



Shades of SPiRit

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Anger or strong emotion can be expressed by blotches of reds and oranges. Tranquility can be communicated through shades of blue. But how can you express, in concrete media, the longing of a soul for its Creator? This is the question that occupies artist Orit Martin as she creates her unique pictures. She thinks of her art as an “invitation to associate with your soul.” And her work is distinguished by its contrasts. Juxtaposed upon the canvas are diametric opposites: life and death, the physical world and the spiritual, tranquility and turmoil.

Orit’s art resonates with people around the world, and her pictures hang in homes in Israel, Europe, the US, and even China. While her primary gallery – a place of bright white walls and breathtaking color – is in Har Nof, Orit regularly exhibits her work across the world.



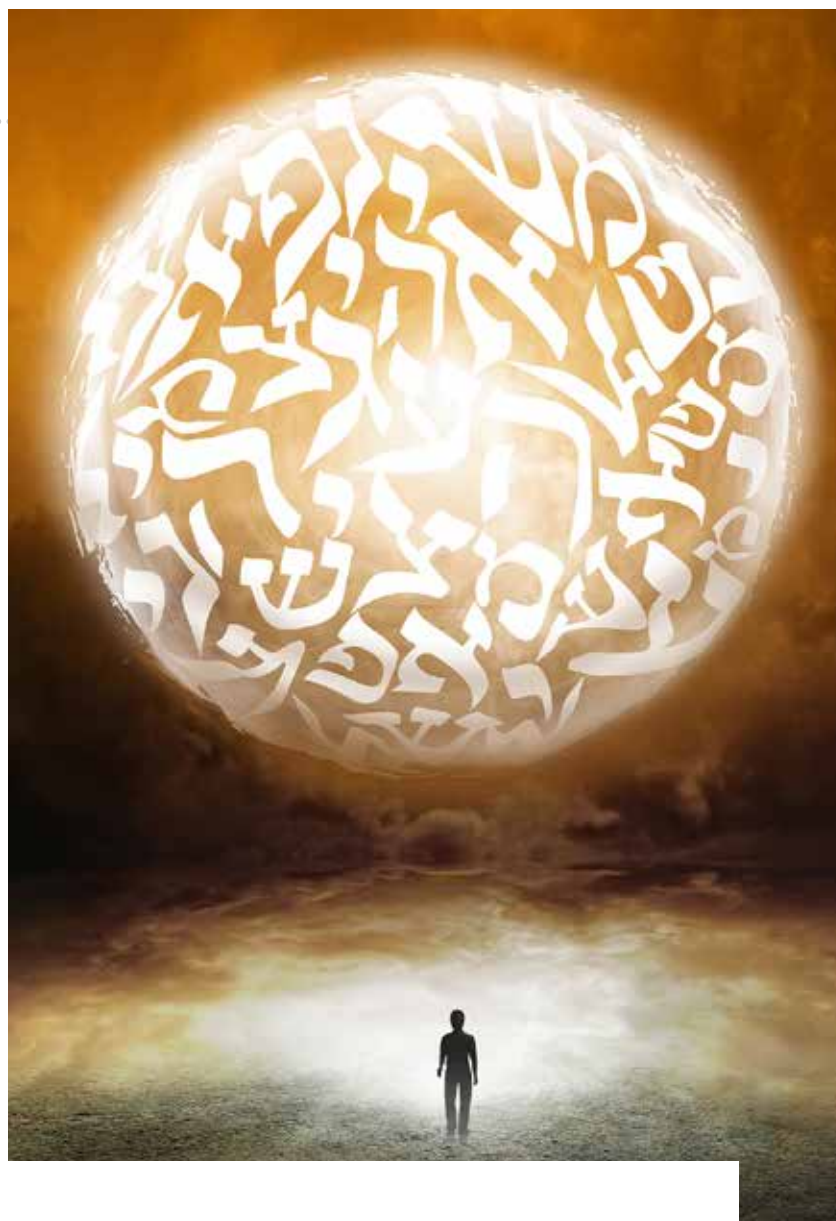
Behind the Curtain

“This is me,” Orit says, pointing to the small child in the painting. The child peeps behind the veil of the picture and is confronted with a dazzling cloud-filled sky. The picture whispers of the spiritual experience involved in looking beyond the confines of This World to behold a dimension of spiritual reality.

Orit was brought up in a nonreligious home in Givatayim, where intellectual pursuits were strongly encouraged. But many of Orit’s questions were shunted to the side. “‘What happens to your mind and heart when you die?’ I asked. ‘What’s the purpose of us being here in the world?’ Instead of getting answers, I was made to feel alien by the people around me.”

