

Threads of Spirit

By Nancy Katz

While concrete and wood may be relatively foreign materials to many, everyone has a relationship to fabric. It is, after all, the most intimate environment that we have. Upon entering the world, leaving the protection of a mother's womb, the newborn is swaddled in fabric. Upon leaving the world, we are clothed in special garments. And in between, all the days of our lives, we choose clothing of varied colors and textures that define who we are, or how we are, at any given time. The versatility of cloth is a blessing in itself. We can use it to embellish and enhance the edifices where we pray in community. We can wrap bodies, our personal temples, in cloth to find the comfort and nurturance we seek.

Fabric in a worship space is relatable and flexible. It has adaptable and transformative capabilities. It provides a decreased sense of alienation, disaffection, and isolation and an increased sense of closeness. Fabric can transform the built environment: a room that serves as the spiritual home to one faith group on Saturday can be home to another on

Sunday. A special fabric covering a table or a banner hung on the wall can make all the difference.

With their adaptable—almost magical—capacity, textiles can transform and enhance any place. A piece of fabric takes on symbolic value while creating sacred space. It can be anywhere: a hilltop farm may become holy ground; a cold convention center, a sanctuary. Unlike more rigid materials, fabric allows for changeability, staying current with the season and the need. Churches mark time by hanging differently themed banners throughout the year. Many synagogues dress their Torahs in white to mark the High Holy Days, with some including congregants in the change as part of a ritualized service. While a facility is undergoing construction and a community requires temporary space, fabric panels can not only spruce up the space, but also serve as “transitional objects,” connecting one spiritual home to the next.

I have witnessed change in the material culture of sacred life over the past few decades. As an artist I have, in fact, been part of a “mini-



Banners created for Mount Holyoke College's interfaith chapel.



A young tallit maker.



A community at work painting.



The completed curtain installed.

Hevreh of the Berkshires

revolution," blessed with the privilege of working with individuals and community members in the personalization of sacred life through cloth. I first realized the transformative power of fabric in the late-1980s through my involvement with the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Initially as a volunteer and then as the director of education and outreach, I saw, over and over again, two yards of fabric serve as a testimonial to a life cut short in a world where the cause of death was considered taboo. Upon ending my work with the Quilt I committed to making art full time. I had learned about manipulating colored dyes on the surface of stretched silk, and I became part of a cadre of artists whose self-assigned job it was to "update" Jewish religious life.

In Jewish spiritual life vestments are not limited to clergy. Customs vary in different circles, with congregants either obligated or welcome to don a prayer shawl. In the 1990s, women claimed an increasing role as spiritual leaders: rabbis, cantors, and soloists. It was evident that sacred garments that worked for their male counterparts would not serve their needs. While specific requirements exist for prayer shawls (tallitot), e.g., woolen strings knotted and wound in a prescribed manner and attached a thumb's breadth from each of four corners, there is much flexibility with regard to the color and the design of the base fabric that was historically black-and-white-striped wool. The women rabbis took delight in having new options.

According to the Talmud (RH17b), to be enfolded by the tallit is regarded as being enveloped by holiness. For the past two decades, young women and men coming of age in this new world have chosen to create their own tallitot. These personal ritual objects reflect who they are and who they intend to be as they take their place as members of the Jewish community, enveloped by a holiness they can claim as their very own. My job has been to serve as a midwife to this process. I have seen two yards of white charmeuse become transformed over and over again: taken off a 45-inch-wide bolt and made into an expression of the holy and communal spirit of both individuals and communities.

Ah, if those stretcher frames that I have used over the years could talk, the stories they would tell! They would speak of women rabbis gleefully putting brush to silk to create a communal tallit painted by members of their professional organization at a convention in the early 1990s; and of the students from multiple faith groups at Mount Holyoke College who helped design and create three banners that now hang in the school's interfaith chapel, representing the themes of Peace, Source, and Community. Those frames would also tell of the hundreds of congregants who, over the course of one Sunday afternoon, painted 12 banners that were used to cover acoustical panels in a synagogue in Bellevue, Washington.

In November of 2001 several thousand lay and professional Reform Jewish leaders from around the country gathered in Boston for their Biennial Conference. At these gatherings, a week filled with meetings and workshops, a highlight is always the shared prayer experience during Shabbat, when the entire community converges. Before the conference, I was approached by Rabbi Daniel Frelander who was responsible for its programming. He felt that while the Hynes Convention Center could physically accommodate the thousands of attendees for communal worship, the space was too stark, too cold, for an ideal experience, and he enlisted me to help out.

