



מסירה, 2010
עיפרון ודיו על נייר, 100×70
אוסף פרדה ואיזק עזיאל

Messira (Transmission), 2010
Pencil and ink on paper, 100×70
Collection of Freda and Izak Uziyel

IN THE SECRET OF THE MOON: TEHILLA



Rachel Verliebter

In the exhibition “Tehilla,” Yifat Bezael explores the destruction of the Temple and the cultural shift that took place in its aftermath, when the once-tangible House of God was replaced by faith, manifesting the lack of an external abode. Against the primal fear arising from this void, Bezael invokes a series of images of a home that is gone, but not silent.

By turning mystical allegories originating from kabbalistic myth and literature into contemporary images, Bezael reinvents the image of the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of divinity, and the objective of the priest’s service in both the lower and the supernal Temple. Her works visualize the aesthetic experience of the invisible along with

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In Lurianic Kabbalah, the concept of “reshimu” refers to the residue that is left in the vacuum after the contraction (*tzimtzum*) and departure of the infinite light that preceded creation. To enable creation to take place, this light of the infinite had to contract itself, leaving a vacant space. This space is marked by a trace of primordial light.

the awe and fear evoked by this vision. Displaying representations of emptiness, her works constantly seek drawing techniques that create an airy image. Hers is an art in the shadow of faith: her visual language traces a shadow that is intangible – the “reshimu” of belief, the residual impression

of her encounter with creation.¹ Though technically meticulous, the drawing resembles a vestige in its appearance, a ghostly trace of the brush that passed over it.

Upon entering the exhibition, viewers encounter the video *Ha-Cheder* (The Room, 2013), which combines realistic photography with animation comprised of drawings. In this self-portrait, Bezael seems to be drawing the exhibition from within her room, on an endless river of paper, as the visitors come in. The video offers an exegetic reading of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, showing

The translations of the biblical passages cited in this article are based on different standard versions, including the Jewish Publication Society of America Version (JPS) and the King James Version (KJV).

her prayer room, a confessional between an oubliette and a studio, where her creativity is let loose. The Hebrew title, *Ha-Cheder*, refers to the classroom in which young children are initiated into the study of the Scriptures. Similarly, the video shows the private place in which the artist explores the secret of her being, while facing solitude. In her research of the ethos of priesthood, the visionary ascent of the chariot riders, and the story of the Shekhinah, she discerns great loneliness with which she identifies.

Featured on the floor is *History of Fear* (2015) – a drawing of the Temple’s layout that embodies the trace of an absent corporeality. A door stands wide open into nowhere at the center of the drawing, inviting us to contemplate the infinite. The Temple’s chambers drawn on the floor resemble a trace of the physical Temple in its absence. In the seventh chamber, home of the Holy of Holies according to Hekhalot literature, the eye encounters the nothingness hinted at by Psalm 121: “My help comes from the void.”² This metaphysical void is also reflected in the emptiness of the bare walls: with the exception of the wall on which the video is projected, all the walls are bare. The viewers stroll through a landscape of monumental drawings resting on back frames. The drawings stand, like installations, on coulisses which are not concealed, but rather show what happens behind the scenes,

thus manifesting the constant tension between the hidden and the revealed, as the Zohar says: “Woe if I reveal! Woe if I do not reveal.”³

History of Fear alludes to the solitude experienced by the believer who turns to his God until the latter succeeds in germinating the inner transformation prescribed by the verse “and let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them,”⁴ whereby the internalized experience of the encounter with the Divine dwells in the human heart.

This process is similar to the psychological change undergone by the High Priest on the eve of his entrance into the Holy of Holies. In a similar manner, the artist faces the shrine of creation as she invites viewers into her private temple: a space reminiscent of one’s own Holy of Holies, hidden from view, at times even from the heart. Given that both the first and the second Temples were regarded as *axis mundi*, the world’s navel, their destruction altered something in the fabric of the

universe. In the shadow of the exhibition’s images, something broken which resonates from that destruction bleeds into contemporary reality.

Inspired by the Talmudic tale about the destruction of the Temple, Bezalel created two drawings portraying abstractions of the myth of the cherubim lovers who were found in an embrace in the Holy of Holies. The male and female cherubs, described by the Talmud as

² Psalm 121:2: “My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” It is worth noting that in the Hebrew source, the psalmist chose the word *ayin*, nothingness, to depict the divine helper.