A major in philosophy (alongside a minor in art) enabled Orit to delve into the works of the greatest philosophers, both ancient and contemporary, and discover their insights into the working of the human mind. “To my great disappointment, there was no discussion of the human soul,” Orit says. Any answers she did receive were dissatisfying.

Orit decided to throw herself into her art, reasoning that even



if she didn’t know why she had been put on this planet, her art would ensure her some level of immortality. But the more Orit invested in her art, the deeper she felt that it wasn’t the answer to her questions.

Modern art confounded her. Defying the definitions of beauty — modern art could be ugly and disturbing — and throwing off the harmony of color and symmetry, what was left?

“This wasn’t something that could answer my thirst for spirituality, I realized. In fact, it would only distance me from what I was searching for.” By shifting the definitions of beauty and ugliness, Orit felt that modern art was moving her away from her instinctive grasp of spirituality: If beauty, which we connect with spiritual accomplishment, is spurned, then what do we value? Not only that, but the recent trends, in which anything goes — and where a steel sculpture of an orange balloon dog (produced by Jeff Koons) can be sold for millions of dollars — do nothing to uplift a person or deepen his perspective on life or the world.



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Secrets

It sounds like a strange subject for a picture: a child and a grave. In *Secrets* a child stands over a grave in the forest, streams of warm yellow light illuminating the scene. He peers into the grave. And yet, the grave is not filled with clods of earth; it is merely a hole from which we see the beautiful blue of the sky along with tranquil clouds.

“It takes a child to see something different from what is expected,” Orit comments. Indeed, it was the child inside Orit — perpetually curious, and unusually open to new experiences — that was profoundly moved when she heard an account of someone who had undergone a near death experience. “These experiences were authenticated, for afterward, the person could recount doctors’ conversations.”

At last, Orit had found proof that even when life ended, a level of existence — soul existence — continued. She read voraciously about these experiences. “One of the things that struck me was that the vast majority of these experiences were so beautiful. They spoke of light and joy and a feeling of being encompassed by love.”

“Are you not afraid of death?” I ask, as I gaze at the picture in her gallery.

Orit shakes her head. “People are afraid of the unknown, and of course, death is the great unknown. But when we grasp that it’s simply passing through a portal to another existence, one in which we’re loved and there’s no pain, then why should I be afraid? It is simply another form of birth.”

By the time Orit’s intuitive belief in the soul was vindicated, she had met her husband, physician Dr. Oz Martin. Together they set out to learn about Judaism. Orit was particularly drawn to the mystical side of Jewish thought — a leaning that’s evident in her work.

Emunah

The rest of Orit's journey to observance is perhaps told most eloquently by the picture entitled *Emunah*. In it, a man climbs onto a large question mark, and uses it as a springboard to take off into the sky. The encounter with the question is what propels him upward to another dimension.

That's not to say that the journey is always easy. Orit's personal journey — more than three decades ago — was particularly challenging. "We were part of the elite of Israeli society: My father was a pilot and my mother had a prominent job in the Ministry of Education. Everyone looked at me and asked, 'What's missing? What more could you want?'"

Those were the days before the *baal teshuvah* movement blossomed, and those who turned to observance were viewed in the best case as odd, and in the worst as psychologically unstable. Orit and her husband view themselves as pioneers: They took the road untraveled. At that time, Orit worked as an art teacher in a college, and she looks back and laughs affectionately at some of the problems that preoccupied her: "How can I style my sheitel in a way that they won't realize that I'm covering my hair?" and "How can I stop myself from trying to tell everyone that there's a Creator?"

Message of Comfort

Orit once exhibited her work on Masada, and there she received an interesting visitor. An elderly Jew had purchased one of her pictures — *The Path of Light* — two days before in Tzfas. The next trip on his itinerary was Masada, and he was thrilled to encounter more of Orit's pictures — and Orit herself.

Surprised and thrilled to meet the artist, he told Orit that his wife had passed away six months before and he was still devastated by his loss. When he set eyes on *The Path of Light* in Tzfas, he had felt that he was receiving a Divine message: G-d was with him. For the first time since the loss of his wife, he felt comforted. Two days later, on the summit of Masada, he was able to tell Orit in person.



Journey

Journey, with its soft blues and beiges is a picture that both calms and uplifts. A man sails on a ship — symbolic of the soul's journey through This World — to arrive at the tree of life, our ultimate destination. I'm struck by the serenity of the picture, the beauty in a world that can be filled with turmoil and pain.

"That's the answer," Orit says, pointing to the picture. "With one eye on eternity, with an understanding that we're not put here for This World, for it can never satisfy us, then we can be happy. This is the secret of all happiness in This World."

