

**PORTFOLIO**  
**JOEL SILVERSTEIN**  
*THE GINZBERG VARIATIONS*, SELECTIONS  
WITH INTRODUCTION AND ANNOTATIONS  
by Matthew Baigell

*Introduction*

Joel Silverstein (b. 1957) belongs to the current senior generation of Jewish artists born between roughly 1930 and 1960 who centered religious Jewish subject matter in their late careers. Many artists in this cohort have refused to become part of the mainstream art world and have instead preferred to explore their Jewish heritage. Silverstein's narrative cycle, *The Ginzberg Variations: The Seven Days of Creation* (2018 – 2020), is representative of the two great achievements of his cohort – namely, redirecting the progression of religious Jewish-themed art within the history of Jewish American art by developing new subject matter impossible to imagine before the 1970s, and presenting their creations in a relatively large number of narrative series, a format rarely used in the past and certainly not with the unconventional imagery seen in recent decades.

Silverstein's series belongs to a contemporary Jewish trend toward narrative cycles that include series based on the lives of biblical figures, on whole sections of the Torah, or, for that matter, on the entire Five Books, which include five decades of examples from Archie Rand's murals in the B'nai Yosef Synagogue (1974 – 1975) in Brooklyn, New York, to Ruth Weisberg's personalized Feminist historical series *The Scroll* (Skirball Museum, Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, 1986), to Richard McBee's nearly one hundred paintings revolving around the Binding of Isaac and the lives of Sarah and Hagar (1980s to the present), and to David Wander's accordion book and scroll paintings of the Five Megillot (the Books of Ruth and Esther, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs) as well as his many illustrated tales of moral values based on biblical and Talmudic sources and secular literature.<sup>1</sup> This generation's coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s paralleled the emergence of identity art within mainstream American art. But Silverstein and his generational cohort can be distinguished by being less insistent on mainstream recognition or on creating works based on their contemporary experiences.<sup>2</sup> Even as they find similarities between the ancient past and the present (i.e., the morality of war, misogyny, racism), they have turned inward, as it were, preferring to explore their religious and cultural backgrounds separate from their American experiences.

The Jewish art of this generation is not rooted in present-day social categories, but in religious narratives, historical events, and cultural values dating back to biblical times. Silverstein, for example, cites the murals in the Dura Europos Synagogue (245 CE) as his inspiration. Apparently the first fully muraled synagogue based on the Bible, it still resonates with artists today. As Silverstein has stated: "Its sequentiality was an inspiration for my own *Ginzberg Variations*." In 2011, he and Richard McBee curated an exhibition, *The Dura Europos Project: An Ancient Site Viewed Through 21st Century Eyes*, under the auspices of the Jewish Art Salon for the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art in which forty-nine artists were each asked to create a work based on one

---

<sup>1</sup> For Rand, see Matthew Baigell, "Archie Rand: American Artist with a Judaic Turn," *Images* 3 (2009): 57 – 59; for Weisberg, see *Ruth Weisberg Unfurled* (Los Angeles: Skirball Cultural Center, 2007); for McBee, see Matthew Baigell, "Richard McBee's Akedah Series: Reimagining and Reconfiguring Jewish Art," *Ars Judaica* 5 (2009): 107 – 120; for Wander, see Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Identity in American Art: A Golden Age since the 1970s* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2020), 140 – 154; Matthew Baigell, "Biblical Narratives in Contemporary Jewish American Art," *Shofar* 31 (2013): 10 – 24.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 84; and Corinne Robins, *The Pluralist Era in American Art 1968–1981* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 3.

of the synagogue's panels. These were then assembled, echoing the original installation. The idea was to create a sacred Jewish space.

The subject of *The Ginzberg Variations: The Seven Days of Creation* is challenging. How does one portray the beginning of things – the presence of the Deity, the creation of the sky, the earth, water, weather, the great variety of creatures, and the character of the people who will inhabit the land in ways – other than by merely illustrating the written word? It should be noted here that at least six members of this generation have attempted it, two artists more than once.<sup>3</sup> Until the 1970s and down to our own day, artists have depicted the events of each day as written in the Torah. But Silverstein, like others of his generation, no longer feels bound by literal representation. He favors instead elaboration, embellishment, and enhancement, and incorporates experiences and concerns into his works that extend far beyond narrow religious interpretations or formerly stringent compositional and stylistic imperatives.