³ Zohar 3:127b *Idra Rabba*: “R. Simeon sat and wept, and said- Woe if I reveal! Woe if I do not reveal. The comrades who were there were silent. R. Abba rose and said to him- If it pleases the master to reveal, as it is written, ‘The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him’ (Ps. 25), and these comrades are fearers of the Holy One, blessed be He, and they have already entered the assembly of the Tabernacle, some of them have entered and some of them have departed.”

⁴ Exodus 25:8.

“entwined with each other,”⁵ are connected to the source of life. In the Sanctuary, the divine revelation took place in the space of the gaze between “two cherubim of gold.”⁶ In other words, it is in the relation between the male and the female that the deity manifests itself: “And there I will meet with thee, and I will speak with thee from above the ark-cover, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony.”⁷ Whereas in the days of the Temple they faced each other, “and their faces were turned toward the house”⁸ – the distance between the drawings *Cherub I* (2017) and *Cherub II* (2017), placed at opposite ends of the space, alludes to the *Nesirah*,⁹ the separation experienced by the lovers. Henceforth, like the primordial androgyne, they find themselves in a perpetual state of longing to reunite and look at each other, face to face. Like a ghost that departed from the original, an interpretation of Salvador Dalí’s *My Wife, Nude* (1945) hovers over *Cherub II*, hinting at the feminine Divine in her nakedness, after being banished from the destroyed Temple. The

delicate drawing seems to almost cover the naked female figure who was separated from the male – portrayed by *Cherub I* which refers to one of the sculptures from Michelangelo’s unfinished *Slaves* series.

Bezalel’s art echoes the cosmic rupture that came about between the male and the female in the aftermath of the destruction and the exile imposed on the feminine Divine presence, who refuses to accept this state of desolation; as evinced by the famous Midrashic saying: “Even though the Temple was destroyed, my *Shekhinah* stands there. R. Aha said, the *Shekhinah* never moves from the Western Wall; as it is said ‘Behold this one stands behind our wall (Song of Songs 2:9).’”¹⁰ In her journey, the exiled Shekhinah is described as returning to caress and kiss the Temple walls, holding on to its columns, refusing to leave her house.

The legend of destruction is a recurring motif throughout the video *Tehilla* (2017), which is based on the novella of the same name by Shmuel Joseph Agnon. Inspired by Agnon, who studied Kabbalah throughout his life,¹¹ the film *Tehilla* was conceived as a tale of holiness in which Jewish mysticism plays a central role. As

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma 54a-b.

⁶ Exodus 25:18.

⁷ Exodus 25:22.

⁸ 2 Chronicles 3:13.

⁹ The kabbalistic concept of *Nesirah* depicts an in-depth image of the myth of human development occurring in the process of individuation of Adam and Eve. A well-known version of this myth is exemplified in Plato’s dialogue *The Banquet*. According to the Midrash Genesis Rabbah 8, Adam and Eve were initially connected back to back, and the process of *Nesirah* (literally ‘sawing off’) separated them into two different beings who, from now on, would face each other. Lurianic Kabbalah conceives of the process of separation of this androgynous figure into the principles of masculine and feminine as a shift from a state of back-to-back to a state of face-to-face. This myth would later be linked to the birth of the soul, being androgynous by nature; see Haviva Pedaya, “The Body of *Nesirah* and Individuation,” in: Baruch Kahane and Devorah Nov (eds.), *Encountering Self: Individuating through the Path of Life* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2014), pp. 297–333 [Hebrew].

¹⁰ Midrash Tehillim, Psalm 11.

such, it is the psychological portrait of the heroine that is of main interest to Agnon, bringing her moral and inner virtues to the fore: "There was an old woman in Jerusalem, nicer than anybody you have ever seen. She was good and wise and meek and charming. The light in her eyes spoke forbearance and mercy, and the wrinkles in her cheeks, blessings and peace. Were it not that women are not to be compared to angels, I would say that she was just like one of God's own angels. Another thing about her was that she was spry as a youngster. The only sign of old age in her was the manner of her dress."¹²

In the spirit of the novella, the film features a young actress, thus visualizing the heroine's spiritual side. Throughout the exhibition a tension emerges between the exterior aspect and the hidden aspect of things: man's nature and heart, the spiritual essence within. In this sense, Bezalel takes Tehilla beyond the confines of the literary character, emphasizing the manifold layers in her being. Between depths of old age and the mystery surrounding the ancients, her vigorous acts of lovingkindness reflect a youthful passion.

