Seeing Silence: Jewish Mystical Experience Refracted through the Art of Mark Rothko

By: JOSH ROSENFELD

An argentine abstraction approaching form
And suddenly denying itself away
There was an insolid billowing of the solid
Night's moonlight lake was neither water nor air
(Wallace Stevens, *Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination*)

You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.
(Deut. 4:12)

And all the people saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain, and the people saw and trembled; so they stood from afar. (Ex. 20:18)

The Voices: They saw what was audible, which is impossible to see elsewhere
(Mekhilta)

Meaning making is for the sake of life.
(Michael Fishbane, Sacred Attunement, 23)

I

A curious literary quirk arises in the sections of the Torah that initially describe the construction of the Tabernacle and the vessels within it. Time and time again,[1] the Torah uses the phrases *ma'aseh hoshev* and *ma'aseh horash* to describe the work of construction, craft, and artistry necessary

[1] Ex. 26:1, 26:31, 28:6, 28:15, 36:8, 36:35; 28:11, Jer. 10:9. The usage of the term *horash* specifically by the precious stones of the *hoshen* deserves treatment in light of the foregoing exegesis, because of the "speaking" nature of these stones, communicating the divine word via the hieromancy of the *urim ve-thummin*. This can be said to be an aspect of God acting, and the nation remaining silent (*va-atem taharishun*; Ex. 12:12), but further exploration of this notion lies beyond the scope of our discussion.

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for the *Mishkan*. These two phrases resist easy translation and interpretation, although Onkelos[2] translates both as *'ovad uman*, the work of an artisan.[3] I would like to suggest that these two phrases, ubiquitous in the Torah's first description of arts, architecture, and crafts,[4] convey a deeper message about how an individual is to perceive and relate to art. Art in its highest form might bring us to an experiential realm that parallels religion as a pure conception of the natural world that surrounds us. G.W. Hegel (1770–1831), in *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, put it as follows:

> Art can serve many purposes, and even be a pastime, but we want to examine the kind of art that is free in its aim and means. This is the only true art. Its highest function is only served when it has established itself in a sphere which it shares with religion and philosophy, becoming thereby a mode and form through which the Divine, the profoundest interests of mankind, and spiritual truths of the widest range, are brought home to consciousness and expressed. It is in works of art that nations have deposited the richest ideas they possess, and often art serves as a key of interpretation to the wisdom and understanding of peoples. Philosophy and religion also do this, but art appeals to the senses and is nearer to Nature and to our sensitive and emotional life.[5]

Ma'aseh ḥoshev and *ma'aseh ḥorash* can thus be understood as referring to the "true art" that Hegel gestures to. The crafting of the Tabernacle and its vessels was expressly directed toward making possible the indwelling of the divine,[6] to allow heaven and earth to fuse through the service of God made possible through metallurgy, weaving, carpentry, embroidery, fashion design, dyeing, and other carefully designed crafts. The impact of all this was meant to drive one to spiritual-philosophical reflection, a *ma'aseh ḥoshev*—a thought-provoking action. Ultimately, this

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2 Ex. 26:1, 28:11

3 According to Rashi, in the case of the precious stones being described in the latter, specifically a lapidary.

4 I am fully aware that we do have instances of shipbuilding and instrument-making that already appear earlier in the Torah text, as well as a limited instance of fashion in Joseph's technicolor dreamcoat, however the sustained engagement of the Torah with art and craftsmanship at the Tabernacle is unsurpassed.