The title itself lets the viewer know that Silverstein has not limited himself to illustrating the biblical account or even accepting Robert Alter's translation of the first sentence of Genesis, which seems to challenge the traditional *ex nihilo* version of Creation: "When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness of the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters."<sup>4</sup> Rather, Silverstein thought it more interesting and adventurous to base his narrative cycle on Louis Ginzberg's monumental *The Legends of the Jews*, published in several editions beginning in 1909. In making that decision, he told me that he has "no religious, ritualistic, or denominational agenda."

Silverstein found that Ginzberg's "florid but terse literary style, elaborate storytelling structure, and crystalline symbology reminded [him] of fantastical tales much like *The Arabian Nights*." He liked the idea that Ginzberg "jumped into the narrative at a break-neck pace" by describing the history before the Creation. As a result, Silverstein projected his Creation narrative as a series of paintings that would combine his knowledge of the history of art, ranging from the murals in the Dura Europos Synagogue to the variety of images seen in and on Greco-Roman and Hindu temples and Christian churches, with his interests in cinema, photography, comics, and toys to find a new way to represent the biblical story. He combines (jumbles together might be a better description) visual references to represent, interpret, exaggerate, and destabilize what we think we know about ancient Jewish texts and how they might affect us.

His version suggests that the traditional biblical original must be augmented by additional source material that also projects positive, affirmative values. As a result, his version of the story of Creation is based on his own spiritual quest, his own way of relating to all that is out there. This means that he has considerably lessened religious presuppositions in search of a new way to proclaim his Jewishness. For Silverstein, "the idea was to engage the text within a specifically Jewish context and iconography, but to keep it freewheeling, improvisational, expressionistic, and leaping in scope." The overall form, he hopes, "fixes the viewer's gaze and simultaneously guides it into the narrative's momentum." It is not quite the Big Bang, but it is a quickly moving panoply of images – as if to capture the frenzy of the days of Creation. He also finds what he calls an "extremity" in Ginzberg's language, which can best be visualized in a German expressionist style – "gutsy, gestural, even cartoon-like."

In his opening chapter, titled "The Creation of the World," Ginzberg described "the first things" before the world was created and those things immediately after. These served as the basis for many of Silverstein's paint-

---

<sup>3</sup> The artists are Jill Nathanson, Archie Rand, Susan Schwalb, Yona Verwer, Deborah Ugoretz, and Joel Silverstein.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Alter, trans., *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004), 17.

ings. According to Ginzberg, God created several “first things” before Day One. These included the Torah, the Divine Throne, Paradise, Hell, the Celestial Sanctuary, several worlds (that were subsequently destroyed), Divine goodness, Behemoth (whom he battled), the Messiah, the Hebrew alphabet, and the archangels Michael and Gabriel. As Ginzberg wrote in the first paragraph:

In the beginning, two thousand years before the heaven and the earth, seven things were created: the Torah written with black fire and white fire, and lying in the lap of God; the Divine Throne, erected in the heaven which later was over the heads of the Hayyot; Paradise on the right side of God; Hell on the left side; the Celestial Sanctuary directly on front of God, having a jewel on its altar graven with the name of the Messiah, and a Voice that cries aloud, “Return, ye children of men.”<sup>5</sup>

Then on the first day, God created the heavens and earth, light and darkness, wind and water, Tohu and Bohu, plants, manna, the celestial Jerusalem, the Temple, seven heavens and seven earths out of chaos. On the second day, God created the firmament, hell, fire, and the angels. On the third day, God created land, plants, and Paradise. On the fourth day, God created the sun, the moon, and the stars. On the fifth day, God created fire, fish, and the Leviathan. On the sixth day, God created birds, mammals, man, and woman.<sup>6</sup>

*The Ginzberg Variations* are for Silverstein part of a new Jewish Art, examining what it means to be an artist, an American, and a Jew. He changes proportions and colors as well as removes or hinders connections to traditional associations, which again might seem blasphemous to some but exhilarating to others. Think of Adam and Eve and the angels in a modern situation that also evokes the scene or an explosive arrangement of color to suggest an elevating or wonderous event or moment in biblical history. Silverstein is of course not alone in reimagining Jewish-themed art in which the ancient texts and legends stimulate his imagination rather than define narrowly his sense of religious affiliation. This point of view is certainly apparent today and might very well become central to religious Jewish-themed art in the future. But for now, Silverstein feels that, in the final analysis, if this series can be seen as part of a new Jewish Art, examining what it means to be an artist, an American, and a Jew, he would be more than satisfied.

