

Foreword

BY RABBI DAVID SEARS



Rabbi David Sears and Hyman Bloom
Photo: Mrs. Hyman Bloom

Rabbi David Sears directs the New York based Breslov Center for Spiritual Growth. A prolific author and translator, his recent works include *Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's Shir Na'im: Song of Delight* (Orot 2005); *The Vision of Eden: Animal Welfare and Vegetarianism in Jewish Law and Mysticism* (Orot 2003); and *The Tree That Stands Beyond Space: Rabbi Nachman on the Mystical Experience* (Breslov Research Institute 2002). In the field of Jewish music, he has co-produced and written liner notes for a number of CD's by clarinetist-mandolinist Andy Statman, including *Awakening From Above* (Shefa Records 2006).

I first encountered the art of Hyman Bloom in 1968, when I attended an exhibition of his drawings at the University of Connecticut's museum on the Storrs campus. At that time I was a teenager studying the fine arts at Norwich Free Academy. The drawings I saw at that exhibition made an indelible impression on me. They fused figurative expressionism with an abstract expressionist sensibility; the draftsmanship was superlative; and their imagery resonated with my own inner life. The rabbi drawings, which came as a complete surprise, also reinforced my youthful conviction that Judaism might still be a living repository of spiritual truths, as an alternative to the Far Eastern traditions that many of my peers were avidly exploring.

Later, I attended the San Francisco Art Institute, and subsequently wound up teaching art history at a community college, while continuing to draw and paint in my spare time – which during that period of my life was most of the time. My spiritual quest eventually led me to enroll in a yeshivah (rabbinical college) and my artistic aspirations slowly began to recede into the distance as I struggled to follow the logical pyrotechnics of Talmudic debate, while moonlighting in a Chassidic kollel (a more advanced learning program) that permitted me to explore the world of Jewish mysticism.

In 2002, I received a call from Raphael Eisenberg, another Chassidic artist and an old friend, who had just seen a Hyman Bloom retrospective at the National Academy of Design. Unfortunately, my friend called on the last day of the exhibit, so I couldn't attend.

But I found a description of the show online, and was surprised to read that the artist had grown up in an Orthodox Jewish home. It happened that I was working on a translation of Chassidic commentaries on a classic rabbinic text, *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of the Fathers). I still remembered the rabbi holding Torah scroll drawings, and it occurred to me that one of them might make a perfect cover for my work-in-progress. So I did something I had never done before: I wrote a letter to a prominent artist without even a word of introduction, and was pleased to receive a warm reply inviting me to visit him at his home in the quiet New England town of Nashua, New Hampshire.

Thirty-four years after I had first set eyes on those spectral, mysterious masterpieces of expressionist draftsmanship, Hyman and I finally met. The soft-spoken elderly artist proved to be an erudite and articulate man, and even more remarkably, one who was still pursuing the truth. Seated together in the studio of the legendary recluse, surrounded by half a dozen unfinished paintings with their faces turned to the wall to protect them from prying eyes, Hyman Bloom and I began what would prove to be a long ongoing discussion of Chassidic mysticism, expressionist painting, Jewish cantorial and klezmer music, Indian classical music, psychic research, and other far-flung subjects.

Not surprisingly, we soon found that we shared many of the same ideas about art. At one point, I mentioned that I had lost interest in avant-garde painting after the advent of minimalist and conceptualist art. With a

twinkle in his eye, Hyman agreed: “They are against the Torah...” A little taken aback, I asked, “Why?” Slowly, deliberately, he explained, “Because the Torah states, ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness.’ Those artists are human beings just like you and me. But their art does not tell the truth about their inner lives!”

I was eager to know more about Bloom’s art and the secret of the emotional courage that it took to paint those psychedelic cadavers, monochromatic séances, and impenetrable existential forests. But what my host wanted to discuss was memories of his immigrant childhood, and his deep connection to the “old world” Judaism that had ostensibly been eclipsed by the lure of western and eastern culture when he came of age. Like an archetype that Jung left out of his pantheon, this ghost of an unfulfilled Judaism kept resurfacing in Hyman’s work throughout his life, especially in those epic images of rabbis holding Torah scrolls in front of the Holy Ark in the synagogue – rabbis who, as the years passed, began to look more and more like the aging artist.

He described the simple piety of his immigrant parents, the family’s struggle to adjust to life in America, and his father’s unsuccessful attempt to persuade an infirm and elderly Chassidic rabbi in Boston to teach a seven-year-old Hyman Bloom the rudiments of Judaism. “The rabbi’s face seemed almost translucent, his beard so white that it was starting to turn yellow...” Bloom reminisced, betraying a painter’s eye at a very young age. Unable to find a religious instructor, Bloom’s father hired a young man who agreed to teach Hyman only the *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses). The tutor was unwilling to translate the classic commentary of Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki 1040-1105), or to discuss any questions about the meaning of the sacred texts they studied, probably because he had lost his faith. “My mind was teeming with questions,” Bloom said, “which my tutor refused to answer.” These were rough years for Jewish tradition and traditional Jews. American immigrant communities were filled with Yiddish-speaking parents who embraced traditional values, who lived alongside their English-speaking children determined to assimilate. Bloom never stopped asking questions. However, as a secular Jew, his spiritual search was soon transferred to his art, and

to his lifelong exploration of the mysteries of the soul via whatever means were available: eastern religions, psychoanalysis, LSD experiments, psychic research – and finally the Jewish mystical tradition for which he had longed as a boy, but could not access. As we spoke, I realized that there might be a psychological symmetry in our encounter. In Hyman Bloom, I was looking for the fully actualized expressionist painter I never became – and in the bearded Chassidic Jew sitting beside him, perhaps Hyman Bloom was looking for the rabbi he never became.

But the two universes we occupied had many points of intersection. As I viewed Hyman’s elegant paintings of autopsies and corpses, ghosts and rats, I began to understand what was driving him. The key, it seemed to me, was a scene from an early 19th century Jewish mystical story: *The Exchanged Children*, one of the thirteen tales of Chassidic master Rabbi Nachman of Breslev (1772-1810). At one point, the protagonist, who is called the *True Son of the King*, and his companion, the *Son of the Maidservant*, become lost in a primeval forest like one of those entangled forests depicted in Bloom’s drawings and paintings. The two lost youths find refuge in a tree belonging to the *Man of the Forest*, a non-human creature whom they regard with a mixture of solicitude and dread. As night falls, they hear the growling, yowling, screeching, and hooting of the wild beasts and birds: a terrifying cacophony. After awhile, however, the *True Son of the King* begins to hear the maelstrom of noise in a different way. He notices that by a mere shift of concentration, the dissonance suddenly becomes the most beautiful music he has ever heard. In it, he hears the sublime song of all creation.

Perhaps Hyman Bloom, in his way, is contemplating the seeming ugliness and disorder of the universe in an attempt to perceive this transcendental beauty – to find harmony in the midst of chaos, and new life amidst the wreckage and decay. In his resolve to do so, Hyman Bloom, perpetually gazing into the void, ironically reveals himself to be a man of faith.