

BEYOND  
WORDSA CONVERSATION  
WITH ARIEL BURGER

*Rabbi Ariel Burger is a man of many dimensions and accomplishments. To give the reader some sense of it, I quote from his website: “When I was 17, I embarked on a spiritual quest that brought me to many teachers. Of all my teachers, Elie Wiesel was the greatest. To tell you who I am is impossible without including the influence this man has had on me.*

*“I grew up in New York City, an artsy kid in an ultra-Orthodox elementary school, with a blind sister and divorced parents who held very different views on life. My quest for meaning and integration, a way to bring together all the elements of my life into a whole, led me to study for seven years in the closest thing to a monastery Judaism offers. I became a rabbi, wrote hundreds of songs and played guitar at Carnegie Hall with Richie Havens, exhibited art in galleries, danced with thousands of Breslover Hasidim at their annual pilgrimage in Ukraine, participated in dialogue groups between Jews, Muslims, and Christians, got married and had four children, got a PhD in religion and conflict*

*transformation, illustrated folktales, became a teacher, worked as an executive at a non-profit for six years, taught, lectured, led workshops on leadership and Design Thinking, and began using storytelling to connect people across communities.”*

*This past March, I received an invitation from Pavi Mehta to join a Zoom meeting for a conversation that she and Preeta Bansal would be leading with Rabbi Burger, who I hadn’t heard of [see Awakin.org]. It was extraordinary learning something about this man. He spoke about many things, not the least of which was the publication in 2018 of his book, Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel’s Classroom. Connected with this is Burger’s role in the recent founding—with Wiesel’s son, Elisha Wiesel—of the Witness Institute. Its mission, through continuing Wiesel’s vision and deep work of education, is to create an ever-expanding community of leaders to build a more moral world.*

*In the almost two hours of conversation, it wasn’t*

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*surprising that little time was given to the important place of art and art making in Burger’s life. So Pavi suggested that we have a follow-up conversation to talk about that. Happily, he agreed.*

*For me, it was a deeply appealing prospect, since it’s clear that art is a serious and essential part of Rabbi Burger’s life while he’s free of artworld ambitions.*

*Pavi got us started... —Richard Whittaker*

**Pavi Mehta:** Several people were really curious about your artistic journeys, and there were certain dimensions our previous call hadn’t touched on. And who better than Richard to hold this conversation with you? So it feels like this ecosystem is one where you can have a random thought, “Oh, wouldn’t it be nice to ...” and then there’s someone who can help manifest that thought! That just felt very alive for me today. And in terms of checking in, I just wanted to see how you’re feeling.

**Ariel Burger:** Thank you. I’m feeling well, thank God. Richard, I had an emergency dental intervention done about a week ago. Last time we spoke I was in the thick of it. It gave me a whole experience of

navigating physical discomfort and pain. In the midst of this period of witnessing other peoples’ pain, this was a deepening experience for sure, and along the way, I had some great distractions, including our previous conversation, and I just want to echo what you said. I feel that we’re written in the Book of Life together, somehow; we’re part of a journey that has some logic to it, and some narrative flow. So in the midst of the anxiety of chaos, and the anxiety of too much imposed control—these are the two kinds of anxieties that I’m experiencing and that I see in other people around me—I feel like there’s a flow that’s natural and makes sense and is just great. I’m very grateful for that. And I just want to name Parker Palmer for connecting us in the first place—the gift that keeps unfolding!

**Pavi:** It truly does, Ariel. Richard?

**works:** Thank you, Pavi, for getting us started on the right foot. And thank you, Ariel, for being here. Thinking about how to begin today, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach came to mind. I wonder if you knew him.

**Ariel:** I did know him.

**works:** I thought of him because of his singing, and how powerful it was. One of our friends in ServiceSpace, Aryae Coopersmith, often sang with Rabbi Carlebach. Could you share your thoughts and experiences about him and his practice of song? What does that bring up for you?

**Ariel:** Well, first of all, I saw an Aryae on the call. Aryae is a Hebrew name, so I noticed that and I know the name Aryae Coopersmith from other connections in those communities of friends and followers of Reb Shlomo, as we called him. My father also performed with Reb Shlomo in the ‘70s, I think. My father is a composer and a guitarist and was also on tour with him. So I wonder if he and Aryae have met.