The following portfolio presents an overview of the series and nine individual panels with annotations to give a sense of the organization, narrative sequence, and imagistic characteristics of this work.

---

<sup>5</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909), I:3. “Hayyot” refers to the heavenly beings mentioned in Ezekiel 1 and 10. “Return, ye children of men” is from Psalms 90:3 in the King James Version of the Bible, and refers to humankind’s necessity to repent.

<sup>6</sup> This very brief accounting is described in Ginzberg, *The Legends*, I:3 – 46. Further references to *The Legends* will be indicated in the text when appropriate by volume number and page number as in IV:12.

*The Portfolio*



Fig. 1 Joel Silverstein, *The Ginzberg Variations*, 2018 – 20. Acrylic on canvas and collage. Printed with permission from the Artist.

### *The Garden of Good and Evil*

Above the rows of paintings, Silverstein added *The Garden of Good and Evil*. It is a boldly painted, loaded brushed garden scene that includes a skull on the left and a rib cage on the right to suggest mind/soul and body, good and evil, life and death, growth and decay, spiritual and material, as well as beauty and ugliness in Creation – that is, the binary dualities of life. The vigor of the paint application announces immediately that Silverstein is an “elbow” rather than a “wrist” or “finger” painter, passionate and purposely not subtle as if to suggest the tumult of the first moments (or days) of Creation. After all, this was a big deal in cosmic time and space.

### *Chaos*

In the first panel, Silverstein shows immediately his and much of his generation’s independence from traditional thought as well as his idea of having a Talmudic discussion concerning different points of view, secular and religious, within his own mind. His goal was to picture the random forces of nature before the act of Creation. More specifically, he offers an alternative to the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* – God “created” the earth “out of nothing” – in that he shows forces of nature that existed before the act of Creation. In his mind, he set the traditional English-language version in the King James Bible – “In the beginning, God created the earth and the heaven” – against modern translations – “When God began to create heaven and earth – the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water – God said, ‘Let there be light’ ; and there was light.”<sup>7</sup> And then against these translations, Silverstein had discovered that Rashi (1040 – 1105), the French rabbi who wrote commentaries on the Talmud and Hebrew Bible, might have read Plato’s *Timaeus* regarding unformed elements being actively manipulated during the act of Creation.

Like Plato, Rashi held that the heaven and earth were not created *ex nihilo*, but out of primordial materials. According to Rashi’s reading, various things were in existence before the creation of heaven and earth: *toho* and *bohu*, darkness, the deep, etc. Like Plato, Rashi held that these preexistent things included the four Greek physical elements: earth, water, air, fire.<sup>8</sup>

Silverstein’s painting includes a head-shot of a squeeze-toy figure wearing a green cap, its mouth agape in a gesture recalling both a smile and regurgitation. Its hands are outsized as if playing a demonic video game. A gas-masked figure looms in the upper center next to faces in various states of either decay or completion, a sequence of off-putting and even frightening gestures depicting a chaotic pre-universe at war as well as frantic amoral activity in the absence of any social control. All of this activity takes place under a supernal light radiating fire and heat before the first dawn: the hottest, whitest heat closest to the figures below.

<sup>7</sup> The first modern translation is from Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and the second is from Robert Alter, ed., *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Norton, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Warren Zev Harvey, “Creation from Primordial Matter: Did Rashi Read Plato’s *Timaeus*?” <https://www.thetorah.com/article/creation-from-primordial-matter-did-rashi-read-platos-timaeus>. See also Philo of Alexandria, *The Contemplative Life, the Giants, and Selections*, trans. David Winston (New York: The Paulist Press, 1981), 7.





Fig. 2 Joel Silverstein, *The Garden of Good and Evil*, 2018 – 20. Acrylic on canvas and collage, 24 × 36 in. Printed with permission from the Artist.



Fig. 3 Joel Silverstein, *Chaos*, Acrylic on canvas, 2018 – 20. 16 × 20 in. Printed with permission from the Artist.