I was charged with the task of designing nine six-foot banners that could be painted by conference attendees before Shabbat and then hung on the concrete walls to transform the space for its holy sacred intention. The result not only softened and warmed the space, but it personalized it as well. Community members literally had a hand in creating the worship space by painting and "bringing to life" pieces of silk prepared before the event. When we enter a space seeking some-


thing familiar, a banner or a hanging we have helped to create gives us a sense of belonging. It's that simple.

In a spiritual space in the built environment textiles often provide the principal focal points. The prime elements in a synagogue are covers for Torah scrolls, curtains for the Holy Ark. These textiles provide the opportunity for the congregation to personalize their relationship with Torah and to express a communal personality.

The sacredness of fabric envelops the most important times of our lives. A Jewish wedding takes place under a fabric canopy held up by four poles; this chuppah represents both Divine Presence over the covenant of marriage and a "home" open on four sides to welcome guests, as did the tent of Abraham and Sarah.

With a simple, spontaneous prayer, El na, refah na la (God, please, heal her, please), Moses called out on behalf of his sister, Miriam. (Numbers, 12:13) We use the words today to pray for healing. I write them on long pieces of silk to make scarves to comfort those in need. When the need subsides, the fabric, imbued with kavanah (intention) is passed on to others in need.

Judaism has a term for the beautification and embellishment of sacred objects. It is hiddur mitzvah. The notion is that, for example, in fulfillment of a mitzvah (obligation) though a "thimble's worth" of wine may be consumed using a small throw-away cup, how much more profound and holy will be the fulfilling of the mitzvah if the cup itself is beautiful and is made especially for the occasion.

The Dalai Lama has said: "Human beings are of such nature that they should have not only material facilities but spiritual sustenance as well." Our charge is to help create the experience of the one fostering the other. 

Nancy Katz is an artist and educator, whose work can be seen at nkatzart.com. For the past three decades Nancy's primary medium has been painted silk. Now she also designs for stained glass with her husband, Mark Liebowitz, of Wilmark Studios, in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts.

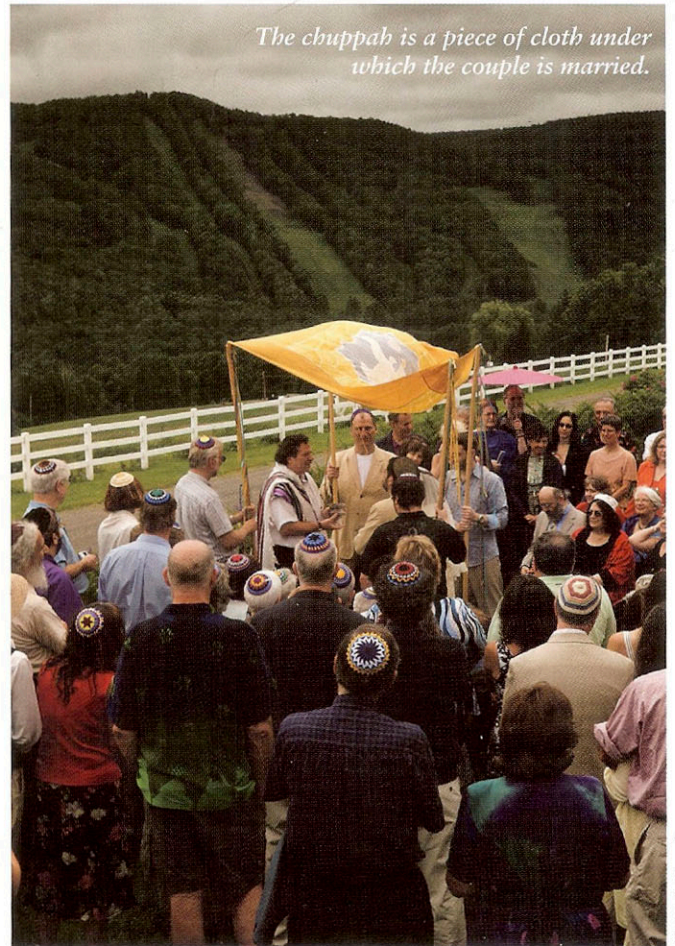
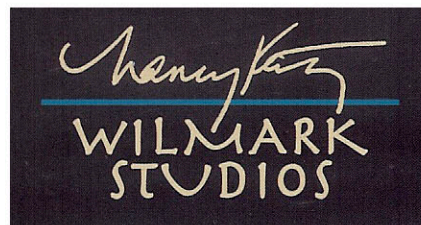


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