**works:** I bet they did.

**Ariel:** I met Reb Shlomo when I was around 16 or 17, but really engaged with him right after he passed away. There’s a teaching that when a great person leaves the world, somehow the limits of their ability to project and reach a lot of people—those limits are gone, because there’s no more physical limitation. And I’ve

seen it happen several times in my life. When a great teacher passes, suddenly the teachings are everywhere and are accessible in a way they weren't before. That happened for me.

I was living in Israel at the time, 1994, I believe. Suddenly, there was an upwelling of the songs, the music and the teachings of this teacher. By the way, Shlomo was also very close with Elie Wiesel. Somebody recently sent me a video of the two of them together, which I'd never seen. It's a very special moment where Professor Wiesel took his students to the Carlebach Shul [synagogue] in New York. He spoke for a while, told a story, and then he handed it over to Shlomo to sing and to teach. You see Elie Wiesel clapping along with the music; it's great to see. For me, the main thing is that I think Shlomo was trying to channel the spirit and the energy of the old Hasidic masters, who were savants, who were wild mystics, and yet of the people. They were part of a revolutionary movement in Eastern Europe at a time when the Jewish world was devastated by physical, political and spiritual crises. First, there were terrible physical attacks on the Jewish community in the 1600s, during the course of the peasant revolutions in Ukraine and Poland—the Khmelnitsky pogroms. It was the worst instance of anti-Jewish oppression in terms of loss of life since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was marked as a fast day by many Jewish communities, until it was eclipsed by the Holocaust.

Then a few decades after the pogrom, the Jewish community faced a spiritual challenge in the form of a false Messiah, a man who claimed to be, first, a mystic, and then the Messiah. Many great rabbis were taken in by this person. Isaac Bashevis Singer has a great novel about this time, *Satan in Goray*, about some of the rabbis encountering a messenger of this false messiah and being caught up in the messianic fervor of that moment. It also tells how all of those hopes were dashed when this false messiah converted to Islam after being threatened by the Sultan. It's a fascinating story. Gershom Scholem, the great academic scholar of Jewish mysticism, wrote an important book about this false messiah. As Professor Wiesel often says, Hasidism teaches us how to build upon ruins, because the Jewish landscape at the time was a landscape of ruin, of destruction, disappointment, hopelessness and despair.

Then, along came a storyteller whose name was Israel, the son of Eliezer (the Baal Shem Tov). He traveled around telling stories dressed like a peasant,

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not like a rabbi. He awakened the hearts of simple Jews who lived in the little towns of Eastern Europe and the Carpathian Mountains. Over a short period of time, he created a spiritual revolution. It was a revival movement that allowed Jews to reclaim their tradition and see it as vibrant and alive, not just intellectual and academic.

I think Shlomo in many ways was carrying on that tradition for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was seeing a different series of challenges in terms of the connection of the Jewish people—but also of all people—to a sense of spirituality and transcendence, exaltation and fervor.

**works:** I first learned about Shlomo from Aryae's wonderful book, *Holy Beggars*. Then I went to YouTube and listened to him singing, and was very touched by these songs. So I wondered if you could say something about the music—his actual singing. For me, it was very powerful. You must understand what I'm talking about.



**Ariel:** Well, I've experienced it deeply. I don't know how much I understand it because it's very mysterious. But you know, there's a long history of song in many, many traditions as a way to open gates. We live in a world with a lot of words. As a great Hasidic master said, words can separate us. If we speak at the same time, there's dissonance, but when we sing together, there can be harmony.

So music has that power somehow to open gates, to open hearts and open us up to each other. There's a whole tradition in the Hasidic world that goes back really to the Temple, the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, which had a whole tradition and structure and architecture and art of singing—of choral singing and orchestral music. We have old teachings about what instruments were used, how many strings were on the lyres and the harps

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that were used in the Temple, and which ones were used for different occasions. It was the tribe of the Levites, actually, who were responsible for music in the Temple, and they were also responsible for keeping the gates. So you see that connection between gates and music. Elie Wiesel, by the way, was a Levite, and had a very, very deep connection to music. You see this sometimes with people. It's not only Levites who are musical, but there's a certain kind of inherited tradition. Of course, with the long exile of our people, we lost a lot of those traditions. There is evidence that some of those musical modes were the basis for things like Gregorian chant—you can hear some of the connections. So Shlomo was somehow calling back to this very ancient sense of music, which is very simple and yet has tremendous depth.