### *The Big Bang*

The scientific explanation of the Big Bang, namely, that the ever-expanding universe can be traced to a single point of origin, was first postulated by George Lemaître in 1927. Paradoxically, this notion can be thought to acknowledge an *ex nihilo* Creation.<sup>9</sup> Arno Penzias added additional evidence in 1964 through his co-discovery of cosmic microwave background radiation.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, string theory postulates that the Big Bang was a spark in a series of multiple ongoing events responsible for the creation of multiple universes.<sup>11</sup> Silverstein feels that this kind of presentation should not interfere with a viewer's Jewish identification, spiritual beliefs, or metaphysical quests, but rather augment them.

Stylistically, the large, central, heavily brushed and flattened circle lying near the painting's center is based on a similar circular form that in fact opens to deep space in *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, 1852), a highly theatrical painting by the English Romantic artist John Martin (1789 – 1854). Silverstein's version clearly suggests an explosion of monumental proportions. Three curved tracks that extend from side to side covering part of the large circle are based on a colorful rainbow bridge that the artist found in a panel by Jack Kirby, one of the major American comic book illustrators in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> The text reads: "Beyond our segment of time and space, there exists Asgard, the citadel of the Norse gods, which is connected to earth by a rainbow bridge called Bifrost!" The tracks suggest rapid movement or the burning tail of a comet that has passed beyond the painting's right frame.

---

<sup>9</sup> See George Lemaître, "Un Univers homogène de masse constant et de rayon croissant redent de la vitesse radiale des nébuleuses extra-galactiques," *Annales de la Société Scientifique de Bruxelles* 47 (1927): 49 – 59.

<sup>10</sup> See the Wikipedia entry for Penzias. In addition, Baigell and Penzias resided in Highland Park, NJ, at the same time. At local social gatherings, Penzias, if asked, was happy to discuss, in layman's terms, his co-discovery. He was often asked.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.livescience.com/17454-string-theory-big-bang.html>, accessed 9/17/21.

<sup>12</sup> A reproduction can be found at <https://twitter.com/BackintheBronze/status/1223688563176493056/photo/1>. The image was reproduced from *Journey into Mystery With Thor* #123, Marvel Comics (New York: 1925), and reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: The Mighty Thor* #4 (New York: 2005), 47.





Fig. 4 Joel Silverstein, *The Big Bang*. Acrylic on canvas, 2018 – 20. 16 × 20 in. Printed with permission from the Artist.



### *Creation of the Angels*

This panel depicts an essentially modern midrash based on three secular sources – Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* (Israel Museum, 1920), Walter Benjamin’s *Thesis on the Creation on the Philosophy of History*, and Silverstein’s own imagination – concerning the creation of angels, who were considered intermediates between God and humans (Psalms 8:4 – 5). Despite their lower station, humans were designated as rulers over God’s works.<sup>13</sup> In Benjamin’s telling, an angel with spread wings whose face is turned toward the past is blown into the future by a storm from Paradise. Where we humans perceive a chain of events, the angel in the painting sees only one catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage at its feet. The angel would like to remain and awaken the dead and make whole what had been smashed, but the storm blowing from Paradise is so violent that it is propelled into the future to which its back is turned as the pile of debris grows skyward. This storm is actually what we call progress. The angel stares past the viewer, implying that the viewer is caught, perhaps overwhelmed, by the past.

Benjamin, like other central European Jews of the mid-twentieth century, could not necessarily claim to be of the country of his birth. He did not look upon the future as optimistically as the more egalitarian, assimilated American Silverstein, who includes several angels in the process of formation, symbolizing positive aspects of progress. His angels are neither terrified nor frozen while contemplating the present and, because they are just emerging newly formed, look forward to the future.

Silverstein found references to the theological concept that humans, created in the image of God, should imitate – not impersonate – God’s actions.<sup>14</sup> God countered the angels’ opposition to the creation of humans by insisting that humankind would possess greater wisdom. God then instructed Adam to name each living creature.<sup>15</sup> This notion prompted Silverstein to link artistic creation and moral action with Divine Creation, the assumption being that divine inspiration remains a constant source of creativity among individuals wherever they are and in whatever condition they find themselves. In effect, reversing the implications of Klee’s painting and Benjamin’s observations, Silverstein posits the idea that humans have within themselves the possibility of evolving into angels (meaning spiritual beings), a concept he equates with superhero actions in American comic books.

