



American Jewish University
The Project Room

RE:Formation of the Jewish Body
Curator: Sagi Refael

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ARISATIA J

INTRODUCTION

BODY, LANGUAGE: SHAPING A COMMUNAL SPACE

Re:Formation of the Jewish Body explores transformations in the visual representation of the Jewish body since mid-nineteenth century to the present. Its starting point, in the midst of the nineteenth century, emphasizes a crucial intersection, of the Jewish world, its public image and political commitment: with the rise of the Zionist movement, whose various protagonists, factions and activists joined forces in response to the unthinkable atrocities Jewish communities in Eastern Europe and Russia endured during violent pogroms, or riots. Interestingly, the discourse around Jewish resistance, as well as the anti-Semite propaganda that fueled the wrath of the attackers, was centered around the body. The anti-Semites aspired to eradicate the communal body of the Jews, which was perceived as foreign, degenerate and ominous. The Zionists aspired to transform, or rehabilitate the Jewish male body: to rejuvenate it, transform it into a powerful, awe-inspiring presence. For the Zionists, the physical resurrection was intertwined with national ambitions, with various attempts to occupy a position within the civic space. In that regard, this physical formation is always seen as both the communal body and that of the individual, whose transformation is intertwined with a new subject position, within a specific discourse. The triumph of the body would also mean a departure from a communal history of defeats and exclusion, it would mean acceptance into what was once an inaccessible field of political, civic and social engagement. This does not necessarily entail complete assimilation, rather, this process involves the articulation of a discursive field that would allow the Jewish people to revitalize their spirit, mind and physique: in which they could speak their national resurrection and communal future.

Curator Sagi Refael researched AJU's art collection, and traced various permutations of this process: from a nineteenth century print highlighting the stereotypical Wandering Jew, to the emergence of biblical characters as heroic figures, as seen in Saul Raskin's Abraham; or, later Salvador Dali's 1968 lithograph, *We Shall Go Up at Once and Possess It*, which amalgamates male nude with the flag of Israel and elements of new-classical art.

Here, Refael suggests intriguing meeting points between such depictions and contemporary artists, both Israeli and

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Sagi Refael, Curator
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Americna, who undermine this seemingly rejuvenated body, as well as its conceptual, political, and social premise. Alon Kedem's *Hamudi* reflects the possibility of thinking the Other of the Jewish, Zionist, Ashkenzai body, while Mati Elmaliach's mixed media image of soldiers questions any presumed heroic position, or presentation of hyper masculinity. Lea Golda Holterman's photographs of young women further under mine the supposed primacy of the male body within this context, positioning one woman as an instigator of a religious ritual, and the other as a wounded leader of unspecified activity. Refael's exhibition thus unveils heterogeneous subject positions, which have come to define the current dwelling space of the Jewish body.

This exhibition, which launches the Project Room at AJU, shows the breadth of multifaceted questions and discussions that could arise by creating encounters between the University's art collection and contemporary practitioners. Curators and artists will be invited to the Project Room, to create site specific projects, programs and exhibitions, explore and comment upon the collection, which has been donated by various members in our community. We are honored to preserve and maintain this collection, which embodies the changing dynamics of Jewish lives since nineteenth century to the present.

In view of AJU's longstanding commitment to the exploration of cultures, ideas, and creative practice, the collection presents an exceptional opportunity to engage local and national communities in conversations reflecting identity, Jewish values, and ideas. Since its inception, in 1947, the University of Judaism, and later, the American Jewish University, supported artists and creatives, established prominent exhibition spaces and various educational programs in the arts, recognizing the capability of art of nourishing the roots of culture, and overcome the parochialism of time and place. The Arts Program at AJU seeks to honor that tradition, while offering a space to question, undermine and examine our knowledge, assumptions and convictions.