In Hasidic teaching, there are two kinds of songs. There's the kind that's an awakening song, the kind that gets you going, gets you dancing, gets you excited and energized. Then there's another kind, a song of longing, of yearning, of heartbreak. Those really are the two modes, musically, and also spiritually, of human experience. And they're the two modes of the Jewish experience and history. There are prayer



services that combine the two, where you begin with longing and yearning and heartbreak for what's been lost and for the brokenness of the world. Then you slowly transition into the joy of expectation, of anticipation and redemption.

Shlomo wrote a lot of songs in both keys, but there was one—probably more—where he combined those two modes. There's one song he wrote in a famous synagogue, or the shell of a synagogue, really, in Cracow. When Shlomo was there, he was thinking about the experience of loss of that community that was destroyed, devastated, by the Nazis. So he started with a very sad, mournful song, a wordless melody. He sang that for a while, and then he transitioned into a joyous melody, which insists on joy in spite of all the suffering and all the pain, and brings the suffering and the longing into that joy. Somehow, he would bring those things together, which is a very core Jewish practice. It's richer, deeper, that way.

For example, at a Jewish wedding, which is an incredibly celebratory moment, there's a tradition of breaking a glass to symbolize the brokenness of the world and the loss of the Temple in Jerusalem, the loss of our indigenous ancestral connection to our land, and all the suffering throughout history. Then, on the flip side, on the saddest day of the year, when we spend the day mourning the destruction of the Temple, there's an old, old tradition of that being the day when the Messiah is born.

So you find these things nested within one another, the tragic and the longing as well as the emphasis and insistence on joy in spite of everything. Shlomo was able to really tap into both of those modes and bring them together in a post-Holocaust world. He was aware of the tremendous suffering, and like Elie Wiesel, he still shows joy in spite of all that. In fact, joy was the major response of both of these great teachers to devastation and destruction.

**works:** Well, that's beautiful! I thought it would be interesting to start with music. I read that you learned to play guitar. So would you say something about the role of music in your life?

**Ariel:** Well, music for me is like the holy of holies, and it's something that I'm constantly engaged with. But it's a very intimate practice for me, and so I don't share it very much. I do a lot with a certain kind of mode and finger picking with the guitar, and I create a

kind of chant-like rhythm through arpeggio and finger picking that creates a trance state. I use that sometimes in my personal practice of meditation. I also write songs, and the songs have, again, a range of modalities. But I rarely have shared them.

It's interesting that you ask this question now, because just recently, I was going over the songs I could find that I've recorded—usually on my phone, on a very low-fidelity app. Over the years, I'd recorded hundreds of my songs, and I started going through them and winnowing, and trying to choose those I liked the best. I found 63. I realized that there might be a project here, to re-record them and share them, rather than keeping them on my phone or my laptop. Because, you know, there's something important about preserving intimacy, but there's also something important about sharing these things when they come—or at least some part of this body of work. So for me, music is intimate and something I'm shy about, and probably the most significant source of support in my life when I'm going through things.

**works:** I appreciate your sharing that. And I can

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“We need to be careful and conscious of language. But, of course, there’s so much that language does not allow us to say. For example, in my book about Professor Wiesel, I added a chapter pretty late in the game about communicating and teaching beyond words, beyond language. And that’s where my life as an artist really starts—where language ends.”

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relate very much to what you’re saying—that there are some things one wants to protect. It reminds me somehow of that quote in the art section of your website. You have an image that features a quote from Parker Palmer. It’s about the soul being shy, and there’s this lovely leopard, I think. Was that an illustration for something? Could you talk about that a little bit?

**Ariel:** My visual art has evolved more and more toward narrative and illustration of stories, but also toward quotes and ideas. Sometimes it takes the form of an entire story—a book-length series of illustrations—and sometimes, it’s a single illustration that really speaks to me. I see an image, or want to capture an image, together with the text that I can share with others. I made that one in particular as a spontaneous response to the quote, because I was really struck by it.

It’s a great teaching by Parker Palmer.

It’s very deep and fruitful to consider the soul as a shy animal. I notice this in my own life. There are certain things I was trying to accomplish spiritually with a sort of masculine aggressiveness and insistence, and it wasn’t working. Then, when I kind of relaxed and allowed it to be in its own way, in its own time—when I became more of a listener and honored the presence of that possibility—then it started to emerge and evolve. So it was a very important quote for me, and the image came pretty spontaneously. Once I created it, I shared it with Parker as a thank-you for so many moments of teaching and friendship and mentorship.