---

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253 – 264, here 257 – 258. Benjamin’s passage is reproduced in Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), xvi. Silverstein painted this work as an homage to the personal relationship between Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, the historian of *kabbalah*.

<sup>14</sup> For a lengthy discussion of this concept, see “Imitation of God,” *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/imitation-of-god>.

<sup>15</sup> Ginzberg, I:61. See also Genesis 2:20 – 21; 3:5.



Fig. 5 Joel Silverstein, *Creation of the Angels*. Acrylic on canvas, 2018 – 20. 16 × 20 in. Printed with permission from the Artist.

### *Creation of the Spherot*

The *spherot* (= *sephirot* or *sefirot*) are associated primarily with Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534 – 1572), who lived in Safed (Safed), now in Israel, and is discussed in two of the oldest religious texts, the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Zohar*, the latter being the major book of *kabbalah*.<sup>16</sup> They are usually represented by a tree-like or human shape with ten points representing the emanations or divine aspects of God. These emanations range from the transcendent nature of God known only to God and then continue to that which involves human life. The ten emanations are known (variously) as Crown, Understanding, Wisdom, Power, Love, Beauty, Splendor, Eternity, Foundation, and Presence. To suggest both the spiritual and physical qualities of the *spherot*, Silverstein placed a book-illustrated skeletal body on a cloud-like form that floats in space whose form is influenced by Hyman Bloom's eviscerated *Self-Portrait* (1948, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). The body symbolizes *Adam Kadmon*, or primordial man, the first burst of energy (pure potential) in Creation and also the physical presence of Adam, the first person in the Garden of Eden.

### *Creation of Metatron, the Archangel*

This image marks an instance in which Silverstein arrived at his image of Metatron by interweaving information from a variety of sources in which Metatron acts as a person (a leader, a victor, and a protector). He is the most important of the archangels, helped Moses lead the Israelites from Egypt, and was able to access spiritual powers, among other things, as a symbol of his intelligence. The initial idea for Silverstein's panel was based on a Jack Kirby science fiction comic book hero named Orion, who fought on the side of justice in a series of four interlocking comic books collectively called *The Fourth World* beginning in 1970.<sup>17</sup> Silverstein connected Orion to Metatron, who holds a similar position in the apocryphal Book of Enoch and The Apocalypse of Zerubbabel as well as in Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (several index entries) and Ginzberg's *The Legends* (I:124 – 40). Insofar as Metatron fought against evil, materialism, and all hostile aspects of life, and was also the recorder of all human moral activity, Silverstein linked ancient mythic and apocryphal religious thought and activity with contemporary comic book culture. Metatron's presence here undoubtedly led to one of Silverstein's Talmudic arguments with himself about his figure's Jewish character because the angel's power rivals that of God.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the most accessible source in English appears in Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (Edison, NJ: Castle, 1995), 7 – 11. See also Aryeh Kaplan, trans., *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1990); and Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Kirby's work was first published in February 1971 as part of *Fourth World* and reissued as *New Gods #1* in 1998 by DC Comics (Burbank, CA). Orion's image can be seen (as of August 2021) on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) in *Jack Kirby's Fourth World Omnibus*, Vol. 1 (London: Titan, 2012). See also the Wikipedia entries for Orion and Jack Kirby.





Fig. 6 Joel Silverstein, *Creation of the Spherot*. Acrylic on canvas, 2018 - 20. 16 × 20 in. Printed with permission from the Artist.

