

Notes on Paintings by Victor Majzner

1: Me

(acrylic on canvas 76 x 56 cm) 2008. [front cover, Ageing]

On an all-consuming/surrounding sea, the monolithic word “ME” is contained within a coat-like outline of a garment. The garment acts as a cage, a container for the ME. Where the garment is fragile, a reference to one’s soul, the monolithic ME seems strong and impregnable, perhaps like our ego? Yet on further observation, the ME is made up of the same material as the sea – water and its apparent strength is just that, an appearance, an illusion. In fact the ME, just like the garment, is vulnerable to its “source”. A human life, although very precious and important to each of us, like the ME of the painting, is in fact simply a transient and temporary illusion. To stress the vulnerability of a human being, an image of Ron floating in an endless sea is at the same time part of the word ME and partly disguised by the coat.

2: (G-d’s) Open hand

(watercolour 57 x 51 cm) 2008. [Belief and Bureaucracy]

Over a condensed landscape of Israel, from the Negev (bottom of picture) to the Galil (top of picture), is painted an outline of an open hand, symbolising G-d’s gift of the world to us (with an open hand He gifted). “You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.” Psalms 145:16. The (life) lines within the hand are the G-dly emanations, the ten *Sephirot* with which He creates. “It is a tree of life for those who grasp it and its supporters are praiseworthy ... its ways are ways of pleasantness and its paths are peace.” Proverbs 3:17, 18. Each *Sephira* is painted according to the colour code of its function as explained by Isaac Luria (Arizal), the 16th century (1534–72) mystic and Kabbalist from Sefad.

3: Bereishit – In The Beginning

(watercolour 57 x 51 cm) 2008. [Continuity]

Over a field of cosmic chaos, Creation is taking place. Light is being separated from darkness, land formations, plants, animals and birds are coming into being. As G-d created the world through speech, through utterances in Hebrew, each letter of

the Hebrew alphabet wants to be the first letter to begin Creation. As these letters juggle for prime position, G-d chooses the letter **Beit** (as this letter was the only one not wanting a prime position) to be the first letter of Creation and of the Torah. **Beit**, being the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, implies a duality, a separation. Each letter of the word **Bereishit** (in the beginning) is falling into place to form the word, however the letter **Beit** (being first) is given prominence – just like in the Torah. Each letter contains different aspects of Creation (the world) as it tumbles into place (order out of chaos).

4: Fences

(acrylic on canvas 56 x 81.5 cm) 2008. [Behaviour]

Psalms: 111:10: “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d ...” This quote in Hebrew is painted as a hedge/fence within a Pilbara (northwest Australia) landscape. Ron’s image is surrounded by this hedge/fence. We all build different fences around ourselves, but this fence is different. The idea is that wherever one finds oneself (in the world) it is good to remember this particular fence as it is the Jewish way towards fulfilment. The first letter of each word of this hedge/fence is slightly lighter than the others, highlighting the fact that the Gematria of these letters is 228 = the same number as **Etz Chaim** – Tree of Life. Such numerical correlations are very important. In this case, the mystical significance of this fence is revealed.

5: The hidden Aleph = letter A of Hebrew alphabet

(watercolour 57 x 51 cm) 2008. [Water, Life and Numbers]

Over Ron’s front-yard water garden of fish is painted the diagram of the ten **Sephirot** as a system of refracting light (the emotions) according to Rabbi Ginsberg. Each **Sephira** is painted according to the colour scheme of its function. This diagram is painted as if one is looking through it to Creation. Framing the complete painting is an outline of the Hebrew letter **aleph** (A, first letter of the Hebrew alphabet). At the Creation of the world, the **aleph** was hidden. Yet its potency is such that it permeates everything. The pond, water and fish are symbols of abundant creation. The letter **aleph** starts out black (symbolising **yetzer ha-ra**), gradually turning white (**yetzer ha-tov**) then gold (G-dly – beyond good or evil) and eventually blue, symbolising tranquillity, the sky, peace = the complete symbolic (colour) process, signifying the meaning of life.

6: The (hidden) Menorah of the Torah (Torah code)

(watercolour 57 x 51 cm) 2009. [Water, Life and Numbers]

The Torah is often referred to symbolically as a garden (of delight, of knowledge, of law, of life, etc.). But mostly it is referred to as the *orchard* – *PARDES* – the acronym for *Pshat*, *Remez*, *Drash* and *Sod*, the four levels of Torah interpretation. Apart from the various levels of interpretation and the 70 “faces” that it carries within itself, there are other codes that are gradually being revealed. One of these is the symmetry of the letters that spell out T’O’R’H (Torah) in Hebrew. In four of the books of the Torah, counting from the first *Tav*, in *Bereishit* and *Shemot* the letters of the word T’O’R’H appear every 50 (49 spaces = 7 x 7 plus the 1 makes 50) letters, and in *Bamidbar* and *Devarim* they appear backwards: H’R’O’T. In *Vayikra* (the third, or middle book) the letters of Y’K’V’K (G-d’s Holy name) appear at intervals of 7 (every 8th letter i.e. 7 spaces plus the 1) letters. These “secret” hidden codes point to the Gematria (mystical numerology within the Hebrew alphabet) and contain a deep level of knowledge and inspiration within the Torah. The symmetry of the letters in the words T’O’R’H and Y’K’V’K’ within the five books make up a kind of mystical (light) menorah.

