

With their face to the Diaspora: Eretz Yisraeli art discourse in the 1930s

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The complex relationship between the notion of Israeli identity and the history and culture of the Jewish Diaspora has been a constant point of reference throughout the history of Israeli art. From the first steps towards establishing a national school of art during the Bezalel period in the first quarter of the 20th century the received premise was that art created in the Land of Israel, often called Hebrew art, was essentially different from art made in the Diaspora. Boris Schatz, the founder of Bezalel school of arts and craft in Jerusalem, believed that only in Eretz Yisrael would the Jewish artist be liberated from foreign influences and will be able to create the authentic Jewish national art; because only here, in Eretz Yisrael he will sense the spirit of the place and will get in touch with memories of the heroic past of the Jewish people. In short, the country was to supply the inspiration and the motivation for the new art that was to be part of the national revival. With a few modifications the idea has remained a central one during the endless discussions held over the years concerning the desirable direction and identity of Israeli art. The central role of the county as a significant source of identity remained so even when artists preached for universalism and rejected any notion of localism. Yossef Zaritsky, the high priest of Israeli abstract art and the leader of the New Horizons group in the 1940s and 1950s, argued that the sense of authenticity and uniqueness of Israeli art within the universal language of modern art would stem from the specific qualities of the place: the climate and the light. Much has been said about the so-called 'Israeli light' and its presumed impact on Israeli art. It is interesting that this has become a kind of code for a legitimate concept of locality, because it is about light and colour, that is to say, about art itself, rather than about national or religious beliefs. And as a local Israeli phenomenon it separates Israeli art from Jewish art elsewhere, particularly if this art inclines towards the narrative and folklore, of the kind associated with Marc Chagall. Zaritsky disliked Chagall although he could appreciate the latter's abilities in colour. But, as Mordechai Omer wrote in Zaritsky's retrospective exhibition catalogue of 1984, in spite of the two artists' shared background in Russia "Zaritsky was disgusted by Chagall's world of images; the Jewish Stetl with its synagogues and surrounding churches, the father and mother, grandfather and Rabbi, the poultry and domestic animals, the jokers and the Klezmers..." all these, writes Omer, "were a complete opposite to the views of the Israeli artist who rejected anecdotes and aspired

to purify painting from its literary aspects.” It is hard not to notice that the notion of literariness in painting is bound together with the Jewish world of Eastern Europe and both are contrasted with the aspiration of the Israeli artist for a pure universal art. Considering the immense influence of Zaritsky on the development of the Israeli art canon it is not surprising that Israeli artists who depicted Jewish symbols or scenes from Jewish life were ostracised and were condemned as irrelevant and non-modern.

If there was any chance for a narrative or symbolic content to gain legitimacy, it had to do with nature and life in the Land of Israel, mainly in a mythical interpretation of the kind presented by sculptor Yitzhak Danziger.

On the backdrop of this mindset in which the desirable Israeli art stems from the place and its physical or symbolic properties whereas any reference to art concerning Jewish life elsewhere is detested as exilic (Galuti), it is interesting to note a time when artists in Eretz Yisrael fully identified with artists in the Diaspora and found that their mission in art was no different. This shift of identity is a significant one, and can be summarised briefly as a change from an Eretz Yisraeli identity to a Jewish one, that is to say, from a particular national Jewish identity – that of Zionism – to a broader, individualistic concept of Jewishness.

A relevant example is the publication in Tel-Aviv in 1937 of large format album titled *Contemporary Jewish Painters*. Included were reproductions of 20 painters: 14 were Parisians, mainly of East European origin, among them famous artists like Chagall, Soutine, Modigliani, and 6 from Eretz Yisrael including Shemi, Litvinovsky, Frenkel and Castel. The pairing of artists from Eretz Yisrael with Jewish artists from Paris is quite unusual. Traditional Zionist art historiography describes Israeli art as separate from Jewish art in the Diaspora.

The editor and publisher of this album was an important voice in the art field of this period: Gabriel Talphir, who in 1932 founded the art and literary journal *Gazith*. *Gazith* published a mixture of prose, poetry, essays, reviews and illustrations of art and architecture. Of the essays published during its first year, a third were dedicated to the visual art, the majority dealing with such modern European artists as Libermann, Menkes, Mintchine, Modigliani, Pascin, Pissaro, Soutine and Zadkine.

These artists, of different generations and styles, had one thing in common: they were all Jewish. Evidently the artists considered by *Gazith* as important and worthy of reading about were primarily Jewish ones. The reproductions featured more variety, with well-known

masters like Monet, Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Picasso, alongside artists from the Yishuv, allocated one image each.

Articles published in Gazith by several artists from the Yishuv often attempted at defining art in terms of its Jewish quality. Among these were younger artists like Haim Atar and veteran artists like Menachem Shemi, Yitzhak Fenkel and Moshe Castel, who were active in the local art scene since the 1920's.