The film focuses on Tehilla's inner transformation: her soul belonged to Shraga, to whom she was betrothed in her youth, but her father annulled the match and chose another bridegroom. After being struck by disasters and losing her entire family, she devotes her life to amending and atoning the sin of her father, who did not ask for Shraga's forgiveness. Tehilla is waiting for the narrator to arrive and

help her write the writ of excuse to Shraga. The humiliation of the rejected fiancé represents the broken vessel, serving as a reflection of Tehilla's inner brokenness.

In the final scene, the narrator arrives at Tehilla's ascetic home and notices that it looks like a house of prayer. Tehilla is sitting and waiting amidst a minimalistic decor consisting of a table on which lay a prayer book, a Pentateuch, and a jug. Her face seems illuminated by a heavenly light emanating from her praying. Another gaze is present in the room and peruses her face:

Tehilla is "drawing" the letter to Shraga with a pencil, while the male figure watching her remains invisible. Whereas in the story, the author is a separate character from Tehilla, in the video he is a part of her. The shadow of the man completing the task symbolizes her masculine side, acting as a creative force in the Jungian sense. He sees the last of the water with which the cleaners purified Tehilla's corpse, hinting at her approaching funeral, as the scene takes place in an interim space between Tehilla's worldly home and her mystical home in the world to come. A paper tablecloth is spread out on the table, and the twenty-two letters of Creation are drawn on it, as an allusion to the letters by which she made the amends of the writ. This visual adaptation accentuates the weight borne by words in a story revolving around a broken promise in a world where the word once had value, where it used to be a vehicle for meaning.

In Agnon's story, Tehilla's name comes from "Tehillim," the Psalms that she reads every day

at the Western Wall. She confides that as a child she used to chatter, and then she accustomed herself to speaking very little, for if she uses up the words allotted to her, she diminishes her days.¹³ Tehilla believes that a certain portion of words has been allotted for the whole of one's life in a world where every word is weighed, as she explains to the narrator: "Certainly you know just as well as I do that all a man's deeds from his birth to his death are portioned out to him; and even the number of times that a man should recite Psalms. But the choice lies with him how many Psalms he should say each day."¹⁴

According to the kabbalistic language theory, speech creates reality with the specific power of every letter taking part in the Creation of the world. The ten utterances by which the world was created were composed of words made from letters, while every letter represents a different type of information and action as enunciated in *Sefer Yetzirah*:

"Twenty-two Foundation letters: He engraved them, He carved them, He permuted them, He weighed them, He transformed them, and with them, He depicted all that was formed and all that would be formed."¹⁵ According to this linguistic concept, the letters prescribe the shape of all creatures, and their inscription serves as a link between the elements of Creation: The letters sealing the closing scene of Tehilla are like signs of life in her infinity.

This version differs from the ending of Agnon's story, where Tehilla passes away, knowing that the reality that came to be postpones

redemption to a time unknown. Bezalel's interpretation, however, suggests that it is not the male narrator who signs the letter; rather, Tehilla is the one redeeming herself by establishing a connection to the inner masculine who brings forth the drawing. By drawing the letter, she is healing herself. When Tehilla is hastening her end, it is not only her eternal home that draws nearer, but the cosmic redemption of the masculine and the feminine. Whereas in the story, the writing is carried out by a quill dipped in ink, in the film (as well as in the video *Ha-Cheder*) the medium of drawing expresses restraint that awaits the right

moment, which characterizes slow art, as opposed to the quick pace in our modern world. The closing scene shows a room without windows, and a painting entitled *12 Sabbaths* (2017) appears through the wall:

On a photograph featuring a snowy mountain, Bezalel painted a Sabbath table whose white tablecloth melts-melds with the snow. The table stands in a room at the heart of nature. It is set for three people, yet one chair is missing, and the guests are absent. The missing couple represents the cherubs exiled from the Holy of Holies, and the room is a vacant space lacking the desired presence; it is the window to the heavenly Sabbath where the sacred marriage (*bieros gamos*)¹⁶ takes place. Tehilla, in her loneliness, is counting the years that passed since she was separated from her loved ones. The worldly Sabbath seems lonely compared to the heavenly one. It is as though even the absent God knows

¹¹ On the centrality of Kabbalistic sources in Agnon's fiction, see Elchanan Shilo, *The Kabbalah in the Works of S.Y. Agnon* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan UP, 2011) [Hebrew].

¹² S.Y. Agnon, "Tehilla," *Tehilla and Other Israeli Tales*, trans. I. M. Lask (London & New York: Ram's Horn Books, 1956), p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵ *Sefer Yetzirah* 2:2.