7: Tishrei – Nisan – the idea of the two first months

(watercolour, each 57 x 51 cm) 2009. [Happiness]

7a: *Nisan* is commanded in the Torah to be the first month for the Jewish people. It is the first month of freedom (from Egypt). It has a spiritual significance as G-d delivered us into freedom. It is also associated with spring as the word *Nisan* in Hebrew means bud. Therefore *Nisan* is also the spring (awakening) of the Jewish nation. The painting is constructed through numerous symbols; the background is of flowers = spring (new buds), the menorah from which emanates light in the painting as well as having its seven lights lit is the symbol of Judaism. The light of the painting comes from the bottom part of the menorah. The original menorah was carved out of one piece of gold by Betzalel on Moses’ instructions as directed by G-d. The central column (stem – from the bottom up) = one; it represents G-d’s oneness (singularity and infiniteness of G-d). The cups (branches – from the top down) = seven, representing G-d’s “physicality” in Creation. As the chains of slavery and oppression break, the light of freedom, both physical and spiritual (from Egypt = *Mitzraim* = restricted place) illuminates our future. The flames from the menorah shine over a matza (unleavened bread = symbol of Passover). All of these point to the spiritual significance of *Nisan*.

7b: Tishrei: although it is the first month of the Jewish year, it is referred to in the Torah as the seventh month. It is the first month because it is associated with the Creation of Man. Adam was created in *Tishrei*. It therefore has a physical association = from dust/earth (resulting in clay when mixed with water – both suggested in the painting) G-d created Man. In a desert-like landscape, although vegetation has already been created (right of painting), Adam is being created. The bottom part of his figure is like the land (mud), brown and heavy. As the “breath” of G-d is being “blown” into Adam’s nostrils (Adam’s living soul), he begins to take on an alive (pink) colour and demeanour. Genesis 1:27: “So G-d created Man in His image, in the image of G-d He created him; male and female He created them”. The reference to the creation of both genders is suggested in the painting by the template of the female back to back with the figure of Adam, as a *Midrash* suggests. The image of G-d is represented by the range of hands (sky-like images) in the process of Creation (pointing), out of which droplets of water (symbols of fertility) are coming down to earth. This painting is about the physical being created by the metaphysical = the significance of *Tishrei*.

8: Unification of G-d’s Name

(watercolour 57 x 51 cm) 2009. [The Confrontation of the Yetzer Ha-ra]

By performing the *mitzvah* of the *lulav* (the four species during *Succhoth*) one is unifying G-d’s Holy Name as each species carries a symbolic connection to the Tetragrammaton: (Citrus) *Etrog* = *Yud*; (Date Palm) *Lulav* = *Hey*; (Myrtle) *Haddasim* = *Vav*; (Willow) *Aravot* = *Hey*. In the days of the Temple, huge willow branches were brought and leaned against the altar during *Succhoth*. The *shofar* was blown and the *kohanim* (priests) would walk around the altar and recite the prayer *hosha na* – “Please bring salvation”. Then the people would come in and wave the *aravot* (willows). On *Hoshanah Rabbah* we perform the ritual of encircling the *Bima* with the four species seven times and waving the willows as we do the four species (in commemoration of the Temple service) followed by the thrashing of willow branches five times on the floor or against a chair, to dislodge some of the leaves. As the *Machzor* explains: “The five-time beating of the *aravah* (willow) branches symbolises the breaking of the five vessels which restrain the full force of holiness. The beating of the branches thus causes a ‘sweetening’ of the strict powers.” To paraphrase this: by beating the five willows the intention is to “sweeten” G-d’s judgments that are made on *Rosh Hashanah* – *Yom Kippur* period that “come down” to the “here and now” physical dimension through the day of *Hoshanah Rabbah*.