Gazith, and its strong-minded editor Talpir, were by no means alone in introducing Jewish artists from abroad in Palestine. There were occasional publications about Jewish artists in the literary periodicals Moznayim and Turim and few booklets on Jewish artists were published by Sifriat Poalim. The Artists' Association of Eretz Yisrael included in their General Exhibition of 1932, paintings by two guests from Paris, Menkes and Aberdam.

Similarly, the budding collection of Tel-Aviv museum, that was founded in 1932 revolved in its first years on famous Jewish artists like Chagall, Modigliani, Pasternak, Kisling and Mane-Katz. The museum held one-man shows for distinguished Jewish artists like Boris Aronson, Max Liebermann, and Lesser Uri, and also a group exhibition of Jewish painters from Paris, commonly known as The School of Paris, in 1936. Monographs on individual Jewish artists written by the French critic Waldemar George were in the possession of artists in Palestine. In short, the interest in those artists and the respect for and appreciation of their work as touchstone of quality art were shared by many in the Yishuv. This can be understood in light of the rising fame and success of Jewish artists in Paris, especially Marc Chagall and Chaim Soutine.

It is customary to explain the strong influence of the Paris School on artists in Eretz Yisrael by the fact that many artists went to Paris in those years. But artists went to Paris also during the 1920's, bringing back an entirely different set of forms, colours and themes, as well as years later in the 1950s and 1960s. Artistic influence or any other adoption of particular cultural components, as Itamar Even-Zohar has argued, is not motivated simply by availability, namely, in this case, by being in Paris. Rather it is the ability of these cultural components to fulfil a function in accordance with the ideology of the recipient.

Moreover, Paris in the interwar years attracted artists and writers from many countries and offered a variety of trends and styles, from classicism to geometrical abstract art and from expressionism to Surrealism. However, only a selected range of these trends was to influence

artists in Palestine. According to Yona Fischer, the artists from Palestine went to Paris in order to study and absorb French art. Yet somehow, despite themselves, they found themselves in the circles of the Jewish artists and eventually looked at French art through their perspective. No doubt, the common East European background that Jewish artists in Paris and in Palestine had shared, and perhaps most importantly their ability to communicate in Yiddish helped artists from the Yishuv in finding their way in the Parisian art world.

For some artists this influence meant a sharp change of pallet and style as they had adopted the new Expressionist mood from Paris— moving from bright, lucid colors to dark tones and thick impasto and from clear-cut forms to freer gestures and a loose handling of the brush. “Pictorially speaking”, wrote critic Haim Gamzu “Eretz Israel was transformed into a French province. However,” he added “the ‘shock’ of Paris was so great that it confused our best artists.”

A major channel for this influence no doubt was the French critic Waldemar George. His essay on Soutine was published in translation in the third issue of *Gazith* in 1932. It was followed a few months later by his article “On the Question of Jewish art”.

Originally it was introduction to an exhibition of 35 Jewish artists held in Zurich in 1929. The publication of the article in *Gazith* must have had a considerable influence on artists and writers in the Yishuv as reflected in their discussions of Jewish art in the following years. This publication is also mentioned by historians as a key point of the relationship between Jewish artists in Palestine and the Jewish School of Paris. I was therefore surprised to find out that this article was already published once before, in November 1930, in the literary supplement of the daily *Davar*. And it had quite an immediate effect: within a few weeks, in December 1930, the writer and poet Ya’akov Koplevitch (later known as Yeshurun Keshet) published a short piece entitled ‘What is Jewishness in art’ in *Ha-poel Ha-tzair*, the organ of the Mapai workers’ party. Koplevich was a writer who was often engaged in art criticism. Early in 1931 he published in the writers association’s weekly *Moznayim* a long essay on Judaism and art which he had written several years earlier. The merely two weeks that passed between Koplewitz’s two texts on art and Judaism in two different periodicals demonstrate not only his own interest in the topic but also the willing of the editors to present this issue to their public.

Why exactly the topic of Jewish art came to the fore in the Yishuv in this particular time is not yet clear. What is clear is that most writers on the subject agreed more or less that Jews shared some sort of innate characteristic, or psychological traits and those qualities enabled their

unique expression in art. Writers were aware of course of the difficulty to point out what is Jewish about Jewish art, especially when thinking of Soutine who never painted anything that can be defined as Jewish in its subject. Thus Koplevitz, when writing in 1930 about the local artist Haim Gliksberg, argues that the Jewish character of his works emerges not in the subject matter but in “something hidden and yet specific, a certain ‘spot’ which is characteristic and imperceptible...but only sensed in the work of an artist who is ‘Jewish’ in his essence”. For the true Jewishness in art, he argues, one should look in “the hidden racial elements, in the mystery of the Jewish soul.”

Such essentialist view of the Jew appeared in many variations later on. The opening article of the first issue of *Gazith* proclaims that art in its purity “is the fruit of the creative spirit of the individual who is isolated in his painful agitation and fear that is grieving in his soul. But in any of its manifestations it is fully immersed in the general vision of the race, the racial core.”