5 George W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (trans. T.M. Knox; Oxford University Press, 1975), Vol. 1, Introduction, pp. 7-8

6 Ex. 25:8

is an *ineffable* encounter, an experience not easily put into words, that renders the individual mute and dumbstruck—a *ma'aseh ḥeresh*.[7]

In the following short essay, I would like to open a dialogue between modern art and Jewish mystical sources. The notion of art—with an emphasis on the importance and communicative properties of color—as representing the ineffable, a religious experience, finds surprising expression in traditional Jewish texts, and in order to facilitate this particular *siaḥ*, we will explore the work of one Jewish artist in particular, the great and enigmatic painter Mark Rothko. To my mind, Rothko's art reflects the dual aspects of *ma'aseh ḥoshev* and *ma'aseh ḥorash/ḥeresh* so emblematic of the Torah's description of the artistry in the Tabernacle. Rothko, who very rarely openly related his painting to his own Jewish background, very often *did* connect his work to the realm of religion and philosophy in a Hegelian sense, and in my mind represents a singularly fertile grounding for our discussion.

II

Mark Rothko (1903–1970), born Marcus Rothkovich in Dvinsk, Russia, is counted amongst the most influential and important artists of the past century.[8] His generation revolutionized and reimagined the essence of abstract painting. Rothko himself underwent radical changes in his artistic style, "from a figurative visual repertoire to an abstract style rooted in the active relationship of the observer to the painting."[9] Although there is much to say regarding Rothko's early works, which exhibit a representative, somewhat mythical dimension that easily lends itself to

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7 The terms *ḥoshev* and *ḥo(e)resh* are conflated in *Targum Onkeles* as well as in R. Ya'akov Tzvi Mecklenburg, *Ha-ketav Ve-haKabbalah*, Ex. 35:35—explicitly linking the phrases to mean "a thought-out, deliberate action." See also R. Moshe Alshich's introduction to his *Alshich al ha-Torah* where "*ma'aseh ḥoshev*" is used to refer to the interpreter's role in deciphering the word of God in the Torah, but that one is enjoined to economize on their words because ultimately, "to God, silence [*ḥarashut*] is praise." Finally, R. Eliyahu Mizrachi in his supercommentary on Rashi (Ex. 28:11) also understands *ma'aseh ḥoresh* to mean "artistry" in general and not just that of stone cutting.

8 Numerous biographies of Rothko have emerged in recent years. Two particularly good studies of the artist's life are Annie Cohen-Solal, *Mark Rothko: Toward the Light in the Chapel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), and the unique perspective offered by Rothko's son, Christopher, *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

9 Jacob Baal Teshuva, *Mark Rothko: Pictures as Drama* (Hohenzollernring: Taschen, 2003), p. 7.

interpretation, this essay will focus almost entirely upon Rothko's mature stage, the color field paintings most prominently associated with the artist.

Rothko's father, Jacob, sent young Marcus to *ḥeder* as a young boy, where Marcus studied and practiced the Orthodox Judaism to which his father had returned after a series of particularly brutal pogroms. The Rothkoviches spoke Hebrew, Russian, and Yiddish in their home, and due to the constant fear of the Czarist authorities and the strict regimen of ritual and study, Rothko would later recount that he did not have much of a childhood.

The Rothkoviches immigrated to the United States, settling in Portland, Oregon, where they changed their surname to Roth, later to Rothko. Marcus matriculated to receive a scholarship at Yale, although after two years there he had dropped out. Increasingly ensconced in the art world, teaching and sketching constantly, Rothko eventually joined an avant-garde *minyan* of artists, all Jewish, called "The Ten." As painter Adolph Gottlieb put it, "we were outcasts, roughly expressionistic painters. We were not acceptable to most dealers and collectors. We banded together for the purpose of mutual support." Although Rothko was still painting in an abstract, yet representational form, it was at this juncture that theories of color, and of "pictures as drama" first became an artistic concern. In the meantime, Rothko wrote extensively on art and even planned a full study on the development of creativity—a theoretical analysis of painting.