Rotem Rozental, Chief Curator

RE:FORMATION OF THE JEWISH BODY

What is a "Jewish body," and how does it differentiate from the body of a "non-Jew"? The "Science of Racism"¹ emerged in Europe of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, putting in place a hierarchy between different seemingly biological races, placing Jews as a "Degenerate Race."² That notion supported the continuous exclusion of Jews from civic life, often justified by their rejection of Jesus and Christianity, therefore "clearly proving" them as a risk to national spirit of the greater populous.³ Even some Jewish thinkers of the time, such as the Italian physician and criminologist Cesare Lombroso, didn't reject the notion of an inherent Jewish mental instability. Lombroso suggested the mental conditions ailing the Jews derive from hundreds of years of persecution, and that assimilation and an adaptation to a stable culture might reduce such mental risks.⁴ Several body organs of "The Jew" received special attention from racists and anti-Semites, such as the nose, the foot, the mouth, the eyes, the ears and so on.⁵ Specifically emphasized in male physiology, was the practice of circumcision, the symbolic mark-making of the flesh, commemorating the divine bond established in an ancient era. For those who opposed the act of circumcision, it proved a mental instability brings Jews to mutilate their children.⁶

Yet, the "Jewish Body" is not just a pseudo-scientific theory but a concept, and its cultural representations do not aim to portray a clinical manifestation, but an intellectual commentary of the time. Visual representations of "Jewish themes," from ancient Eastern mosaics and frescoes and renaissance paintings, had often depicted ceremonial gatherings, Shabbat customs, weddings, synagogue liturgy, as well as Biblical stories and characters, historical events and protagonists, while the bodily presence was not associated with a specifically charged ideology or agenda. Rather, it typified a specific figure: of the Orthodox Jew, whose bodily characteristics were stereotyped and outlined by problematic conceptions regarding his physique and capabilities.

This exhibition aims to present recognizable manifestations of Jewish figuration alongside potential contemporary analogues and responses to these points of reference, while showcasing symbolism in transition. Partially derived from the collection of the American Jewish University, the artworks on display allude to the narrative of

“Never Again,” of Jewish triumph and overcoming of physical hardships, signifying a continuous--and at times simultaneous--metamorphosis of Davidian and Goliathan positions, from heroic independence to victimhood, and so forth.⁷

Marking the starting point are Abraham and Moses, the originators of the “Israelites,” who defined a tribe with its own distinct rituals and divine providence. In the collective memory of generations to come, their personal stories had served as “proof” for overcoming obstacles while adhering to monotheistic belief: both among religious believers and by seculars, Jews and non-Jews, as evident in countless artworks by many European creators of the last centuries. As visual and textual narratives surrounding Jewish myth and heroism continued to develop, they were succeeded by the Maccabees, who exemplified strategic capabilities and the courage to take one’s faith in their own hands until achieving victory. To note, the figures of the Maccabees gave their name to the first Jewish sports association, which was established as an athletic club in Turkey in 1895. Two decades later, it developed into the Maccabi World Union, which initiated the Maccabi Jewish “Olympics”--known as Ha’Maccabia--and a Jewish Youth organization.

The Zionists’ point of origin, from which they wanted to distance themselves the most, were the Orthodox Jewry: associated with studies in the Cheder, whose public figure and visual representations were associated with the pogroms the imminent failure to protect their families, property and, more broadly, their community. Their physical appearance was described as weak, pale and overall passive, even feminine - incapable or unwilling to fight back - as they are trusting God to protect them. The Zionist movement, formed in central and eastern Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century, thus loudly declared a desire to mold a reformed type of Jew. Max Nordau, an Austrian physician who became a Zionist leader, conceived the paradigm of “Muscle Jewry”: calling to actively reshape the physiology of the Jewish body into a strong and invincible figure, whose rejuvenated physics and psyche would re-connect him with the land of ancient roots, where he would carve his revived strength by working the land and guarding its borders.⁸

Although Zionism moved away from religious practice, it also manifested a connection between modernity and the spirit of

the mythical ancestors. These meeting points can be seen in the visual work of E.M.Lilien, considered by some as the first Zionist artist, who was also a close friend of Theodor Herzl, the leader of the Zionist movement.⁹ Lilien created illustrations for Zionist publications and co-established a publishing company that issued Jewish-related books, at times with depictions of Biblical figures - such as Moses and Joshua - resembling the features of Herzl.

