductory *pasuk*, verse 1, is broken down into mystical letter combinations which are written over the seven flames of the Menorah:

לְמַנְצָח בְּנִגְיֹת מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר:

לְמַנְצָח בְּנִי נוֹ תַמֵּן מוֹר שִׁיר

Each of these letter-combinations have many connotations in Kabbalah, like *Man* (Manna, sustenance from Heaven), the letters *tzade chet beth* in a different order make the roots for *digging* or *carving* and *to be sharp or bright* (of a color or smell), the third combination can be *Gani, my Garden*, the mystical garden from Shir haShirim, or *my Paradise, nun-wow* in the middle has the numerical value of 56, the same as *אכלה, food*, or *כל, the total, all*; *tav mem zayin* can be *splatter*, but its numerical value in Gematria is 447, the same as *אילות, strength or force*, or *גדלתי, I magnified HaShem*, followed by the next two flames with *Myrrh* and *Shir, song*, which both play a role in the mystical interpretation of Shir haShirim. But there are, of course, many more possibilities to interpret them.

Some Shivitis contain the Sefirot, the ten Divine Emanations, occasionally represented by terms from Tehillim for different types of songs to praise HaShem:

Keter:	אֲשֵׁרִי	(Song of Praise)
Chokhmah:	שִׁיר	(Song)
Binah:	בְּרָכָה	(Blessing)
Chessed:	מִזְמוֹר	(Psalmic Song)
Gevurah:	נִגּוֹן	(Melody without words)
Tif'eret:	הַלְלוּיָהּ	(Song of Praise)
Netzach:	נִיצוּחַ	(Song of Glorification)
Hod:	הוֹדָה	(Song of Praise)
Yesod	רִנָּנוּ	(Song of Joy)
Malkhut:	תְּהִלָּה	(Song of Praise, Psalm)



The Shiviti I created is an oil painting on canvas and, contrary to most historical Shivitis on paper, parchment, metal or leather, very colorful and less symmetric. -

The center displays the large seven-branched Temple Menorah that was fashioned like almond branches (Shemot 25:31–37; 37:17–24). The verses of Teh. 67 are written in white alongside its arms.

The letters of the introductory verse, לְמַנְצֵחַ בְּנִגְיֹנֹת מְזֻמּוֹר נְשִׁיר, are written next to the flames in the fashion described above.

The important Shiviti text to meditate upon, *I have placed HaShem always in front of me*, is written in a slanting line from the top right downwards and the word תמיד (*always*) is positioned straight over the flames of the Menorah. However, there is no large *Shem Hameforash*, the Ineffable Name, but the abbreviation 'ה. Instead, the four letters of the Tetragrammaton are scattered all over the canvas. Out of respect and awe I refrained from writing the Name in full in the top border. Its third letter, the ו *waw*, is positioned over the six books at the base of the Menorah, the *shisha sidrei Mishnah*. This reminds us of the custom to have little children start their Torah study in Cheder with the third book of the Written Torah, Wayiqra. That deals mainly with the Mishkan, the tabernacle in the desert and its service, the kohanim and the sacrifices, which was continued in the Temple in Jerusalem. The innocent and still blank minds of children should start studying holy subjects like the Temple service instead of the tumultuous and often disturbing stories in Bereshit.

The right border contains the letter combinations of the first words of the *ana bekoach* prayer, the mystical 42 letter Name. The left border contains the text about the Menorah from Bamidbar 8:2, *When you mount the lamps, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lamp stand.*

One meditates on Mishle 6:23:

כִּי נֵר מְצֻוֶה וְתוֹרָה אֹר ( וְדַרְשׁוּ חַיִּים תּוֹכְחוֹת מוֹסֵר: )

*For the commandment is a lamp, the teaching is a light, (and the way to life is the rebuke that disciplines).*

The bright colors in the painting represent the four traditional Euclidean elements of our world, Earth (green, bottom left), Fire (red, bottom right), Water (blue, covers most of the right half), and Air (the blue and yellow light in the top left). All four elements mingle and mix, everything is in motion, *panta rhei*.

These colors have a special Jewish dimension as well. Red symbolizes the burning desire, the *hitlahavut*, of Jews to study Torah, to cling to the Tree of Life.

Blue is the water in which fish live. If they would leave the water they would instantly die. Similarly, Jews live with and in Torah. Cutting themselves off means spiritual death.

The green of the earth and the bright yellow and blue light of the sky remind us of what the Karliner Rebbe said:

Jews must be like a ladder (like the *sullam* in Bereshit 28:12) with their feet planted firmly on the ground and their heads in Heaven, meaning, they must take care of their livelihood, *parnasah*, and business in this world, participate in society, and occupy themselves with holy subjects and Torah study. This symbolic ladder dominates the left half of the painting.

Devarim 30:12 says,

לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הִוא לְאָמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה-לָנוּ הַשָּׁמַיִמָּה וְיִקַּחֶהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעְנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂוּהָ:

*It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?"*

The Torah is here on earth, it is studied and interpreted by people. Therefore, I painted the Torah scroll at the synagogue-shaped base of the Menorah.