Rothko's art evolved from what might be termed expressionism to varying degrees of abstraction, even dabbling in surrealism for a time, until he reached his final stage of color field painting, beginning in 1946, but presaged in earlier works Rothko dubbed "multiforms." It was these iconic, large-scale "painterly" works that would become synonymous with Rothko, and it is in these paintings which so forcefully resist interpretation that we will focus our study.[10] In searching for religious, *Jewish* meaning in these works, Rothko's own words are instructive:

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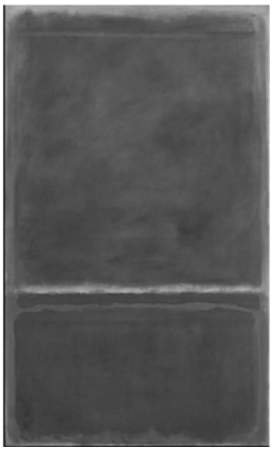
[10] In many of his interviews, and even in his artistic manifesto of 1943 (written with Adolph Gottlieb), Rothko resisted categorization of himself within a particular school of art. However, we may playfully suggest that there is one useful categorization of Rothko, viewed through a Jewish prism: "Painters too are divided between *misnagdim* and *hasidim*." Liebermann and his generation were *misnagdim* in art. But the new art among Jews began with *hasidim*. From a Letter of Marc Chagall to his wife, Bella, after meeting German Impressionist painter Max Liebermann, quoted in Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 358, quoted in Bezalel Naor, *The Kabbalah of Relation* (Spring Valley, NY: Orot, 2012), introduction. As we shall see in this short essay, we would seek to categorize

> I am not an abstractionist… I am not interested in the relationships of color or form or anything else… I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on—and the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I *communicate* those basic human emotions… The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point![11]

III



Green (top) and Maroon (bottom), 1953[12]

רבי אבא אמר יפה הוא, אבל כך אמר המאור הקדוש (דהיינו רבי שמעון), לבן זהו אברהם שנלבן בלובן של אש, (על ידי נמרוד שהפילו לאור כשדים). אדום זה ודאי יצחק, ירוק זהו יעקב העומד בין ב' הצבעים… (זוה"ק פנחס לה.)

R. Abba said, that is all fine, however this is what the Great Illuminator (R. Shimon) said: White is Abraham, who was scorched in the white-hot fires (of Nimrod's furnace in Ur Kasdim). Red is

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Rothko not only as a *Hasid*, but even as a mystical painter, a type of "canvas Kabbalist" in his final mature stage.

11 'Notes from a conversation with Selden Rodman, 1956,' in *Writings on Art: Mark Rothko* (2006) ed. Miguel López-Remiro, p. 119.

12 All of the artworks referenced herein may be viewed in full color at <http://www.wikiart.org/en/mark-rothko>.

> certainly Isaac, green is Jacob who stands between the two colors… (Zohar, *Pinḥas* 35a)[13]

With these words the Zohar gives us one of the first color-theories in Jewish sources.[14] The great Safedian Kabbalist R. Moshe Cordovero (RaMaK; 1522–1570) fans the Zoharic spark into a flame when he wrote that "the matter of colors is an apt metaphor for the divine gestures and expressions devolving from the *sefirot*… there is no system better for allegorizing and conceptualizing their distinctions than colors, which fissure, divide, and proliferate according to the relationships of one color to another."[15] R. Cordovero dedicated an entire section of his magnum opus, *Pardes Rimmonim,* to his spiritual color theory, calling it "The Gate

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13 See also *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Ex. 26:1, and Cf. R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah*, Ex. 28:1 - לבן הוא צבע הטהרה, אדום צבע החיים, תכלת צבע האלקות שכרתה ברית עם האדם, ובהרכב זה של הצבעים גדול שיעורו של הצבע האדום משאר הצבעים ביחס של 2:1, כך מסמלים ארבעה הצבעים האלה כשהם שזורים באבנטו של הכהן, את המטרה הרמה של שאיפת הכהן לשלמות, חיי עשיה בכל התחומים, חיים הנבנים על יסוד של טהרה מוסרית והחדורים רוח אלוקית...