Endless hardships and struggles, followed by the tragedies of the Holocaust, positioned the Zionist “New Jew” in a state of constant battle and resistance against various attacks. This “new” or “reborn” Jew, who had claimed the role of the “quintessential” Jew from the hands of the orthodoxy, has entered itself back into the traditional loop of “Us against the World,” also commonly known as “Very few against many”. The heroic aggression, once perceived as an inevitable defense, is now being challenged, even among Israelis themselves. Examples of this Zeitgeist can be seen in this exhibition, where the powerful limbs of Jewish infrastructures meet humorous, self-deprecating and ironic arms embracing alternative facets of identities.

Sagi Refael

Notes

¹ Among the writes that encouraged the discourse of “Scientific Racism” was Arthur de Gobineau, with his book “Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races, 1853–1855,” published in 1855 France, and translated into German in 1897 by Ludwig Schemann.

² Sander L. Gilman and James M. Thomas, *Are Racists Crazy? How Prejudice, Racism, and Antisemitism Became Markers of Insanity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 29-32.

³ Gilman and Thomas, *Are Racists Crazy?* 32-33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁵ The “Jewish Body” and its organs had been a subject of academic research in recent decades. Two groundbreaking books are worth mentioning in this context: Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991); and Melvin Konner, *The Jewish Body* (New York, NY: Schocken, 2009).

⁶ Gilman and Thomas, *Are Racists Crazy?* 33. In modern times, this no longer applies, as Muslims and Christians also circumcise their infants, and this cut organ is no more a Jewish specification.

⁷ “Never Again” is a phrase often associated with the *raison d’être* of the state of Israel, which was established as a Jewish state following the Holocaust. “Never Again” is often publicly stated by public leaders while visiting the state of Israel, and specifically at the Yad VaShem museum in Jerusalem, as proclaimed also by Pope Francis and Barack Obama, both in 2013.

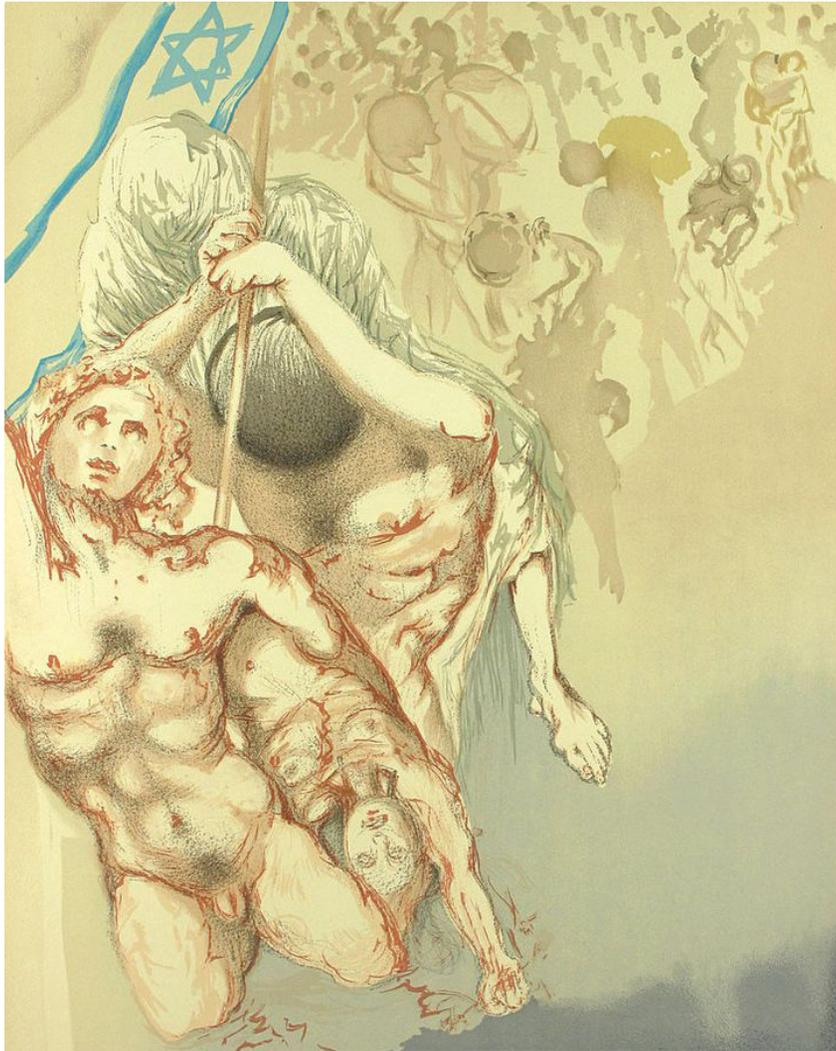
⁸ More about the rejection of Orthodox Jewry by Zionism and the embracing of the “New Jew”, in: Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2000)

