

# The Art of Yihudim\*

Dedicated to Lisa Rose

*His Higher soul longed to unite with her soul, which is the beginning without end, and the end without the beginning.*

Abraham Abulafia, quoted from Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah by Moshe Idel, Page 8, Note 41 from Biblioteque Nationale

*Yahweh shaped an earthling from clay of this earth, blew into its nostrils the wind of life.*

The Book of J, Section #1, Page 61 Translated by David Rosenberg, Interpreted by Harold Bloom

*You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

Tanakh: The Holy Scripture, Exodus 20:4-6

This essay speculates and, at times during its stint in the sanctum sanctorum, ruminates on the kabbalistic concept of Yihudim as an art to which the creation of art and by extension, the artist, is closely linked. We will limit our gaze to the medieval Spanish kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (1240-1292) as exemplar of Yihudim, and painter Lisa Rose whose paintings exemplify the agon at the center of Yihudim and/or its aspiration, creation and eventual surrender.

The Yihudim of Spanish kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (who was born in Spain, wrote prophetic books, tried to convert the Pope on the day the Pope died and for which he spent a month in prison rather than be executed, then wandered through Italy and Greece), proposes to give unity meaning beyond the unified to blend the perfect amalgam of all potential disparity and return the seeker to the nondual from which all categories of humanity are spawned. Since disparity at its base occurs in oneself and extends outward to another, and then to the other ad infinitum, Yihudim is a trope of impossibility whose aim defies the common sense of human experience. Yihudim is indeed a mystical activity which seeks to restore the primordial bifurcation between humanity and divinity, and in so doing, merge disparity. In the history of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah has been called "prophetic" and "ecstatic" by eminent scholars such as Gershom Scholem and Moshe Idel. The ecstatic kabbalist is different than the theological and literary kabbalist insofar as daily practice, invocation and attainment of the holy are concerned. In Abulafia's own words: *"all the inner forces and the hidden souls in man are differentiated in the bodies. It is however in the nature of all of them that when their knots are untied, they return to their origin, which is one without any*

*duality, and which comprises the multiplicity.*" (VeZot LiYihudah: Epistles of Abraham Abulafia)

Yihudim is the result of untying the knots, and as W.T. Stace says in Mysticism and Philosophy (quoted in Idel's Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah: Notes to Chapter 1, Note #44) "*The untying of the knots of the soul means the liberation from the fetters of finitude so that they return to their origin, which is the Infinite One.*" We can surmise from this metaphor that the act of untying knots is complicated, involves many steps, be they theurgic, calligraphic or contemplative. We can also surmise that the Infinite bares a multiplicity, yet, as Abulafia avers, a multiplicity without duality. The praxis which leads to Yihudim involves uniting two multiplicities or composites: one composite is human and bares an extended array of emotional, psychological and physical layers. The other composite is God which bares an infinite array of multiplicities, and/or, for the sake of relevance, names. The human composite merges with the God composite, and as Idel himself avers, "besides the formulae He is He, and I am He and He is I we get the formula I-I," which, Idel concludes, "is the meaning of the name Eheyeh asher Eheyeh." (Studies: Page. 11) Eheyeh asher Eheyeh popularly translated as "I am that I am", (the revelation on Mt. Sinai from God to Moses) could also mean "I am you, and you are Me." The trope is blasphemy and suggests that through a heightened act of untying knots and freeing the human composite, we, the humans become God, who is himself, a multiplicity. Abraham Abulafia spent his life untying the knots that kept his soul in fetters through the lexical and calligraphic artistry of the 22-letters of the Hebrew Alphabet. Though historiography presents Abulafia as a wandering mystic collecting a coterie of disciples for whom he enacted the role of the second Adam, the messiah returned, and for whom prophecy was a vocation, it is his poem on the nature of the 22-letters that informs this essay and will be the link to the art of Lisa Rose:

*"When Yahweh spoke to me when I saw/His name spelled out in blood and/designated in my heart, separating/the blood from the ink and the ink from/the blood. And Yahweh said to me:/know that your soul's is blood/and ink is the name of your spirit."* (The Battle of Blood and Ink: Abraham Abulafia, quoted from The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse, T. Carmi, Page 417)

The 22-letters are written or painted with the ink of the spirit, which is part of the aesthetic composite which links the human with God. God's beginning was to create the 22-letters of the Hebrew Alphabet, thus it is through the 22-letters that we return to God's multiplicity. The letters are at once philology and art. As philology a line can be designated from Sumerian and Akkadian Cuneiform to Egyptian Hieroglyphics, dividing again into Western Semitic Syllabic, Proto-Sinaitic, Proto-Canaanite, Proto-Hebraic, culminating in Aramaic and then Hebrew. As art, the 22-letters can be described as portraits of God that entail an act of artistry to manifest. Direct exemplifications of the art of 22-letters are calligraphy, such as in sections of the art of Marc Chagall, Wallace Berman and Abraham Pincas. Indirect exemplifications of the 22-letters are manifest in what Lisa Rose paints in her Spiritual Agency paintings, where symbolic and a-linguistic calligraphic shapes wrestle with color prior to the dark sublime of merging.