14 Professor Elliot Wolfson points out that well before the emergence of the Zohar as a mystical corpus, sustained engagement with color representation in Kabbalah was undertaken by the *Ḥassidei Ashkenaz,* and references to specific colors as representative of divine attributes appear as well in the writings of R. Abraham Abulafia [personal communication]. For more on the significance of colors as a Kabbalistic and mystical motif in Judaism, see Gershom Scholem's pioneering study, "Colors and Their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism," in *Diogenes* vol. 108 (1979). See the important studies of Moshe Idel, primarily focused on the theme and significance of color as a tool of meditative visualization—especially in prayer—in the Kabbalistic writings of the little-known R. David b. Yehudah he-Ḥasid in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 103–112; "Kabbalistic Prayer and Colors," in ed. D. Blumenthal, *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. III (Atlanta Scholars Press, 1988), pp. 17–28, and "Visualization of Colors, I: David ben Yehudah he-Ḥasid's Kabbalistic Diagram" in *Ars Judaica* vol. 11 (2015), pp. 31–54. For more on R. David b. Yehudah he-Ḥasid, see *The Book of Mirrors: Sefer Mar'ot ha-Zov'eot by R. David b. Yehudah he-Ḥasid* (ed. Daniel Chanan Matt; Brown University: Scholar's Press, 1982), pp. 1–5.

15 R. Moshe Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, 10:5 (*Sha'ar ha-gevanim*), seemingly based on Zohar 3:137a-b and 1:51a; The RaMaK explicitly states the purpose of the chapter as being "an explanation of the colors… as used in the Zohar and in the words of R. Shimon b. Yohai." Idel posits that the device of color visualization was yet another link in the chain of Kabbalistic attempts to interpret and perfect the concept of *kavvanah* and mentions the possible Sufi influences in the emergence of color as a prayer device. See Idel, "Kabbalistic Prayer and Color", p. 23-24.

of Colors." His conceptualization and categorization of colors provided an influential framework for later Kabbalists to use in their theorization of the Divine attributes and our understanding of how God interacts with this world. Elsewhere, R. Cordovero elaborates on the role of colors in achieving ideal mystical intention in prayer:

> there is no doubt that colors [serve as] an introduction to the functions of the *sefirot* and the drawing down of Divine effluence from them. It is for this reason that when one desires to draw down the effluence of mercy from loving kindness they should mentally illustrate [=*yetzayer*] before themselves the name of the *sefirah* in its respective necessary color according to the color of this Divine trait—if absolute loving kindness, then pure white, and if not absolute [loving kindness], then [off]white like the plaster of the sanctuary [=*heikhal*], and so forth as we shall explain in the *Gate of Kavvanah*…
> It is from the visible colors and the colors that we can imagine as physical in our mind's eye that the spirit and soul may be excited and uplifted higher and higher from one reality to another until the very locus of [the soul's] sustenance and inception, uplifted according to [the level of] its illustration [=*tziyyurah*][16]

For his part, Rothko pointedly downplayed the centrality of color and its meaning in his art. Art historian Jacob Baal Teshuva writes that "perhaps in fear of being described too one-dimensionally, Rothko deliberately denied that the medium of color interested him, although it was plain that color was his primary source of expression" (Baal Teshuva, 57). From the perspective of the viewer, it is clear that for Rothko, color "held mythical powers, which transported themselves to the viewer." Rothko even suggested optimal viewing distances (46 cm) for these large-scale canvases so that the viewer would feel as if enveloped and subsumed by the color fields before them. As for the scale of the execution, Rothko admitted, "I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is painting something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them, however […] is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human."[17]

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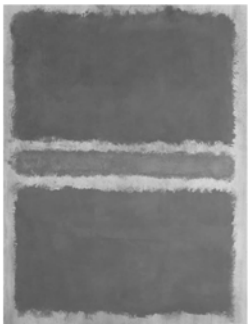
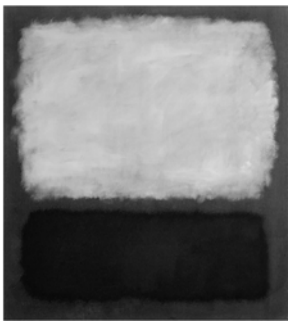
16 *Pardes Rimmonim*, 10:4. Idel cites these passages (ad loc.) and observes that they very closely parallel the Kabbalistic function of colors in the manuscript writings of R. David ben Yehudah he-Ḥasid, and that until the Safedian re-interpretation of Kavvanah in the 16th century, the color visualization method from the 13th century was actually "the main Kabbalistic interpretation of Kavvanah."