⁹ Gideon Ofrat, “Zionism, Utopia, Art,” Gideon Ofrat’s Depot, gideonofrat.word-press.com, December 30, 2013. [in Hebrew]

Zachary Balber, *Joshua and Goose* (diptych - from the series *Tamim*), 2012, Lambda Print on Dibond



Salvador Dali, "We Shall Go Up at Once and Possess It" from the portfolio *Aliyah, The Rebirth of Israel*, 1968, Lithograph, 25 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches, Collection of AJU, Bel Air



Following the Israeli triumph of the Six Day War in 1967 and its ensuing international admiration, Samuel Shore, the head of Shorewood Publishers in New York, invited the celebrated Spanish artist Salvador Dali to create a series of gouache based lithographs to celebrate Israel's twentieth anniversary. Dali created a portfolio titled *Aliyah, The Rebirth of Israel* in twenty five progressing images: from *Exile and Hope*, via *The Yishuv* [the pre-State of Israel settlement] and *Shoah* (Holocaust), to *Independence*, with the closing image of *Covenant Eternal: Circumcision*, featuring an introduction by Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion.

In the exhibited example from that portfolio, *We Shall Go Up at Once and Possess It* (plate 4), Dali used a quote from the biblical story of Caleb and the spies, that were sent by god to see if the holy land could be ready for conquer. Caleb thought the land was ready and declared, "we shall go up at once and possess it," anticipating a similar approach to the much later Zionist perception of reconquering the land of Israel. The nude figures, holding the Israeli flag, might reflect Max Nordau's vision of "Muscle Jewry," but they are also a direct quotation from the altar of Zeus in the temple of Pergamon, suggesting supernatural characteristics and divine physical features to be associated with the "New Jews" that revived the Jewish State.²

² A traveling exhibition of Dali's entire "Aliyah" portfolio, accompanied by an informative online website, was organized by David R. Blumenthal, Jay and Leslie Cohen, Professor of Judaic Studies at the Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. The exhibition originated at the Marcus Hillel Center of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and traveled to other venues, including Hillel Center, Rhode Island School of Design, Brown University, New York; Hillel Center, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington; Hillel of Colorado, University of Denver, Colorado; Hillel Foundation, Boston University, Massachusetts; Columbus State University, Columbus, Georgia; Polytech, Blacksburg, Virginia. March 2015 - Spring 2017.

Mati Elmaliach, *Untitled, (Southern Lebanon | 1999)*, 2016, Embroidery on Archival Inkjet Print, 11 x 15 inches



Reminiscing on his military service from over two decades ago, the artist scanned and reprinted an image of himself in the company of two soldier-friends, at the foreground of an Arab village.