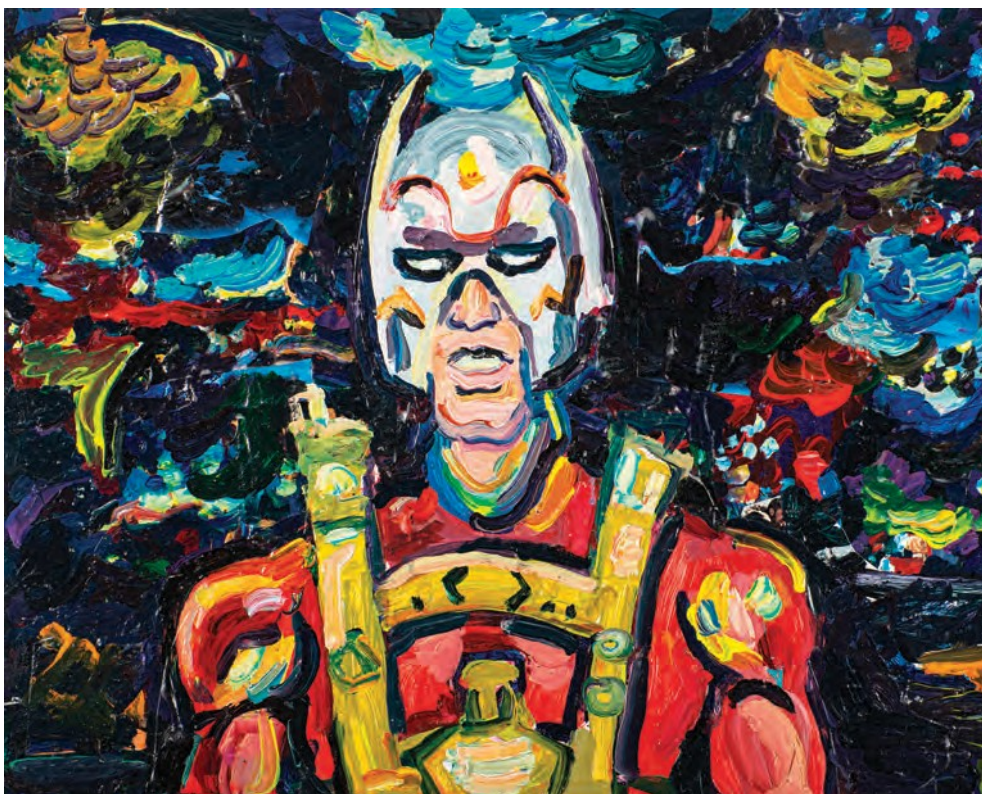


Fig. 7 Joel Silverstein, *Creation of Metatron*. Acrylic on canvas, 2018 - 20. 16 × 20 in. Printed with permission from the Artist.

### *Kabbalistic Image of Tsim-Tsum*

This is among the more complicated images both for the panel's iconography and for reasons personal to Silverstein. Briefly, the above-mentioned Rabbi Isaac Luria, the kabbalist, interpreted Creation as a contraction of God's being – the *tsim-tsum* – to make space for the Creation of the universe. In the process, evil was set loose and until it was contained through religious worship and good deeds (*tikkun olam*), the Messiah could not appear and Creation could not be completed.<sup>18</sup> The result is that we live in an incomplete and broken world, one that requires human intervention to aid in the completion of Creation. The planets, as depicted in Silverstein's panel of the solar system, are not in fixed positions. The revolving arcs appear as uncompleted elliptical paths. A green monster, suggestive of God, is an indeterminate figure of both good and evil. In this still unstructured universe, this aspect of God is seen as the author of broken unfinished forms or, worse, a figure removed from human compassion. The central blue circle, Silverstein's symbol of a cold sun, perhaps reflects the ancient Ptolemaic belief that Earth is the center of the universe. This panel describes a partial Creation, but the universe is nonetheless alive with living creatures seen in the bone-like form above the green monster's head and the diagram of veins and arteries to the right.

In a panel in a narrative cycle about the Creation, Silverstein paradoxically asks the basic question others have also raised: why was the universe created if our earth is still such a mess? In the concluding section below, Silverstein offers his reasons for painting the cycle, but, like others, he has no answer to the basic question. However, in this regard he joins, in good Jewish fashion, those ancient figures Abraham, Job, Noah, and Moses, who questioned God's judgment as well as those who have wondered about God's presence during the Holocaust.

### *Creation of Beauty on Shabbat*

The last two images in the series are related to the last day of Creation. God rests and creates the Sabbath. Silverstein decided to paint two contiguous images showing the effects of the last day of Creation. In the first, two celestial beings, perhaps God and an angel, cease their activities. Or it is possible that, sitting at the edge of the Garden of Eden, they are surveyors or evaluators working for a vast celestial bureaucracy. The surveyor is contemplating, perhaps evaluating one of God's newest creations: the rose. As God proclaimed that all Creation is good, God is asserting that it is beautiful, thus establishing an aesthetic category in addition to a moral one. By painting the bright, exuberantly colored flowers and distancing the bureaucrats, Silverstein also asserts his preference for immediate emotional responses to a beautiful scene in nature rather than assessing its glories by cold, intellectual means. He evokes here William Blake's monotype, "Newton" in the Tate Gallery, London (1795), concerning the limits of logic and science in the face of nature, beauty, and emotion.