By nature an intellectual, Orit spent many hours studying Jewish texts and clarifying areas of Jewish thought. Eventually, she started giving classes and lectures and at one point, even had a radio program, on which she discussed ideas relating to

the soul's journey.

"At some point, though, I realized that working through the head is the long way around. I wanted people to actually experience spiritual transcendence and the whispers of their souls. That's when I turned back to art." Orit explains that her art is not simply a work of beauty to hang on the wall. "It's nice to have a picture of the Kosel or Yerushalayim on your wall," she says, "but a picture like that doesn't depict the struggle of the soul as it passes through the physical world."

Orit describes her art as a spiritual experience, a dialogue between artist and viewer, between art and the viewer, between the viewer and his very soul. "I call it Jewish art, but it's not a picture of Shabbos candles. It's an invitation to open yourself up to new and unexpected dimensions."



The Light of Shabbos

A painting that's very dear to Orit's heart is a depiction of a woman lighting Shabbos candles. "This is very popular with secular Israelis," she says. In the picture, Orit doesn't simply show a woman standing in front of her candles; she hints at the higher worlds and the flow of blessing and sanctity activated when a woman lights candles.

As Orit's family grew and she became more involved in the physical, day-to-day tasks that occupy a Jewish woman, she became more attuned not only to the higher reality, but to the way in which it's infused into the physical. On one level, this is the message of this picture: Simply by striking a match and kindling a candle, a woman has performed a mitzvah — and the spiritual significance of her simple action is profound.

This is also the theme of a set of three pictures: *Spiritual Bread*, *Spiritual Feast*, and *Sparks*, all showing the mystical connection between the act of eating and the spirit. One shows sparks emitted from a loaf of bread. Another is a large painting of a fork on a plate, with the letters of the *alef beis* rising from the plate. The picture shows how the act of eating can be translated into a spiritual experience, a sensation of Divine love, and an act of service, as we eat to give us strength to serve Him.

When I remark on the palette of colors Orit employs, she tells me one of her earliest childhood memories: "I was around two years old when my father made me a kaleidoscope. We sat together on the grass and pointed the kaleidoscope to the sky. I turned the kaleidoscope and was amazed by the shapes and colors I could see. Maybe that instilled me with a love for color. Maybe it prompted me to look to the heavens."

Genesis of a Picture

Every piece of art starts with an idea, which "comes from Above," Orit says. "Sometimes it's prompted by a *pasuk*, a Torah thought, or it just 'comes' and I see an image with my internal eye. Then I begin sketching out ideas. I'll do a lot of sketches using the computer, and think about which medium will best express the idea. I'll play around with the idea a lot."

Orit's pictures are made employing digital art, using the computer as a tool to achieve layers of nuance and transparencies of color. The finished product may be quite different from the original conception, but Orit works until she feels satisfied with the product.

Then she's ready to show the picture to "my bosses — namely, my husband and children." Orit credits her husband with pushing her forward in her work and artistic vision, and helping get her pictures out into the world. After working many years as a physician, going on to direct Maccabi medical

care, Dr. Martin now devotes himself to the emotional realm, practicing as a psychotherapist and authoring popular books that focus on relationships and self-knowledge.

As for her children, Orit has a discriminating audience, for each of her five children are exceptionally talented and creative. Her daughter M. Kenan is an acclaimed author of a hugely popular historical fantasy series. Yael Rottenberg is an educational expert, whose textbooks — illustrated by her mother — are in wide circulation. Between them and the skill sets of her younger three children — Yonasan is a public relations officer, Rut is a psychologist, and Rachel is a graphic artist — Orit receives multifaceted and on-target feedback.

Orit then returns to the picture and works some more. Eventually, the picture is ready to be shown to a wider circle of acquaintances, whose feedback is also carefully noted, and changes are implemented.

At last, Orit has produced a picture that's also a digital file, ready to be printed on high-quality canvas, in limited editions. Each print is signed and numbered, so that while her art is more accessible, the artistic value of each print is preserved.

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Free Mind

This painting expresses a deep Jewish concept: Where your mind is, that is where you are. The child, depicted in black and white, is bent over and can be construed as depressed or sad. But even when this is the case and his external circumstances are difficult, his thoughts can carry him to a different place, a world full of joy and color. The mind is a formidable force, and in many ways, it's the essence of who we are and where we are.

Orit reflects on her ability to take complex and esoteric subjects and translate them into images on a canvas. "At a certain point I understood I'd been given a gift, a real treasure: to see images inside my head, to take concepts and express them through art. Musicians do this through their melodies; writers through their words. I do it through image and color." ☺