While the public image of the IDF might be heroic or ultra-masculine, the artist's expression suggests discomfort and unease. His fellow soldiers are faceless, and their heads are replaced by embroidered rays in pink and red, splashing toward the sky. Homo-eroticism or Bromance are implied by the merging of the two red rays into each other, and by the dominance of the pink triangles that might allude to feminine organs: their brightness is seemingly contrasted by the olive-green uniforms and faded surroundings.

Attributed to Austin Grodinger, *Moses Holding the Ten Commandments*, undated (circa 1950s-1980s), Basalt, 10 1/2 x 28 1/4 x 4 inches, Collection of AJU, Bel Air



One of the most commonly represented biblical themes in art history, the figure of Moses holding the ten commandments is depicted here at ease, perhaps even with humor: Moses lifts the slabs easily, his posture is slim and flexible. His legs are spread, one is vertical, standing firmly on the ground, and the other is bending at an angle, balancing the weight that is emphasized on the opposite upper side. This elongated sculpture, although not large in scale, conveys a sense of progression, by creating a step-like pyramid-shaped composition, from the feet to above the head, encompassing monumentality in domestic proportions. If this scene had often been presented with drama and pathos, here the sacred, or, alternatively, terrifying event is being elegantly carved and treated with a sense of humanity and lightness.

Lea Golda Holterman, *Esther, 12, Yom Kippur Evening, Jerusalem, 2011, C-print*



In the two photographs featured in the exhibition, Lea Golda Holterman suggests an empowered position of womanhood at different stages in life: of women who act out of deep belief in their actions.

A young girl is holding a dead chicken on Yom Kippur evening, perhaps before or after performing the atonement ritual of Kapparot: self-purification by removing all “sins” from the human body and unto the bird. The girl’s pale skin and rosy dress bare resemblance to the chicken’s plucked body, yet by placing her in a predominantly masculine position, especially at such a young age, Holterman outlines a new version of girlish independence, passionate belief, fearlessness and awareness.

Lea Golda Holterman, *Untitled, A Settlement in Binyan Region, 2009, C-print*



In the second image, Holterman depicts an 18-year-old pregnant settler woman, standing alone in what seems to be a wilderness. One of her arms is missing underneath her tunic. Her vertical position within the horizontal landscape, creates a cross-shaped composition, echoing Christian representations of the crucifixion on the Golgotha. The missing arm might allude to the modern Jewish-Israeli reference of Joseph Trumpeldor, the amputee Russian officer who became a symbol of Zionist bravery and sacrifice. According to the myth, after fighting and getting shot during the Tel Hai battle in 1920, his last words were presumably “it is good to die for our country.” In this view, Holterman’s direct gaze at these two young females, stresses the blurred lines between a victim and a hero.

Orr Herz, *Dumbbell*, 2016, Ceramic, 8 1/2 x 5 x 4 1/2 inches



Orr Herz, *Hammer*, 2016, Ceramic, 11 x 6 1/2 x 5 inches



Two sculptures, depicting a hammer and a dumbbell, are made of clay and glazed in glossy and pastel colors. Originating from hyper-masculine arenas, such as gyms and construction sites, these symbols of strength turn into disabled, fragile and impractical tools of useless functionality. If the concept of “Muscle Jewry” aimed at a new type of strong and fierce people, who will build the new Jewish country and perfect their labor while reshaping their bodies, Herz’s objects present a self-deprecating conviction that is devoid of pathos, and perhaps even on the verge of breakage.

Alon Kedem, *Hamudi*, 2017, Oil on canvas, 27 3/4 x 31 1/2 inches



A portrait of a man, perhaps loosely resembling the artist himself, echoes a visual tradition of mugshots that is also associated with typological (or stereotypical) identification. Here, the profile emphasizes a presumably Jewish nose that does not hide its Iraqi origins. *Hamudi* (Hebrew for “Cutey”) is also a common nickname for “Muhammad.” The physical and cultural resemblance between the ever-conflicted Israeli Jews and Arabs, both originated from the same father, Abraham--and to a lesser extent between the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic communities--surfaces in this painting.