---

<sup>18</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1995), especially 260 – 264.





Fig. 8 Joel Silverstein, *Kabbalistic Image of tsim-tsum*. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 2018 - 20. 16 x 20 in. Printed with permission from the Artist.



Fig. 9 Joel Silverstein, *Creation of Beauty on Shabbat*. Acrylic and collage on canvas, 16 x 20 in. 2018 - 20. Printed with permission from the Artist.



### *Creation of the Bride*

The final painting of the series, *Creation of the Bride*, is a young woman (Fig. 10), identified as the Sabbath Bride, popularized by the Sfad kabbalists particularly in the song *Lecha Dodi*, originally a poem written by Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz (1500 – 1576), which includes the passage “Come my Beloved” as part of welcoming the Sabbath. The beauty of the metaphorical bride also refers to the mystical marriage between God and Israel, as pronounced by the Prophets (Hoshea 2:19) and linked to the holiday Shavuot. On at least four occasions, Ginzberg commented on the relation of God to the Israelites as bride and groom. He wrote about God’s union with Israel at Mount Sinai as if He were a king who at the marriage ceremony overwhelmed his bride with gifts (III:77); had Moses wake up the Israelites one morning to announce that the groom had arrived to lead the bride to the marriage canopy (III:92); told the Sabbath that it would be coupled with Israel as its spouse (III:99); and had all Israel exclaim that “the Torah that Moses brought to us at the risk of his life is our bride, and no other nation may lay claim to it” (III:455).

In his book *The Hebrew Goddess*, Raphael Patai discusses the concept of such a creature, which he calls Matronit (the Matron, Lady, or Queen), who has “played the role of spouse as well as mother to her people. She also assumed the form of a divine queen and bride, who joined them [the Israelites] every Friday at dusk to bring them joy and happiness on the sacred Sabbath. To this day, in every Jewish temple or synagogue she is welcomed in the Friday evening prayers with the words ‘Come, O bride!’ ”<sup>19</sup>

The series ends on this hopeful note, of joining the entire house of Israel together for a religious service. Silverstein’s portrait of a bride is based on an ad in a 1960 issue of *Vogue*, the panel’s message delivered through a contemporary image but underlined by an extensive grasp of religious ritual and thought, traditional family values, and knowledge of appropriate legends.

### *Acknowledgements*

The author would like to thank Joel Silverstein for several discussions about *The Ginzberg Variations* and for sharing information about his sources.

---

<sup>19</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. Revised (1967; repr. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 33.



Fig. 10 Joel Silverstein, *Creation of the Bride*. Acrylic on canvas, 16 × 20 in. 2018 – 20. Printed with permission from the Artist.

**Matthew Baigell** is Professor Emeritus of Art History, Rutgers University. He has written seven books and numerous articles on aspects of Jewish-themed art in America and coauthored two anthologies on modern Jewish art. He was recognized in 2021 in the inaugural 16 over 61 Awards sponsored by the Jewish Community Center of Manhattan and *The Forward* (digital) for contributions to Jewish culture.

**Joel Silverstein** is an Artist/Curator who paints expressionist landscapes, portraits, and interiors often with Jewish themes using direct observation, history painting, comics, movie stills, and collage. He has exhibited nationally and internationally. He is a Founding and Executive Member of the Jewish Art Salon and has curated or advised on fifteen Salon exhibitions including *Through Compassionate Eyes: Artist's Call for Animal Rights* at the Charter Oak Center in Hartford, CT. Recent exhibitions of his own work have taken place at the Green Kill gallery in Kingston, NY; the Art Basel Gallery in Miami, and the Amstelkerk gallery in Amsterdam. His work and curated exhibitions are cited in Ori Z. Soltes' s *Tradition and Transformation: Three Millennia of Jewish Art and Architecture* and Matthew Baigell' s *Jewish Identity in American Art: A Golden Age Since the 1970s*.