17 See Anna Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 119–121.

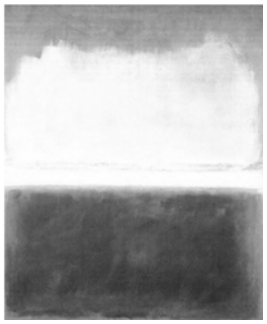
King David, remembered in perpetuity for the contours his poetry gave to the Divine, wrote that ultimately, *lekha dumiyah tehillah*—for You, silence is [also] praise (Ps. 65:2). As we shall see, Rothko's paintings spoke volumes in their impenetrability and seeming silence, with Rothko himself telling an interviewer that "silence is so accurate" when it comes to interpreting his works.[18]



Untitled, 1966
(Blue Divided by Blue)



Blue and Grey, 1962



No. 8, 1952

The technique Rothko used was as much about the process of creating color as its application to canvas. Rothko would mix and experiment with dozens of different pigments and expressions of the same color until the notion of "color" was thrown into question. Upon close inspection, the viewer perceives layers of paint applied in thin washes to create the fields of color. Rothko loved this minimalist abstraction for its lack of representation and urged his audience to seek clarity and personal meaning by projecting their own psyche and ideas onto his canvas. He revered the "elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea and between the idea and the observer."[19] In a telling quote, he aspires toward a visual experience that transcends mere representation or even abstraction: "A painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience."[20] For Rothko, this was the element of the sublime that he and the *minyan* of "The Ten" sought to capture in their art—the image that is no longer an image, the *un*painting. It is telling that Rothko was wont to refer to his works as "our paintings," and stated, "art is a consummated experience between picture and viewer. Nothing

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18 Seldon Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1957), pp. 92–94.

19 Lorena O'Neil, "The Spirituality of Mark Rothko," OZY Magazine 11.23.1.3

20 Dorothy Seiberling, 'Mark Rothko,' *LIFE* magazine (16 November 1959), p. 82.

should stand between them." In this way, Rothko's paintings simultaneously deny and invite a host of interpretations, they demand *darsheini*, unravel and elucidate me.

This denial of ready interpretation, the refusal of narrative in Rothko's multiforms, is what confers their numinous quality. Rudolph Otto described this essential marker of the spiritual-religious as the *mysterium tremendum*, the mystical core of religious experience.[21] One of the great contemporary philosophers of religion, Elliot Wolfson,[22] repeatedly highlights this sense of mystery as central to the Kabbalistic conception of the Divine in his works. He explains that the reason we call Hebrew "the Holy Tongue" is because of the "small still voice" (*kol demamah dakkah*; I Kings 19:12) with which God expressed himself, in the Zohar identified with *tohu*—primordial, undifferentiated chaos.[23] Wolfson writes:

Significantly, in one Zoharic passge,[24] *qol demamah dakah* is identified as *tohu*, the primordial chaos, "the place that has no color or *image*," that which "is not contained in the secret of the image."[25] It follows that when

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21 *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 12–23. Cf. R. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (ShaGaR), who once remarked: אי אפשר לתפוס את הדת בלי הגרעין המסטי שלה—"it is impossible to grasp religion without its mystical core."
For more on the religious quality and the role of (suspension of) belief in the appreciation of Rothko's oeuvre, see the excellent article by Peter Schjeldahl, "Rothko and Belief," in *The Hydrogen Jukebox* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 9–18.

22 For a moving overview of Wolfson and the significance of his contribution to Jewish scholarship, see Joey Rosenfeld, "Dorshei Yichudcha: A Portrait of Professor Elliot R. Wolfson," *The Seforim Blog*, 6/21/15.