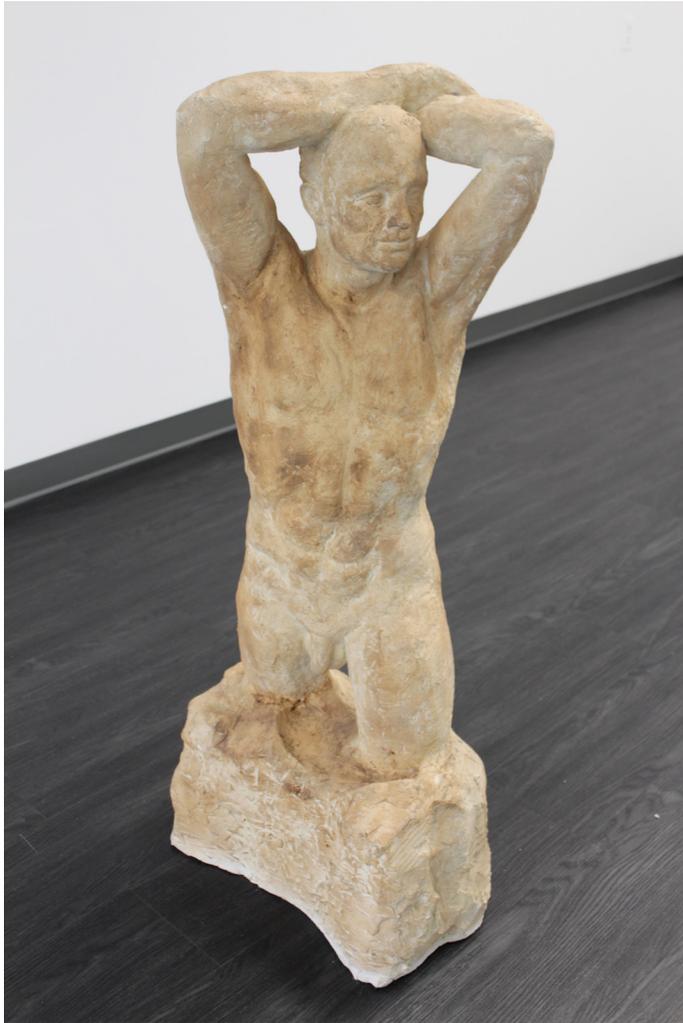
Saul Raskin, *Abraham*, undated (circa 1940s-1950s), Etching, 9 1/4 x 11 1/2 inches, Collection of AJU, Bel Air



Saul Raskin was a Russian Jew who immigrated to the United States during his early to mid-twenties, after traveling throughout Western Europe, predominantly in Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland, where he attended art schools and practiced lithography. Raskin had worked as a cartoonist and caricaturist for a number of New York based Yiddish publications, and often depicted the differences between Jewish life in Eastern Europe and the United States, while also serving as a critic of visual arts, literature and theatre.

This etching of Abraham is very different in style, bearing resemblance to more classical approaches of representation, also echoing a Romantic version of E.M.Lilien's *Jugendstil* illustrations. Abraham's figure stands at the center, commanding the composition. His body is solid as a draped Greek sculpture. His arms are raised up to the star-studded skies, as if embracing the galaxy, or being showered with blessings by the divine creation. With his eyes closed, Abraham's body language is ecstatic, dreamy and fully devoted to his spiritual experience. This might be the moment in which he was promised that his “seed would be multiplied as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the seashore” (Genesis 22:17). Underneath the nation's first father are figures with camels, a direct connection Raskin suggests between biblical times and the pilgrimage to Zion in different historical times, and especially in the artist's own lifetime.

Attributed to Melver Unter, *Nude Man*, undated (circa 1960s-1970s), Painted plaster, 49 x 21 x 10 inches, Collection of AJU, Bel Air



A torso of a male nude is erected from his knees up, his arms frame his head, in a gesture of surrender or rest. The nudity might allude to classic Greco-Roman sculptures of mythical figures, or on the contrary, to Michelangelo's "slaves," which he carved out of marble blocks, freeing them from rigidity, or capturing them in a frozen movement.