¹⁶ On the mystical meaning of the kabbalistic Sabbath customs, see Reuven Kimelman, *The Mystical Meaning of Lekhah Dodi and Kabbalat Shabbat* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2002) [Hebrew].

not the solitude crying out of Tehilla's story.

In Bezalel's version, the invisible storyteller corresponds to the absent God. In a space where far more is hidden than revealed, a constant chess game is being played between the immanent world and the supernal world until, with hindsight, human consciousness comprehends that they are one. In this sense, the figure of Tehilla functions as a transitional object. To let herself lead a mundane life, the artist's yearnings for absolute holiness are projected onto Tehilla like a confession about her incapacity to bear such an ascetic lifestyle as a woman.

In the video as well as the exhibition, what happens behind the scenes becomes essential. Bezalel's search for ways in which to express these moments of revelation relates to the paradox inherent in art and religion. The common denominator linking these two realms is imagination. Bezalel's visual language seeks to comprehend inner revelation, whether in art or in religion, and thus attunes language's relation to imagination.

One of the symbols of imagination inhabiting her works from the outset is the moon, reflecting the nocturnal consciousness as an ethereal time

for prayer and artistic creation. In contrast to the striking sunlight, moonbeams shine as softly as a drawing. In the exhibition, this motive appears in the scene where Tehilla is seen reading Psalms on a ladder, illuminated by moonlight.

Her mysterious expression bears a similarity to the drawing *Messira (Transmission)* (2012) which was inspired by Bernini's sculpture *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni* (1674) – reflecting the archetype of the Divine Mother. In kabbalistic literature, the ultimate female is symbolized by the moon and by the figure of Mother Rachel weeping for her children, whose spirit she manifests. Tehilla thus integrates such feminine entities as Rachel, *Knesset Yisrael* (assembly of Israel), and the moon. In Agnon's story, Tehilla is a divine entity who, like a mother-bride, mediates between the absent God and his believers. Like the Shekhinah, it is from nothingness that Tehilla nurtures her creatures.

In the exhibition, "moon rays" are projected onto one of the drawings by means of a flashlight placed on the same ladder on which Tehilla sits in the video. In Jewish mysticism, the ladder on which the mystic climbs on his visionary ascent to revelation, like Jacob in his dream, symbolizes

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Genesis 28:12.

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See Bracha Zak, *The Gates of Kabbalah according to R. Moshe Cordovero* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1995), pp. 232-235 [Hebrew].

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Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hullin, 60b: "R. Simeon b. Pazzi pointed out a contradiction [between verses]. One verse says: 'And God made the two great lights' (Genesis 1:16) and immediately the verse continues: 'The greater light... and the lesser light.' The moon said unto the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Sovereign of the Universe! Is it possible for two kings to wear one crown?' He answered: 'Go then and make thyself smaller.' 'Sovereign of the Universe!' cried the moon, 'Because I have suggested that which is proper must I then make myself smaller?' He replied: 'Go and thou wilt rule by day and by night.' 'But what is the value of this?' cried the moon; 'Of what use is a lamp in broad daylight?' He replied: 'Go. Israel shall reckon by thee the days and the years.' 'But it is impossible', said the moon, 'to do without the sun for the reckoning of the seasons, as it is written: 'And let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years' (Genesis 1:15). 'Go. The righteous »

the oscillating consciousness of *ratzo vashov*, running to and fro between heaven and earth: "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it."¹⁷ Te-hilla, the angelic woman whose name connotes the Hebrew word for halo (*hilla*), stands under the sign of the moon that is fully lit only once a month. As a symbol of the secret, the moon reveals herself only occasionally. She is identified with the cycle of birth and death, creation and decay, and in its waxing state, the pregnant crescent moon serves as a powerful image of the Messiah's soul in its conception.¹⁸

According to the Midrash, in a mythical, unknown time a cosmic drama unfolded, turning the relationship between the great lights from an equal to an unequal one. In a Talmudic dialogue between the moon and the Creator, the moon refuses to accept her diminution.¹⁹ According to this radical rabbinic interpretation, God erred when he diminished the moon, and henceforth a monthly sacrifice had to be offered to atone for his sin.