23 Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 294-5 fn. 188–191. Professor Wolfson delivered a lecture at the Rothko Chapel in Houston, "The Path Beyond the Path: Mysticism and the Spiritual Quest for Universal Singularity," on April 7, 2011 as part of the Chapel's "Spirit Matters" lecture series. It may be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/24132743>. Wolfson is himself an accomplished artist, painting in mystical abstraction with startlingly beautiful results. His works may be viewed at <http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/faculty/wolfson/paintings_2010.html>.

24 Zohar 1:16a; Wolfson also brilliantly cites b. Berakhot 58a for the story of the blind man's recognition of the arrival of the King.

25 Elsewhere, Wolfson discusses a crucial distinction made in a Zoharic text between "revealed" and "concealed" colors. See *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 379–383. This binary supports the approach taken by some critics

this voice is contemplated (*mistaklin beih*), "it has no image at all," for "everything has a garment except for this one." ...There is a natural shift from the acoustic to the ocular, as these are widely considered by Kabbalists to be two prisms through which a phenomenon is apprehended. What does one see when one contemplates the *qol demamah daqah*? A vision unseen, dimly clear, a subtle, silent voice, mutely spoken.

Rothko's paintings exhibit this essential quality of *tohu*, especially in his later monochromatic works. At first glance, the color fields appear uniform and mundane. As the viewer takes them in, the textures, layers, and brushwork become apparent, soon revealing that what at first seemed static is actually a dynamic, pulsating expression of pure color, in all its gradations and variations. When more than one color field is at play, it is the play between those colors, the ways in which they bleed and blend into each other through gradients and blurring liminality, that creates a sense of drama and narrative. The *tohu va-bohu* (the confoundment of the initial chaos) begins to disclose meaning and descends into the realm of representation and sign,[26] to each individual according to their interpretation and experience as a viewer.[27]

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that Rothko was attempting to speak a language of nothingness in his paintings, a type of erasure through painting that obscured any possibility of interpretation—the (non)image.

26 This is reminiscent of the Kabbalistic doctrine of *tzimtzum*, the primordial contraction of the unknowable infinite divine and its descent into the myriad gradations and details of physical existence, however a fuller discussion is beyond the scope of this essay.

27 For example, I would like to for a moment entertain the notion of the numbered multiform color-field paintings (by this point in his career, Rothko would only give numbers or terse color descriptions of his paintings) as a corpus representing the *urim ve-thummim*, the precious stones representing each of the 12 tribes of Israel on the breastplate of the High Priest. Rabbinic literature is replete with a detailed, nuanced description of the colors and qualities of each stone, together used for the process of hieromancy and worn during the Priest's sacred duties. See, for example, Num. Rabbah 6:2: באותות, סימנין היו לכל נשיא ונשיא מפה וצבע על כל מפה ומפה כצבע של אבנים טובות שהיו על לבו של אהרן, מהם למדין המלכיות להיות עושין מפה וצבע לכל מפה ומפה... ראובן אבנו אודם ומפה שלו צבוע אדום... שמעון פטדה ומפה שלו צבוע ירוק... לוי ברקת ומפה שלו צבוע שליש לבן ושליש שחור ושליש אדום... יהודה נופך וצבע מפה שלו דמותו כמין שמים... יששכר ספיר ומפה שלו צבוע שחור דומה לכחול... זבולן יהלום וצבע מפה שלו לבנה... דן לשם וצבע מפה שלו דומה לספיר... גד שבו, וצבע מפה שלו לא לבן ולא שחור אלא מעורב שחור ולבן... נפתלי אחלמה וצבע מפה שלו דומה ליין צלול שאין אדמותו עזה... אשר תרשיש וצבע מפה שלו דומה לאבן יקרה שמתקשטות בו הנשים... יוסף שוהם וצבע מפה שלו שחור עד מאד... בנימין ישפה וצבע מפה שלו דומה לכל הצבעים.