Since this modern sculpture is made of plaster with limestone-like aspirations, it might fit stylistically more with commemorative monuments, immortalizing soldiers lost in battle or war victims. Its apparent heaviness and thematic seriousness are evident, clarifying the body here is not sensual or erotic, but bares the echo of an internal and external drama.

Sara Wallach, *With Body and Soul*, 1985, 20 1/2 inches diameter, Saragraph print, Collection of AJU, Bel Air

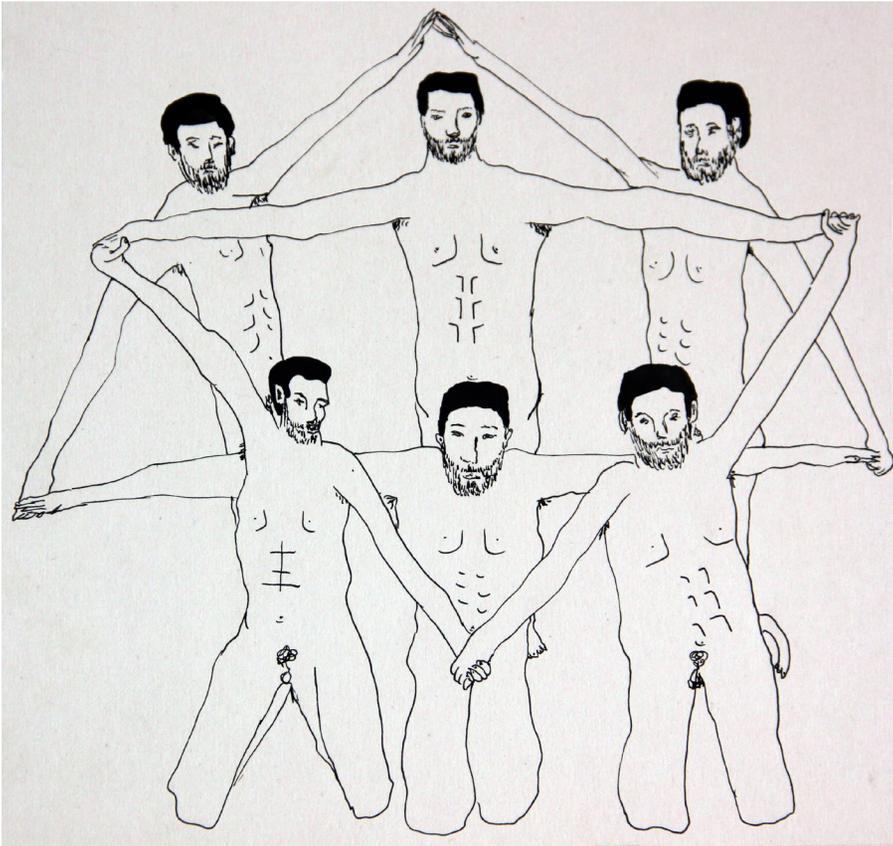


Sara Wallach was a printmaking artist, or, in her own words, "designer of line and space," since for her "the space surrounding a line is as important as the line itself."¹ Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, she spent her adult life in New York, Arizona and Tucson. Wallach studied printmaking at McGill University in Montreal, and later moved with her husband to Lafayette, California, where she established an etching studio. Wallach had also practiced a method of embossing and debossing in her etchings, which she called "Saragraphs."

In the print "With Body and Soul" from 1985 (presented here in its tondo version), two young Hasidic boys are mirroring each other with dance movements, holding together a tallit. The joy of faith is referred to in the title of the work, and their bodily expressions might remind those of acrobats, who also dedicate their bodies and souls for perfecting their craft.