Then I shared it with some of my students as a way of passing along a message of wisdom that isn’t only in words. That’s really where I’ve lived in the last years. I think about how we articulate things in words, and we need to. We need to be careful and conscious of language. But, of course, there’s so much that language does not allow us to say. For example, in my book about Professor Wiesel, I added a chapter pretty late in the game about communicating and teaching beyond words, beyond language. And that’s where my life as an artist really starts—where language ends.

**works:** That’s a very rich thing you’ve just said, the difficulty and the importance of expressing things beyond words. There was something you said earlier that struck me, about having a kind of masculine approach to your work. And then something shifted. It made me think of the portraits I’ve looked at on your website. There are several that I find very interesting. These came up for me when you said you turned away from that masculine approach. I wonder if you can talk about your process for the portraits. What is that for you, making a portrait?

**Ariel:** Sure. I’ll say first that this movement from a kind of aggressive stance towards a more listening, empathic, humble stance is for me about aging and maturing. It’s also about how we might mature as a species. There’s a parallel here between what I see around me in our culture and society, where we tackle issues and problems in a very aggressive way. Through our mastery of technology, we try to force certain results. There’s a place for that. There’s a place for being aggressive; there’s a place for being insistent, and there’s a place for ferocity. But we overplay that in our

society very often, I think.

So I think all of this has a lot to do with where we're going as a society, and as a species. I want the aggressiveness to show up in the search for a vaccine, for example. I don't want it to show up when we encounter and face one another. I want us to listen to one another, and I want us to listen to the earth again. So I'm in the process of trying to learn how to do that.

In terms of portrait making, first of all some of these are fictional portraits. They're portraits of characters in my dreams. Some of them are literal characters that showed up in my dreams, denizens of my interior landscape. I don't know exactly where they live or what their stories are entirely, so as I'm making those portraits, I'm listening to their stories.

A lot of what I'm doing with those images is avoiding direct representation, but still reaching for a portrait or a representation of a state. But I'm not using traditional techniques or a kind of precise way of translating features onto the page. I'm starting with marks in different media, with different materials that have their own inner logic and their own strengths and limits. I'm allowing the materials to work, and to lead me and guide me.

That's often what happens when I'm making art. I don't start out with an idea. If I'm responding to a quote, I will have some idea, but even then it's very open. I don't really know exactly what's going to happen. And that's the most important and healing part of the process for me: allowing myself to enter the presence of something else, where I'm not in control.

In one series, I started actually with crumpled pieces of printer paper dipped in acrylic paints and then stamped onto a new page of Bristol board that would become the basis of the portrait. Of course, it leaves a very random, textured area of color. When I allow that to dry, it guides me to the form of the face, or the cheek, or the shadow on the side of the nose. That's how one series started; there are three of them. They all started the same way, with a yellow area of color that becomes not only the background but the guide. This helps me to become liberated from my own notions of what the person should look like, or what their story should be.

**works:** That's such a moment, isn't it? I mean, to be liberated from one's own notions.

**Ariel:** It really is.

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**works:** It could be a delicate thing—the dance between the part that sort of knows what it wants to make and another part that wants to listen to something unknown. So it's a dance, in a way. Can you say a little about that delicate situation?

**Ariel:** You're framing the question beautifully, and it's such an important one. I think it has a lot of implications for a lot of things. There was a turning point for me about 18 or so years ago. It had to do with my life as an artist, and also my life as a spiritual

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seeker, or practitioner of traditional arts, like prayer. For a long time, I thought that my job as a person was to craft an ideal image of myself and try to live up to that, and force myself to fit into that image. So I did that for a long time. I’m talking about creating a list of practices and disciplines to which I held myself accountable, and would force myself to do. You know, things like waking up at dawn to pray. It was coming from a very good place, but I think it was also coming from a very misled, mistaken place, the mistake of thinking I could control these things.

Interestingly, during the real heart of this period, when I was living on a mountaintop and focusing on spiritual practice, I stopped making art completely—with the exception of an occasional doodle in my sacred texts. It wasn’t on purpose, and it wasn’t even conscious. I write about this in my book. Only at

the end of that period did I realize, “Wait a minute! I stopped making art for the first time in my life! I’ve been making art and also music for as long as I can remember. What happened?”