Over a background of water (symbolic reference to the depth of Torah) the letters of the Tetragrammaton are painted in the art form of the species in their corresponding orders. They are unified towards the central point just as on *Succoth* we hold the four species together. The “thrashing” of the five branches of the willow are symbolised by the Hebrew letters within the image of the hand overlapping the Tetragrammaton. Just as *Succoth* is the festival in *Tishrei* which immediately follows the spiritual heights of *Yom Kippur* (ascended during the previous month of Elul to *Rosh Hashanah* and the Ten Days of Repentance), *Succoth* bridges this spiritual high point as it brings us towards the new month of *Cheshvan* in the cycle of the year.

These letters are a symbolic reference to the five *Megillot* (five scrolls) of the *Tanach*: Each of these is symbolically referred to as:

Shir Hashirim (Song of Songs) – *Tzedek* = Righteousness,

Ruth – *Chesed* = Kindness,

Eichah (Lamentations) – *Mishpat* = Judgement,

Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) – *Emunah* = Belief,

Esther – *Rachamim* = Mercy.

The first Hebrew letter of the *Megillah* (scroll) and the first letter of its symbolic connotation are combined within the image of each “finger” of G-d’s hand: *shin/tzaddek*, *reish/chet*, *aleph/mem*, *koof/aleph*, *aleph/reish*. This combination of the ten letters are a pointer to the ten other utterances of G-d = Creation and the Ten Commandments. In a visually symbolic manner this painting represents the totality of the Torah.

9: Yetzer Ha-Tov versus Yetzer Ha-Ra = the constant battle

(watercolour, each frame 29 x 25.5 cm) 2009. [The Confrontation of the Yetzer Ha-ra]

Yetzer ha-ra = external, evil force; *yetzer ha-tov* = G-dliness in each of us. Imagine that these two opposing forces play within the “consciousness” of the individual. Maybe it is the soul of the person influencing their conscience and their free choices?

Painted like a strip/narrative in eight frames:

Frame 1: Within a person, the place of *yetzer ha-ra* is dark, like a dark and frightening tunnel or a pit: emptiness, nothingness and a sense of foreboding.

However, as the world was created by *Elokim* through judgment/righteousness, so even within the darkest and most empty habitat of *yetzer ha-ra* there remains a tiny dot of light, of hope, of redemption – of *yetzer ha-tov*.

Frame 2: As soon as the light (goodness) of *yetzer ha-tov* confronts *yetzer ha-ra*, the latter appears to begin to withdraw and the light of *yetzer ha-tov* illuminates the darkness. It corners and surrounds *yetzer ha-ra*, at which point *yetzer ha-ra* appears to sprout colours, to disguise itself.

Frame 3: Although *yetzer ha-ra* is innately black (dark/evil) and preys upon one's vulnerability, it disguises itself as being beautiful, sensual, attractive and desirous. It beguiles with a mirage of colours as it attempts to allure and mislead.

Frame 4: *Yetzer ha-ra*, disguised in a veil of beauty and colour, goes through a seductive “dance-like” series of movements or self-preservation manoeuvres in order to distract and hypnotise *yetzer ha-tov* into a false sense of security, as its goal is to dominate by whatever means is available. Genesis 2:6: “And the woman (Eve) perceived that the tree was good for eating and that it was a delight to the eyes ...” However, this colourful charade proves to be only a thin veneer of a disguise, as it has been identified and recognised for what it truly is.

Frame 5: As soon as this disguise is torn open/exposed, out pours the reality of ugliness and repugnance of *yetzer ha-ra*. Its destructive work is exposed. The forces of *yetzer ha-tov* need to have been able to overcome the forces of *yetzer ha-ra* to have approached it so closely and taken hold of it to tear off its disguise.

Frame 6: Its true nature exposed, the forces of *yetzer ha-ra* are gathering and multiplying in strength. A serpent-like (dark/repulsive) form of it is being revealed.

Frame 7: *Yetzer ha-ra* sees an open doorway radiating light (the essence of *yetzer ha-tov*). *Yetzer ha-ra* speeds towards the light, wanting to challenge and engage in yet another illusion that will continue its purpose.

Frame 8: *Yetzer ha-tov* expels *yetzer ha-ra* out of this gate. Inside this doorway (symbolically) lies our power from within our awareness to confront our *yetzer ha-ra* and reveal its true ugliness. The way to deal with the forces of *yetzer ha-ra* is to use “the fence” of our inner strength, belief/spiritual comfort and shut this door to it, locking it out and excluding its destructive influence. In other words, to allow the G-dly presence (*yetzer ha-tov*) to rule. The Hebrew letter *Yud* dominates the painting, illuminated from the crown upon the letter. *Yud* is the first letter in the Tetragrammaton of G-d's name (*Yud Key Vav Key*) and stands for His presence –

the ultimate *yetzer ha-tov*! It represents the potential in all of us. Thus the *yetzer ha-tov* prevails over the *yetzer ha-ra*.