The scroll on the right side is the *Torah bikhtav*, the Written Torah. The six books on the left side represent the *Torah b'al peh*, the Oral Torah, the six books of the Mishnah, which together with the Gemara are the Talmud.

The Torah scroll is adorned with leaves, because the Torah is the Tree of Life, as stated in Mishle 3:18: עֵץ-חַיִּים הִיא לַמְחַזְקִים בָּהּ וְתִמְכֶּיָהּ מֵאֲשֶׁר: *She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, and whoever holds on to her is happy.*

This *pasuk*, which is sung when the Torah is removed from the Aron, is written partly over the scroll and partly on the base of the Menorah. The letters of the word מֵאֲשֶׁר have the numerical value of 40-1-300-200 which is similar to the numerical value of ישראל, 10-300-200-1-30.

The mantle of the Torah scroll displays the letters כ and ת, the Crown of the Torah, כתר תורה, and a Magen David.





Two words of the verse Yehoshua 1:8 are written over the six volumes of the Mishnah:

לֹא-יִמּוּשׁ סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה מִפִּיךָ וְהִגִּיתָ בוֹ יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה לְמַעַן תִּשְׁמֹר לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל-הַפְּתוּב בּוֹ כִּי-אֶזְרְצֶנּוּ מִצָּלִיחַ אֶת-דְּרָכֶיךָ וְאֶזְרְצֶנּוּ תִשְׁכִּיל:

*Let not this Book of the Teaching [the Torah] cease from your lips, **but meditate on it (study it)** day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it. Only then will you prosper in your undertakings and only then will you be successful.*

To the right of the Menorah is the list of songs of praise that represent the Ten Sefirot, as described above.

The big Temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed, but a synagogue is called a *mikdash me'at*, a small Temple. Therefore the base of the Menorah in the painting is shaped like a miniature model of the Neue Synagoge at the Oranienburger Strasse in Berlin. This impressive edifice in Moorish Revival style, built between 1859-1868, housed a huge community and consisted of a large domed portal building, flanked by two towers with smaller cupolas, and a vast main sanctuary that could seat 3000 worshippers. In 1930, Albert Einstein participated here in a concert with this violin. The synagogue survived the November Pogrom of 1938,



thanks to the heroic act of a German policeman, but was in 1943 by mistake bombed by the British Air-force. After the war, the ruins of the main sanctuary, being on the verge of collapse, posed a danger to their surroundings and were flattened. This part of the synagogue has never been



rebuilt. Instead, there is a large open space behind the portal with a monument of black pillars where the Aron used to be.

The heavily damaged once gilded ribbed dome of the portal remained standing. But the majority of the Jewish community in Berlin had been murdered, many survivors emigrated. The officials of East Berlin in the GDR, where the Neue Synagoge was located, let the ruined building remain as is. Trees grew through the cracks in the walls and rain fell on the birds that nestled in the damaged dome. In 1987, a committee under supervision of Dr. Hermann Simon undertook the restoration of the portal building. It was completed in 1995 with the rededication of the synagogue. The building with its shiny gilded dome now houses offices and conference rooms of the Jewish Community of Berlin, the Stiftung Neue Synagoge, a museum and a gallery, a hall for concerts and lectures, and a mikvah. In the top floor is a small prayer room that is used since 1998 by the first egalitarian minyan of Berlin (Masorti, Conservative), the Oranienburger Strasse Synagoge. Words of Torah and the voices of worshippers reverberate again through the hallways. The base of the miniature Neue Synagoge displays the *pasuk* of Teh. 1:3:

וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שָׁתוּל עַל-פְּלִגְיֵי-מַיִם  
 אֲשֶׁר פְּרִיָו יִתֵּן בְּעֵתוֹ וְעָלְהוּ  
 לֹא-יִבּוֹל וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה  
 יִצְלִיחַ:

*He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives.*

The blue streams of water under the base express this verse and are connected to the Jews and fish as described above.



The text on the frieze over the main entrance of the Neue Synagoge is Yeshayahu 26:2: פתחו שַׁעֲרֵי־מִצְרַיִם וְיָבֹא גוֹי־צְדִיק שֹׁמֵר אֱמֻנָה: :  
*Open the gates, and let A righteous nation enter, [a nation] that keeps faith.*  
This is written in a waving line under the water at the base of the Menorah.

I have lived in Berlin and lectured at the Free University in the nineties of the last century, right after the Berlin Wall opened up, and witnessed part of this restoration project before I moved to New York. From there, I moved back to Holland and, after my father passed away, back to Berlin. I said Kaddish for both of my parents in the large open space that was once the main sanctuary of the Neue Synagoge. This was one of the few places during the pandemic where regular services took place, under the sky, and now I daven in this famous shul.

Berlin, March 2024