At a certain point, I came across an essay by Erich Neumann, the Jungian psychologist and writer. It was an essay about Marc Chagall, where he writes about the loss of color among Jewish artists for millennia. He says the experience of the desert and the encounter with God in the desert—somehow the encounter with that white light and that white heat burned away all color. It’s not until Chagall that we get color back.

If you notice, when Chagall went to Jerusalem and started painting the Western Wall and other holy sites, his art became sentimental and much less powerful and effective; because he was somehow falling into that strange admixture of religious oughts and shoulds with the aesthetic demands of freedom for the artist—that’s what I got from it.

When I read that, I suddenly understood this is what was happening for me. And so my last year living in Israel, my last year studying in the yeshiva on the mountaintop, was a radical shift where I suddenly realized that growth can happen, and really only can happen—for me at least—when it comes from yearning and longing, and the flow and gentle cultivation of yearning and longing. That’s the only way I can sustain any disciplined growth or practice over time—or for more than two or three weeks at a time. And I started working with that. Ever since then, that is how I practice, in my spiritual life and in other areas.

For example, now I wake up to pray at dawn every day. But it’s not from a place of should or ought, or have-to or obligation; it’s from a place of really deep yearning. I know how beautiful those hours are. I love it so much, so I’ve been able to sustain it all this year for the first time in my life. Twenty years ago, I would have been very excited to be living into that image of who I should be, and after two weeks, I probably would have overslept. Now, I’m saying this with full knowledge that I could oversleep tomorrow. I don’t take anything for granted, but I know that the cultivation of love and of yearning, for me—and for many people that I encounter—works better.

So with art making, I’m thinking about the search for beauty—and paying attention to what’s beautiful and what’s not—not for ethical reasons, but for aesthetic reasons. Those are what guide my hands. And my hand is much wiser than my head—that’s what I’ve



learned as an artist. As a guitarist, my hands know things that my head is too slow to pick up or to figure out. As a painter, I notice things happening that I could never have planned. The openness to those remarkable surprises and visitations is, I think, where the promise lies—at least for me—of making art.

**works:** There are so many ways to respond. You mentioned Erich Neumann, and I wondered if you knew about Jung's attitude about art. It's interesting.

**Ariel:** Not really. I know he made art in *The Red Book*.

**works:** Yes. At some earlier point in his life, he had to make a choice whether to become an artist or not. But he felt there was something dangerous in being "an artist." So he decided not to. It was a conscious decision, although he clearly had a natural gift.

**Ariel:** Well, it's really interesting. I'm not familiar with that, but I'm moved by it, because I wrestled with it also. First of all, when you're seven years old and you're the kid who draws slightly better than other kids in the class—you don't draw stick figures, you draw shapes—the kids start to call you the artist in the class. That happened with me.

When I was 17 or 18, I had a choice about whether to go to art school. My best friend was going to art school, and I was very drawn to that path. But I chose not to follow that path, because I wanted to find the all-encompassing discipline. I wouldn't have used those words then, but that was really what it was. I wanted to find the thing that would be the source for art, but also the source of being a person, and the source of meaning—and a response to mortality.

I had a very deep sense of my own mortality when I was 18 years old, for whatever reason. So I decided to study as much of human wisdom as I could. I studied humanities and comparative religion and wanted to study my own tradition deeply. The dialogue between different religious traditions has always been very important to me, and mythology was very important to me.

Art was always there as the primary expression, but I didn't call myself an artist. I felt that I didn't have the right to call myself an artist. Soon after the period I was talking about earlier, when I came back to art making, a therapist I was working with described

me as an artist, and I started thinking about that. I realized that there is one respect in which I really do call myself an artist, and that is actually in terms of my relationship with time.

I realized that in comparison to, and in contrast with the people around me, I really identified with art's time—that is, with the pace of projects, the pace of making a painting. That's the primary way I experience time, still. So I have a hard time keeping track of time. I now wear a watch to remember what time it is, and what day it is. I know a lot of us are struggling with this nowadays, in this quarantine period. But I always struggled with it. I have to triple check my calendar to make sure I'm not double-booking or forgetting something. The way I experience time is almost like a mythological time—the time that's taking place within a painting, or within a song, or within a cycle of stories. I realized that that's a primary aspect of at least one conception of being an artist—and then I started thinking of myself as an artist.