¹ Cited in Sara Wallach studio, "An Introduction to the Sculptural Etchings of Sara Wallach Page 1," (Lafayette, CA: The Sara Wallach Collection archive), undated. The archive is located at The University of Arizona Museum of Art

Ron Winter, *Dauids Protect*, 2014, Ink on paper, 9 x 9 inches, Rogel & Tal Collection, Tel Aviv, Israel



A group of six similar-looking naked men (perhaps the artist's doppelgangers) are forming a shape of the Star of David with their arms. Their bearded faces and schematically drawn six-pack abs are characterizations of an ideal, chiseled masculinity. However, their flaccid bodies and hidden private parts might question the notion of hyper masculinity, and the image of a Machismo that was favored by Zionism and the militaristic Israeli environment. The title reverses the term "Star of David" (literally meaning, David's Shield or protection), to "Dauids Protect," and by so doing, it removes the physical and symbolic protection over the soldiers, clarifying the men stand unprotected, and can only depend on one another for protection.

Gil Yefman, *Breastlev Kippa*, 2009-11, Knitted sculpture, 5 1/2 inch diameter, Private Collection, Los Angeles
Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York



A hand-knitted yarmulke shaped as a female breast, hybridizes the masculine nature of the liturgical head cover with the feminine personification of god, the presence of the divine, the "Shekhinah." Functioning both as a practical object and a sculpture, the "Breastlev Kippa" presents a humorous approach to contemporary Judaism, and perhaps serves as a bald fashion statement for Breslov Hasidic believers.

Attributed to Charles François Pinot, *Le Juif-errant* (*The Wandering Jew*), nineteenth century, 15 x 9 1/2 inches, Collection of AJU, Bel Air



“The Wandering Jew” is a folklore tale which had probably originated in thirteenth century Europe. It is based on a Jewish figure that presumably refused to let Jesus rest on his chair, as he was carrying the cross on his Via Dolorosa. Therefore, Jesus “punished” the Jew by telling him that he would never find a land to dwell in, and will forever be restless, moving from one place to the other. That story was widely spread across Europe for centuries, and had been printed in different languages, such as German, Flemish, French and more.

This featured print was published in Paris, France, by Imagerie d’Épinal Press House, probably in the mid nineteenth century, and it is attributed to Charles François Pinot. Here, the wandering Jew is depicted as a tired old man with long white hair and beard, the wind is striking his body, and he is walking on the edge of the earth, with his back to the wavy ocean. Reminiscing perhaps of Moses--who parted the Red Sea into two and led the Israelites in it but did not enter Canaan with them, the Jew does not find a rescue at shore, and he battles to stay strong on his feet, leaning on a walking cane to stabilize himself.

Southern California Jewish Sports Hall of Fame Statue, 1990s, Copper, 15 x 6 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches, Collection of AJU, Bel Air



Drawn from the Southern California Jewish Sports Hall of Fame (SCJSHOF), the trophy that was given to Californian Jewish men and women for their athletic excellence depicts a Greek-inspired copper figure of a gymnast or a warrior holding a laurel wreath. Bridging thousands of years back to the classic, or Pagan world, this sculptural figurine aims to shed mythical dimensions on its modern recipient, while connecting the perfectly proportionate physique with that of the New Jew in America: a living proof to Max Nordau’s “Muscle Jewry” ambition. Uncannily resembling Charlton Heston as Mark Antony in the Hollywood adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* from 1950, this athletic “Oscar” offers a larger than life’ role model, extending reality into epic connotations.

Men forming Star of David with their Rifles, Palestine, undated (circa 1920s-1930s),
Scanned photograph, 16 x 20 inches, Collection of AJU, Bel Air



The Star of David (commonly translated as “Magen David” in Hebrew) had been a symbol associated with Judaism mainly since the fourteenth century, while it had appeared thousands of years ago in Jewish synagogues, but also in Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist cultures. It emerged again during the nineteenth century, and was incorporated in the flag of the Zionist movement during its Congress in Basel, held in 1897. The group of six men in this photograph, wearing uniforms and military berets, are creating the shape of the “Magen” (Hebrew for “Shield”) with their rifles, enhancing the bond between their roles as protectors and active promoters of the Zionist mission to create a safe land, governed by and for the “New Jews”.



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