Jewish race discourse has received some critical attention lately by scholars of different disciplines. In writings on art, the notion of race was not a biological concept but rather a psychological one, referring frequently to emotions and character. Some of the features were attributed to non-Jewish artists, too especially Rembrandt. But what is significant here is that the concept of race and racial characteristics being the origin of high art allowed Jewish artists in Palestine to perceive themselves as equal to Jewish artists in the Diaspora. The artistic vision no longer stems from the land and the physical world, but rather from the soul of the artist; and no longer does it reflect the national aspirations as a collective mission. Instead it is the expression of the individual artist. Not exactly post-Zionism but certainly a view that does not distinguish between the Jews in Eretz Yisrael and the Jews elsewhere.

Talpir in his inaugural article of *Gazith* describes in equal terms the important role of the Jewish artistic creation in present time “not only in our regenerated society, but also in every single place where the Jewish collective achieved a certain self expression albeit sometimes in a foreign language.”

To the best of my knowledge, this was the only time in the history of Israeli art that Jewish artists from Palestine looked up to Jewish artists in the Diaspora as a model for true and authentic modern art. Moreover, they ascribed the artistic achievements of the Parisian artists to their being Jewish, part of the Jewish race.

In his introduction to the album of contemporary Jewish painters mentioned earlier Talpir describes the suffering of the Jewish artists upon their arrival in Paris and their encounter with the great school of French art to which they gradually joined. However, “in spite of their adaptation of the manners of this school... a Jewish heart beats in their chest and they have a feeling of their own, and a sharp and special sense of their race, which helped in the formation of their painting. This racial uniqueness preserved the character of their painting even without intending to...” Talpir goes on to explain the particular psychological aspect of the painting of these artists created in the darkness of their studios concluding that “hence a certain psychic sickliness hovers over our painting in the last generation.”

The source of such ideas was no doubt Waldemar George whose writings provided most of the repertoire for later commentators. Writing of Soutine as a free, original artist Waldemar George described him as transgressive, infringing all boundaries, his art recognising no laws, homeland or tradition. The origin of all these, “The curse that afflicts this young painter” he writes, “is part of his race, determining his emotional life [...] his art seems to be bleeding [...] every drop of blood creating new painful and tragic visions, powerful in their observation.”

Written in support of Soutine, the text nonetheless echoes the often vicious attacks on Jewish artists in Paris since the mid 1920s. Jews had occupied a significant position in the Paris art world since the beginning of the 20th century as artists, collectors and dealers. But the sudden success enjoyed by Jewish artists alongside a growth in immigration – especially by Jews – from eastern Europe following the First World War gave rise to the idea of ‘the invasion of barbarian hordes that will destroy French culture’. Indeed the term *École de Paris* (the School of Paris) was applied to foreign artists in Paris – mainly the Jewish Montparnasse circle – as opposed to the *École Française* (the French School). In 1931, an article calling for the demise of the *École de Paris* in favour of the *École Française*, was written by no other than Waldemar George, by then a champion of French nationalism. The *École de Paris*, he wrote, “is a house of cards built in Montparnasse... Its ideology is oriented against that of the French School... The moment has come for France to turn in upon itself and to find in its own soil the seeds of its salvation.”

The work and views of the Jewish-Polish critic Georges Jarocinski known as Waldemar George has been the subject of a few studies by Romy Golan and by Matthew Affron. The

interesting point is that he turned from supporting modernist art and leftist politics in his early career to supporting fascism in the 1930's, including a publicised meeting he had with Mussolini. His praise for Jewish art in the late 1920s which was aimed at a predominantly Jewish audience echoes, nonetheless, all usual slanders against Jews and Jewish art – its being eclectic, nomadic, oriental, irrational, mystic, Semitic, anti-naturalist and anti-classical, nervous, restless and double-faced. Regarding the Jews as persistent enemies of Greco-Roman culture he claims that “The Jews are the most active and dangerous agents of this effort of decomposition. Their nihilism and their cosmopolitanism help to chip away at the foundation of an excessively worldly edifice.”

The enthusiastic welcoming of these views in Eretz Yisrael is somewhat odd, particularly in view of his position on issues of national culture. Waldemar George held that Jewish art was fundamentally international, even supranational. Accepting these ideas meant that Jewish artists in Palestine no longer sought to link their work to the country as part of the national revival. The concept of Jewish art as promoted in Eretz Yisrael of the 1930s offered an alternative identity: art is understood in terms of the modernist expression of the individual inner self, and at the same time relates to a collective, ascribed with certain psychological traits and historical experience. This allowed artists to present their art as simultaneously personal and universal, the voice of the individual which is also an expression of the collective spirit. This collective, however, was not exclusively Zionist. On the contrary, the identification of artists from Eretz Yisrael with Jewish artists in Paris blurred for a while the traditional boundaries between Eretz Yisrael and the Diaspora as emphasised in the concept of Negation of Exile (שלילת הגלות).

The idea of Jewish universalism in the art discourse was short lived. By the 1940s the model for modern high art remained French, but no longer Jewish or Diasporic. The disputes in Israeli art were set in the binary model of localism vs. universalism, whereas the Jewish experience, in art, in life and in death was pushed aside of the Israeli art canon for many years to come.

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