



Conceptualizing Prayer

What does it mean to pray? How do Jews pray? *Visual Prayer*, a video installation by artist Hagit Shimoni that is part of the “Judaica Twist” exhibit on display at Beit Hatfutsot (the Diaspora Museum) until the end of August, addresses these questions and demonstrates the power of traditional Jewish prayer in a completely untraditional way.

A recent alumna of the Holon Institute of Technology’s undergraduate program in communication design, Shimoni, 28, created this mesmerizing video installation as her final project. “My school gives students a great deal of independence and I made the most of it to learn and explore,” Shimoni says. “In my second year, I took a class in which I designed posters for music from three cultures. I tried to convey the feelings expressed in the lyrics in black and white letters.”

Visual Prayer goes one step (or perhaps several steps) further than that: it demonstrates what worshippers

experience in traditional Jewish prayers by animating the letters and words of those prayers.

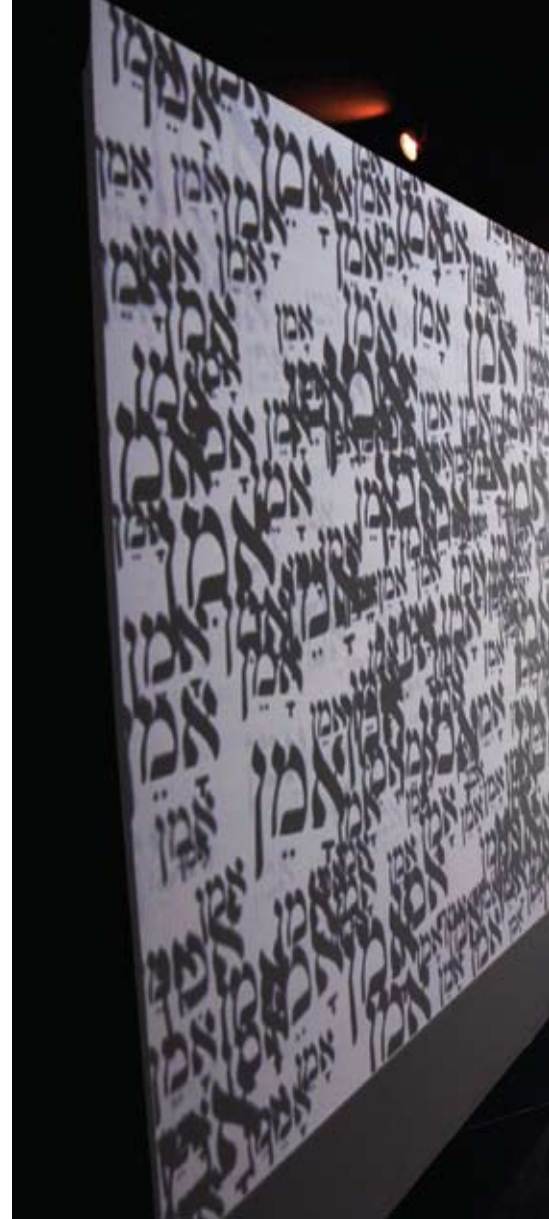
“In Judaism, letters have profound meaning, much more than the eye can see. They have become a tool for spirituality and they represent the ongoing dialogue between heaven and earth, actual and abstract,” she explains.

“In a daily prayer cycle, there are three main prayers – *shema*, *kaddish*, and *amida* – that are repeated as a mantra, making the connection between God and humans stronger. I came to the conclusion that the powerful combination of prayer, the beat, the cantillation notes and the trance that a person feels will transfer through magical observation into a world of symbols (letters). This will be added to all textual memories and be engraved in the mind of the observer in a way that will make the written passages and the feelings surrounding him through the prayer more significant.”

The challenge of combining print,

video, and music appealed to her, Shimoni recalls. From the time she was a child growing up in Afula, in northern Israel, Shimoni has been interested in art and experimented with different disciplines and media, from drawing and interior design to fashion, in an effort to satisfy her desire to learn and express her ideas.

A book on mandalas also caught Shimoni’s attention; fascinated by it, she began to search for a parallel in Judaism. She learned that scribes sometimes would write psalms in a way that illustrated the words’ meanings. Shimoni, who comes from a traditional Jewish home, also began to explore the concept of prayer, visiting synagogues, speaking to rabbis, and discussing what





she found with her father and brother, both of whom share her interest in the spiritual experience of prayer.

“I believe that art should have a message, that it should aspire to change something,” Shimoni says. “I wanted to show people the beauty of Judaism – to give people unfamiliar with it an opportunity to see, to open their minds. I also wanted to create something extra for people who know the prayers well by ‘forcing’ them to refocus on the words and therefore on the meaning.”

Her research also included searching through the many recordings of prayers as sung by different communities around the world at the National Sound Archive at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem until

she found recordings that would help her to do this.

“I wanted a meditative version of the prayers and selected versions that were from Moroccan and Turkish synagogues. It was difficult to pick out the music, but very important since the movement of the letters was based on it,” Shimoni recalls.

Though she received assistance and guidance from many people, including her academic advisor, Prof. Shimon Sandhaus, she did the actual work herself, including building the huge three-sided white cube in which the video is shown. The cube, which evokes the shape of phylacteries, is intended to create a distinct separation between inside and out, she explains.

The impressive results were recognized by both her school and the Tel Aviv art scene. The Holon Institute of Technology named her an outstanding student due to this project. Curator Daniel Wajman subsequently gave her work a prominent place in “Judaica Twist,” a temporary exhibit at Beit Hatfutsot.

Shimoni, whose work can be seen at www.hagitshimoni.com, has been working on branding and designing expositions and websites since graduation. She hopes to continue to use her art to raise awareness about issues that are important to her, from ecology to Israel to Jewish identity. ■

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