As mentioned above, in kabbalistic literature the moon is identified with the female archetype

symbolized by the sefirah (divine emanation) *Malchut*, representing the Shekhinah, in the sefirotic tree. The fault of the diminished moon consists of her inherent darkness when she is far away from her beloved, symbolized by the sefirah *Tiferet*, corresponding to the sun. The patriarchal

» shall be named after thee as we find [righteous men shall be named 'the Small' after the moon which was reduced to become the small luminary] - Jacob the Small [Amos 7:2: How shall Jacob stand? For he is small], Samuel the Small [Tractate Berachot 28: A renowned Tanna of the first century, called 'the Small' on account of his humility], David the Small [1 Samuel 17:14: 'And David was the youngest (smallest)']. On seeing that it would not be consoled the Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'Bring an atonement for Me for making the moon smaller'. This is what was meant by R. Simeon b. Lakish when he declared: Why is it that the he-goat offered on the new moon is distinguished in that there is written concerning it unto the Lord? [Numbers 28,15: 'And a he-goat for a sin-offering unto the Lord'] Because the Holy One, blessed be He, said: Let this he-goat be an atonement for Me for making the moon smaller'."

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See, for example, Zohar 1:181a, 1:233b, 1:249b, 2:145b.

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On Nahmanides's egalitarian approach to this, see Haviva Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003), p. 361 [Hebrew]; on the myth of the diminished moon, see Zahi Weiss, »

approach considers woman to be flawed like the moon, as a small lacking luminary receiving its light from the male-sun. The reflected moonlight is frequently interpreted as indicating the passive and empty nature of *Malchut*, "who has no light of her own."²⁰ In the past, however, the Shekhinah's status used to be more elevated than at present, whereas in the future she shall rise again and shine like the sun. Therefore the description of her lack of light refers only to a temporary state. According to Rabbi Isaac of Acre, in the days of the Messiah, the Kingdom of the House of David will return, when *Malchut* and *Tiferet* resume their original equal status.²¹ Hence the inferior status of the Shekhinah in exile is only a matter of time: Although not yet visible to the eye, in the future her stature shall be restored.

While signifying material lack, in the video the impoverished Tehilla is seen through a lens that challenges the concept of the moon as the lowest sefirah, which has nothing of her own and is

included in the masculine. As such, she mirrors a tradition of marginal Kabbalists, unlike Agnon's character who was inspired by the mainstream school of kabbalistic thought. In Bezalel's film, the games of shadow between the sun, Tehilla, and the moon, reflect Rabbi Moses Cordovero's positive approach, which perceives the moon as a celestial body that is always full and whose lack is nothing but an optical illusion resulting from its invisibility whenever it is

not lit by the sun. Therefore, the moon's lack lies in the eyes of the beholder and in the light that he casts on her.

In depth psychology, the moon symbolizes the unconscious and creative intuition. Jungian analyst Esther Harding reveals the dynamic abundance of emotional cycles ruling the feminine psyche that is related to the ancient moon goddesses.²² Along the same lines, Erich Neumann emphasizes that the moon is connected to the other, matriarchal consciousness that is essential to the creative personality, wherein the body and the emotions play a central role.²³

The creative Tehilla is preparing herself for the end of time. By writing the letter with her own words, not only does she amend the wrong done to Shraga (whose name, meaning luminary in Aramaic, is mentioned in the Midrash cited above), but she mends her inner world and the

face of reality in its entirety. The masculine and the feminine, the two faces of the androgyne, are reunited within her, as the primordial equality between the two lights announces her redemption. Whereas in Agnon's story she needs the narrator to compose the letter for her, in the film she writes it herself, creating a new world in which the two lights shining from within help her give birth to the world to come. The sacred

marriage is now taking place inside her, as is written in the book of Isaiah: "The light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold."²⁴ Following the traces of the Kabbalah, Bezalel's visual language restores the spiritual femininity likened to the moon to her full glory.

» *Cutting the Shoots: The Worship of the Shekhinah in the World of Early Kabbalistic Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2015), pp. 60-90 [Hebrew]; Shifra Asulin, "The Flaw and its Correction: Impurity, The Moon, and the Shekhinah: A Broad Inquiry into Zohar 3:79 (Aharei Mot)," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, vol. 22 (2010), pp. 193-251 [Hebrew].

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M. Esther Harding, *Woman's Mysteries: Ancient & Modern*, with an introduction by C.G. Jung (Boston & Shaftesbury: Shambhala, 1990).

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Erich Neumann, "The Moon and Matriarchal Consciousness," *The Fear of the Feminine and Other Essays on Feminine Psychology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994), pp. 64-118.

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Isaiah 30:26.