
SPACE, TIME AND CONTENT IN THE BIBLICAL STAINED GLASS

Windows of Ofra Friedland

"One who seeks the heart of the story in the space between the creation and its author is mistaken – it is far preferable to search not in the range between written and writer, but in the range between written and reader."

Ofra Friedland interprets biblical narratives through art, placing them and their actors against changing backdrops and landscapes. Through a rational process, Friedland deconstructs the cohesiveness of the canonical biblical text, condenses it into its significant components, and remaps them into a complex artistic language. Ofra's work places the individual and the collective against nature's powers in a continuous journey that is personal, social and existential, a refining furnace of human experience. Her series "The Five Books of Moses" is comprised of 91 biblical episodes depicted in five stained glass panels. This work was inspired by her earlier series of oil paintings on the same topic, and in spring 2017 it was installed in the entry hall of Congregation Ramaz-Jeshurun in New York.

This essay attempts to characterize Friedland's artistic language through analysis of the relationships among space, time, and meaning, as these are expressed in the components of the work and its entirety.

Composition as Space, Time and Content

THE LEVITICUS WINDOW

The space of each of the five windows in the “Five Books of Moses” series was organized around a contextual center of gravity that defines leading biblical narratives and redefines their relationships to related narratives [IMAGE I: Leviticus].

The image of the Tabernacle is located in the upper central section of the Leviticus panel, in the center of a downward golden spiral that emanates from the divine contraction and influences human society and the world through a rational structure of laws. The spiral becomes the illuminated focal point of the entire panel, around which Friedland maps 21 related narratives. The spiral represents complex movement between upper and lower spheres and between center and periphery. Friedland makes use of these multi-directional relationships to hint at the dynamic nature of the dialogue between the divine, the individual and the world on one hand, and within the individual and human society on the other. The golden-white center represents divine wisdom, and it changes sharply to intense blue in the second spiral, which represents the dialogue between the individual and the world. Human and animal images are embedded in the blue background as humanity populates the primary order. But the palette changes to red, orange and yellow as Ofra demonstrates humanity's failure to maintain this order.

The spiral structure continues to expand downward into a third circle, the space representing holidays and festivals, where historical scenes and episodes are placed against contemporary natural views of Israel as well as imaginary backdrops. The palette in this space is comprised of earth colors, and along with the color blue, represents the pallet scale of the entire series.

Friedland depicts the holidays through groups of people acting together in harmonious proximity. Rosh Hashanah is represented by a group of people praying, illuminated in pale blue light. Shavuot appears through a group of people carrying an offering of the fruit of the land, illuminated in rose-colored light. Friedland's interpretation of the tension between individuation and socialization as a component in the preservation of an ethical code will continue to echo throughout the entire series.

Vertical and horizontal divisions and subdivisions are a structural necessity that grant the medium of stained glass its unique character. These are in opposition to Friedland's earlier series of soft oil paintings that inspired this work (IMAGE 2: Leviticus – Oil Painting). The subdivisions – the leads – are constructed in a complex checkered pattern echoing the visual composition. Often the lead is used to outline scenes and images, enabling the observer to compare varied contextual groups.

THE GENESIS WINDOW

The Genesis window [IMAGE 3: Genesis] is bursting with dramatic biblical episodes. Friedland is deeply interested in the biblical drama, the events that confront the individual with natural and sublime forces in a manner that transcends human perception.

The Genesis panel composition relies on an asymmetric center of gravity at the upper right side of the work. Friedland places the stories of creation and the Garden of Eden at this center, and around it she maps the major episodes of the Book of Genesis – this time in a counter-clockwise circular sequence. This spatial mapping enables the viewer to perceive the relationships between the work's thematic center – the creation story, and the following narratives in Genesis. The story of the flood, for example, is placed in the upper left corner of the window, opposite the creation story on the upper right. Both stories inspire the viewer to consider the flood as a divine attempt to realign to primary order through a temporary state of chaos.

As in the Leviticus window, the subdivision of leads in the Genesis window creates circular coordinates that are crossed with diagonal lines, like a road map linking the varied topics and the relations among them. Thus the story of Jacob's Ladder bursts through the window's borders diagonally from the left upwards, while the story of creation penetrates the window's upper right borders downwards. In a unique way, Friedland superimposes the image of Jacob's ladder with the image of the Tower of Babylon positioned behind it. Both narratives represent the individual's aspiration to be released from earth's gravity and unite with the divine.

Friedland continues to develop the composition until it is perfectly balanced. To her, creativity is "a healing process, like the struggle of the individual who succeeds in raising himself from crisis while utilizing Nature's creative forces."