Similarly, the Torah reminds us that during the theophany at Sinai, we did not perceive any discernable image, despite the presence of a synesthesic audiovisual experience of thunder and lightning, *kolot u-berakim*. Nevertheless, the revelation was enshrouded with a distinct lack of definitive clarity—the heavy fog of doubt, *anan kaved al ha-har* (Ex. 19:15–20). The initial experience of the Divine at Sinai was so immediate, powerful, and direct that the Midrash teaches the people were thunderstruck in this transcendent experience, and that their souls momentarily departed from their bodies.[28] The revelation at Sinai is described in sources as having been simultaneously a collective and personal experience. Each individual experienced a revelation on the level of prophecy according to their own understanding and personality.[29] It is the process of continually interpreting this revelation, refracted through the generations, that lends Torah its dynamic quality of *Torat Ḥayyim*, a living Torah. The great scholar of Judaism, Michael Fishbane, gives voice to this notion of interpretation and exegesis as a quintessentially *Jewish* act, a religious duty:

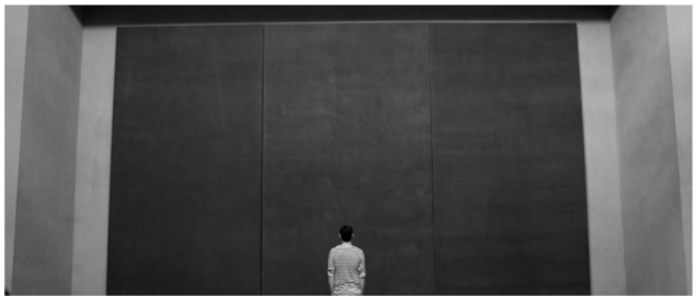
The spiritual transformation of the exegete *through exegesis* is the profound truth repeatedly dramatized...This is so principally because Scripture is a configuration of Divinity; accordingly, the interpreter is affected by the transcendental features which he penetrates in the course of study… Once again, these deeper truths are not mere surface intrusions, but deep wisdom recovered through exegesis.[30]

Perhaps each of those roughly square, mysterious paintings represents another facet of the stones on the breastplate, a type of modern divination through the power of artistic creative expression.

28 *Shemot Rabbah* 29:4.

29 See, for example, "long" commentary of Ibn Ezra on Ex. 20, s.v. "*sha'aluni*"; R. Schneur Zalman of Liady, *Likkutei Torah* 15b, s.v. "*u-biur*"; R. Avraham Yitzḥak ha-Kohen Kook, *Orot ha-Kodesh* 1:27, *Shemonah Kevatsim* 5:14. For more on the interplay between personal and communal revelation in Judaism, see Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 70–72.

30 Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 110-11.



Mark Rothko's final project, The Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, is perhaps the most powerful, arresting expression of the infinitude of exegetical possibility suggested by Modern Art. After a long bout with depression, Rothko took his own life before he would see the completion of the project, consisting of 14 canvases (3 triptychs, 5 individual) of various intoxicating shades of black, blue, violet, brown, and purple. The paintings manage to be paradoxically simple and complex at the same time, and a visit to the octagonal multifaith/non-faith chapel, surrounded by the huge canvases, is described as a "humbling" and "overwhelming" experience.[31] At the dedication ceremony, Rothko's patron, Dominique de Menil, said the following words, which "deserve to be quoted at length" (Baal Teshuva, 74-75):

The more I live with them, the more impressed I am. Rothko wanted to bring his paintings the greatest poignancy they were capable of. He wanted them to be intimate and timeless. Indeed they are… We are cluttered with images and only abstract art can bring us to the threshold

[31] Still others report feelings of rapture and joy in the same space, what we might reference to access the sublime as depicted in Rothko's work. See further, Wessel Stoker, "The Rothko Chapel Paintings and the 'Urgency of the Transcendent Experience'," in *The International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Oct., 2008), pp. 89–102:

> The sublime refers in general to contradictory content: the fascination by something which hurts or frightens or leads to lack of understanding. There is something immense which makes one experience one's own smallness. Described in that way, the sublime can refer both to transcendent religious experiences and to secular experiences… as a contradictory concept of both fear and fascination, the sublime can also be applied to the chapel paintings, i.e., as a reference to religious transcendence. The transcendent is not invoked as an experience of beauty, as in Christian theology, but as a sublime experience, 'as the absolutely unknowable void, upon whose brink we finite beings must dizzily hover.'

of the divine.[32] It took courage for Rothko to paint nocturnal murals...[33] The dark paintings on the walls seemed to mirror the melancholy and loneliness which Rothko apparently felt in the last years of his life. The art historian Barbara Rose compared the new chapel with the *Sistine Chapel* itself… In each case, she wrote, 'the paintings seem to glow mysteriously from within.'

Many have seen in Rothko's dark, final executions for the Houston Chapel a sense of foreboding and pain, mirroring the inner torment that eventually took Rothko's life.[34] There is room, however, to perhaps end on a note of interpretation that is uplifting. The glowing, luminous quality that Rothko's brilliant brushwork was able to lend to paintings that otherwise might represent that foreboding void hints to the faith of the faithful that there is indeed light and revelation within the darkness. Much like the blind beggar in the famous story of R. Na<u>h</u>man of Breslov's "Story of the Seven Beggars," perhaps the occlusion of sight that is the blackness of the canvas actually comes to illustrate the "true sight" that is able to

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32 This is deeply resonant with the Kabbalistic concept that the most profound revelation of God is in *'ayin*, or "nothingness." Only at this level, where our human perception is stripped of all illusion and preconception, can we readily encounter and "make space" for the presence of God, that which is *en sof*, without end. See R. Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach: Samuel Wieser, 1985), 299-300.

33 I always understood the surrounding of a spiritual place, a place of worship with these images, visions of dark surfaces and infinite black voids, as alluding to the "dark night of the soul" that is often suppressed, but in fact such a crucial aspect of the believer/doubter's soul, regardless of religion. In this sense, the Rothko Chapel attempts to embody a "theology of protest," expressing anti-religiosity in the most spiritual and respectful terms possible, but not allowing us for a moment to turn away from the void, as every angle in the chapel reveals another chasm.

34 Some speculate that a covert reference point for the color field paintings are the mass graves of Jews massacred in pogroms near Rothko's childhood hometown of Dvinsk. See James E. B. Breslin, *Rothko: A Biography* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 25, 154-155. One of the most powerful interpretations I have heard is that Rothko was painting "from the other side of death, trying to communicate the experience of darkness as light" [Elliot R. Wolfson, personal communication]. This idea evokes the notion of the unknowable "behind the curtain" [=*a<u>h</u>arei ha-pargod*] that appears from time to time in rabbinic literature. For more on "darkness as light" and "light as darkness" see R. Eliyahu of Vilna [Vilna Gaon], *Sefer Yahel Ohr* (Vilna, 1881), *bi'ur ha-hekhalot*, 16a-b, and the explanation of the concept of "black light" [=*nehora ukhmah*] in *Sefer he-Arakhim Ḥabad* (ed. R. Yoel Kahn; Brooklyn: Kehot, 1975), pp. 4–31.

push away all superficial imagery and representation[35]—in the sense of "thou shalt not make for me no idol nor graven image" [Ex. 20:3]. Only by the clearing away of all *temunah* and approaching the pure abstraction of pure color was Rothko able to finally express the spiritual sublime that he—and we—seek in our own religious quests.

גַּל עֵינַי וְאַבִּיטָה נִפְלָאוֹת מִתּוֹרָתֶךָ.

Uncover my eyes that I might behold—in everything—wonders of your Torah.

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[35] See further R. Yair Dreyfus, *Ḥatuna Shel Avudim* (Efrata, 2011), pp. 79–84, citing, *inter alia*, Nobel Prize laureate Jose Saramago's novel *Blindness* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997).