Lisa Rose's paintings are at once haunting and sublime. In her painting, *Spiritual Agency*, ethereal figures have emerged from the recessed expanse of blue-gray to face each other moments before metamorphosis. The figure on the left (indirectly the Hebrew letter Lamed) is about to lift himself up from a brown thin chair. The figure on the right (indirectly the upside down Hebrew letter Shin), part animal, part angel/cherub, part human, is either what the figure on the left will become, or is separate and is thus part of the pre-merged form these two will become when they do in fact merge. Whichever interpretation is more apt, the core of this *Spiritual Agency* painting is the aesthetic pangs of the unitive experience seen during one of the many stages involved in the artistry of untying knots. The space between the figures looks like a morphologic field curving toward itself to form two bonding Ayins, half an Alef, again, moments before melting to the perfect blend of nondual forms. Of crucial import to this painting is the proximity of the merging. One might surmise that this shape shifting movement has nearly reached its unitive link and bears a close resemblance to a layered sequence. In this case, the figure on the left has risen red from a blue lift, to stand over the upside down Shin which has metamorphosed with a brilliant white silhouette of a head. This is clearly a composite, a multiplicity of form untying the knots to let the soul exit without fetters.

The unfettered soul cleaves (devekut) to the unitive through the 22-letters of the spirit and enacts, as mentioned, the rarity of joined mutual multiplicities (the lower soul with the higher soul.) Her paintings are near combinations of the Sufic Green Man of Light and the Hebrew letter Tsadi, and convey a converging process. Two disparate forms, one pale-azure-green and the other amber-beige melt to basic blend and are about to metamorphose to become what the viewer would see an instant later were he existing as part of a fusion. The terrible irony of this stipulation lies in the awareness that once merged, once returned to the nondual from which one began and through thousands of generations has repressed and fractured, the aesthetic is no longer necessary. That is that Art would no longer be necessary in a world where we were God. Were Tikkun (the restored world as developed by Safed kabbalist Isaac Luria 1534-1572) in place, this would be the case, but it is not. To appease the terror of this insight, we refer finally to Idel's view of Abulafia's role in the world, and thus, by our assertion, the role of the artist. Let us first quote the titular passage and then rewrite it.

*"According to Abulafia, the mystic's duty is to remain in the spiritual state known as the unitive experience. The only reason to return from God or to escape this state, is when there is an urgent need to instruct the people, in order to bring them under the wing of the Divine Presence."* (Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah, Page 16.)

Revised version: **The artist's duty is to remain in the spiritual state known as the unitive experience. The only reason to return from God or to escape this state, is when there is an urgent need to create a work of art to bring people under the wing of the Divine Presence.**

This act of misprision is not facetious. It is rather an effort at sincerity so genuine and it seems as old as oneself. Nonetheless and in conclusion, it is the Abulafian world that Lisa Rose conjures through her painting whether deliberately or by an undiluted longing for Yihudim which speaks through her. Her paintings are indeed *Spiritual*

Agencies cleaving to what Moshe Idel says of Abulafia, "the primordial dynamic unity in the bosom of revealed divinity." (Studies: Page 18) The agon rests in the trials and labors of creation, that one interrupts eternity and takes a temporary hiatus from unity (which is in itself not duality, as we mentioned, but a dance of multiplicities) to do God's work. God's work is the archetype of creativity, since it is creativity that compelled the Infinite (which was not yet God) to make a space to create the perceptual field that is God in 22-letters, God in 22 multifaceted and extended paintings of himself in us to access. We celebrate the art of Lisa Rose and see that this is what she struggles with. For like the prophet Jeremiah, Lisa Rose struggles to hold in the pangs of divinity but cannot. What has manifested is a life's work of symphonic homunculus color forms merging in the primordial soup of divinity, a place our old friend Abraham Abulafia knew well.

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