THE EXODUS WINDOW

As in the Genesis window, the Exodus [IMAGE 4: EXODUS] window also depicts the tension between the personal and the sublime in nature. But the story of the crossing of the Red Sea is granted an interpretation that diverges from the familiar. Here the sea becomes a powerful waterfall that crosses the work's space diagonally and represents its dynamic center of gravity. Around it, Friedland places Exodus's primary narratives, from the story of slavery in the bottom right corner, through the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, to the sin of the Golden Calf and the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai in the upper left of the window. She juxtaposes these with images from Moses' life story and mission that are stacked vertically in the right-hand third of the window: slavery, baby Moses in the basket, Pharaoh's daughter, Moses and the smiting Egyptian, the burning bush, the ten plagues. The visual mapping of the destiny of a leader against the destiny of the people and the intervening forces of the sublime, enables the viewer to closely observe the internal dynamic among them.

THE NUMBERS WINDOW

The Numbers window (IMAGE 5: NUMBERS) juxtaposes the power of the desert and the fragility of the individual while on a journey that exposes it to dangers and threatens its cohesiveness – a journey that is inconceivable to contemporary readers. The visual stories of this panel are seen from a bird's eye-view with multiple foci, uniting near and distant. Friedland binds together the multiple stories through these imaginary landscapes by using broad swatches of color, mainly blue and earth tones. The Tabernacle placed at the lower center becomes a center of gravity of this panel, creating a vertical axis with the image of Miriam's well above it. Both the Tabernacle and the Well stand for the ability of the individual to realign with the journey by uniting with sublime wisdom.

Friedland casts no doubt regarding the spiritual integrity of the biblical heroes and their ability to maintain their dignity when they fail. In the upper left corner of the Numbers window, the figure of Moses is seen standing on Mt. Nevo after he is prohibited from entering it. Yet his image exudes nobility, acceptance and humility while gazing at a powerful golden entity radiating towards him from the upper left side of the work.

The delicate image of Miriam is placed on the lower left after she is banished from the Israelite camp. Her figure is seen enveloped in layers of white and blue light, which serve to emphasize her isolation but at the same time represent divine protection. In the center right, the figure of Aaron grasps the staff of Levi as it sprouts new branches. Underneath it, Moses chooses to strike the rock instead of obeying God's command to speak to it. Friedland's biblical heroes are isolated. They are guardians who are aware of the responsibility they have been given as well as their errors but never fail to realign with the divine code of ethics. The open, merciful dialogue between the leaders and the divine is transformed into fire and fury as the earth opens up to swallow the sons of Korach and his followers.

THE DEUTERONOMY WINDOW

In the Deuteronomy window [IMAGE 6] the alienation of the desert gives way to depictions of cultivation of the Promised Land. Here the individual's sense of belonging to place develops through cultivation of the land and observing the festivals. Friedland selects Moses' larger-than-life image as the center of gravity that crosses this work as a living memory uniting past, present and future.

The dominant palette here is composed of the colors of earth, vegetation and water, replacing the dominant blue of the Genesis window. Through the agency of Moses, the divine speech, like the artistic act, transforms the earth from a desert to a flourishing entity. The Deuteronomy window expresses the fulfillment of Moses' mission: the potential of the supreme wisdom that is delivered through the divine word, is manifested through the individual.

Everything is Illuminated

Friedland's creative space is always broad enough to contain the multi-faceted narrative that she addresses. The series deconstructs the essential meanings that are encoded in biblical narratives, rewords them, and organizes them into original visual compositions. The new mapping of the stories allows the viewers to further explore the well-known stories. Friedland's artistic language is composed of purely material elements into which she infuses non-material qualities such as fields of color and imaginary landscapes depicted in soft outlines. Through contact with light, these combine to form a dynamic tapestry that continuously illuminates and transforms the work.

Ofra's interest in the synthesis between idea and artistic techniques began in her youth when she wrote a broad essay titled "Technique and Materials in the Works of Pablo Picasso." Through her own mastery in a wide range of artistic techniques she infuses richness of expression into the content that she addresses. Ofra assimilates past and present through the study of nature, the play of light, literature, and her own life experiences.

Like Picasso and Turner, both artists she admires, Ofra does not seek mere harmony. Her work explores the tension between the temporary and the harmonic, the constant and the subversive, the beautiful and the sublime. In her essay, Friedland cites Picasso: "Painting is poetry – it is written in rhyme with flexible tempos, never as prose." The material tempos that Ofra creates connect complex, rhyming meanings through glass, lead, and blocks of color and light as transformative elements.