10: Numbers

(acrylic on canvas 76 x 56.5 cm) 2008. [Science or Religion]

Numbers and plus signs i.e. $6 + 1 + 3$ float on water/sea, like islands. Ron's image is sitting on one of them, looking into the distance. Each of us (at times) feels as if we are alone, isolated and living on an island, upon a slightly turbulent sea surrounding us. The aerial view allows the viewer to observe that each number and plus sign is actually a piece of a (living) hedge. The symbolism here is that there is a purpose to it all (life) but a bit out of our reach. We can only understand the island we live on (hang onto). Is this another fence? In this case, the numbers signify the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) written in the Torah. The addition of $6 + 1 + 3 = 10$ is a reference to the ten G-dly utterances at Mt Sinai – the Ten Commandments. Man (sitting on a worldly level) cannot see the complete significance of these *mitzvot*. Only G-d (and the viewer) can see the complete “picture”.

11: Kedoshim

(watercolour on paper 71.5 x 56 cm) [Introduction]

Leviticus 19:1 “*You must be Holy since I am G-d and I am Holy*”. This quote is depicted along the bottom of the painting. This *parsha* (weekly portion) *Kedoshim* is the centre of the Torah and the above quote is central to the Torah and to Judaism. The *parsha* seems to paraphrase the Ten Commandments, therefore I painted them as if on the two tablets, in their “original” (first) incarnation where the letters were written by G-d and suspended miraculously where one could see through and around them.

Over the top of these tablets is depicted the Kabbalistic “Tree of Life” (*Sefirot*), the G-dly attributes through which G-d functions. Each *Sefirah* is represented by a droplet of water, the symbol of Torah.

12: Hula Valley from Ramot Naftali

(acrylic on canvas 137 x 152 cm) 2007. [Ageing]

Hula Valley is the breadbasket of Israel; one of the most fertile regions. I am painting

the Valley from an elevated viewing area outside the Moshav Ramot Naftali. The depiction of myself in the act of painting reinforces the artifice of art.

13: Images of Tanya, Gate of Unity and Belief, Chapter 12

(silk screen print on paper 67 x 47 cm) 2001. [Belief and Bureaucracy]

This is the final image of ten prints dealing with the idea of the Unity of G-d and Creation as elucidated by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi in his famous work *Tanya*.

G-d creates through the “garment” of Hebrew letters, G-d’s mystical speech. Within the letters that make up the “garment” are contained all references to creation: land, vegetation, animals, birds and fish. The creation of Man is implied by the coat garment that seems to hover over a mystical seascape. The spiritual is embedded within the physical.

14: Painting Me Painting

(acrylic on canvas 91.5 x 76 cm) 2007. [Continuity]

I depicted myself as I paint on location, this time in Israel. I am painting an imaginary Hebrew letter *Alef* which, together with the other Hebrew letters in the painting, spells out the word Adam as reference to the first biblical man. In this case these gigantic letters that dominate the scene are sprouting from the landscape like cultivated hedges or natural sculptures. Culture + nature + the act of painting.

15: Ki Teitzei

(watercolour on paper 71.5 x 56 cm) 2008. [Behaviour]

This painting deals with the *parsha* of that name in the Torah (Deuteronomy 21.10-25.19). The image depicts what is considered to be the easiest *mitzvah* (commandment) in the whole Torah. *If one happens to come upon a bird’s nest in the wild and desires to take the eggs or the chicks, one must first shoo away the mother bird* (Deuteronomy 22.6-7). The reward for doing this mitzvah is long life.

The image superimposed over the narrative is of *tzitzit* (a fringed garment) commanded to be worn.

16: A Planted Garden

(acrylic on canvas 183 x 168 cm) 2007. [Water, Life and Numbers]

In this fictional garden or park, hidden among the trees are growing hedge-like Hebrew letters. The world continues to be created by the speech of G-d through the holy language of Hebrew.

17: Lights

(acrylic on canvas 196 x 166 cm) 1994. [Happiness]

An outline of a naked male figure (the quintessential Adam) hovers erect yet vulnerable over an archetypal Australian landscape. Light bulbs (symbols of unrealised potential/ideas) surround him like an aura of light. They seem to provide the light in the painting. Instead of the sun, an open flower displaces it.

18. The Book is Everywhere

(acrylic on canvas 122 x 122 cm) 1998. [Religion and Science]

In a mystical desert (perhaps the Negev in Israel) in a desolate landscape of stones is a gigantic open book carved out the stone like a monument. What kind of book is it? A book of laws? Of fiction? Of stone? This book is capable of being filled with “anything” and “everything”. It is already filled with the land, with nature and culture even though it is only a transient mirage. However, the book is in the process of “conversing” with the land.

The male figure, dwarfed by the book, seems insignificant in this setting. We seek the spiritual but often end up with stones.

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