I realized it's more and more important for me, in order to heal my own life and be a whole person for other people around me, to claim that and to make as much art and music and poetry as possible. I'm just a better person when I do it. I'm less anxious and more centered, and my cells are more awakened. I experience the freedom from time that I yearn for. I mean, literally, when I lose track of time when I'm creating, it's the best meditation I've ever experienced.

**works:** You know, I think a lot of artists would understand exactly what you're talking about. I know I do. But at the same time, you say that you've discovered that it was essential for you to *be* an artist. I think that's another thing that many artists know, because if you *need* to be an artist, you continue to be an artist. Otherwise you don't because there's not enough outside support to keep the great majority of artists going.

**Ariel:** Yes. That's a big, big thing in my life figuring this out—not just for me, but looking outward at our world. We live in a society that doesn't deeply honor and invest in the arts and other modalities that are seen as somewhat marginal or extra-curricular, when it's those very things that can really save us.

**works:** What you've just said reminds me of this thought, and I wonder what you'll say about it. There

“You have to find your own path. You have to perceive your unique form of mystical madness. That’s important. But the test of that path is always: Am I becoming kinder? Am I becoming more sensitive to other people? Am I becoming more compassionate? Am I becoming more responsible?”

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are probably millions of people doing creative things—painting a sunflower, making a carving, knitting a scarf, whatever—countless enactments of creative energy—none of which is really honored in our culture. There’s no way that the culture knows how to integrate this huge amount of creative energy. And it probably could be a transformative thing, if there were only some way the culture could find a way to integrate this energy. I think that this is what you were saying, somehow.

**Ariel:** Yeah, I think it’s critically important for several reasons. One, it is truly a human need, and an essential human characteristic, to be creative—in whatever medium. It doesn’t have to be painting or music or dance. It could be setting a table and hosting people to make them feel deeply at home. It could be the medium of conversation. It could be really, any medium. It could be living a healthy life that reflects the truth of the body. But we don’t think in those terms, and we try to translate things into quantifiable commodities.

I think that’s part of why our world looks the

way it looks, and I think that part of what we need is a revolution that challenges the narrowness of the bandwidth in our repertoire. You know, we’re not going to solve all the problems that we face in our society through conversations and committees and policies. Money plays a role, of course, but it can’t be the primary driver of solutions. We have to ask, who are the people who are holding wisdom, or tools, or beauty that is not quite commodifiable? We haven’t figured out how to sell it on Amazon, or bring it into the décor section of Ikea; but it can really heal us, liberate us, or remind us of things we need to remember. For that reason, I’m fascinated by outsider artists, for example.

**works:** Oh yes.

**Ariel:** I stumbled onto the Outsider Art Fair at the Javits Center in New York about ten years ago, and I was just completely transformed. There’s something about the relationship between art and the margins, and it’s still a major theme in my life.

I have to say, to be perfectly honest, that I’m someone who has inherited from my Jewish ancestry the desire to pass, the desire to be safe. That’s a function of Ashkenazi Jewish trauma. So what saves me from that is the art. It reminds me that I actually don’t belong only in the mainstream cultures in which I have spent years, or found myself in. There are conversations that take place *not* in words, where many people might leave wondering, “What was just accomplished? After all, we couldn’t commodify anything.” But those are the most important conversations in my life! They give me the most inspiration and joy and healing and allow me a different kind of language that I can then share with others, with my students and friends, and that has turned out to be most helpful.

**works:** I love what you’ve just said. One thing that you mentioned somewhere, you used the word “ethics” in the way that you look at art—ethics, as related to art. That may not be the whole story, but even the mention of the two together is unusual, in my experience. Not that there isn’t plenty of didactic art, and there’s also propaganda art—and advertising. But I feel that what you’re saying is something else. So how do you view ethics and art, the relationship there, the possibilities, or the responsibilities around this area?

**Ariel:** Yes. As soon as you said that, I was thinking about Soviet propaganda art. Most of it is just bad art. In general, didactic art doesn't speak to me and isn't that effective as an educational mode. We have a whole heritage of finger-wagging, and should-ing and ought-ing, as Parker Palmer puts it. I'm a parent of teenagers, and the last thing you want to do if you want to get a message across is to say you "should" do something—not just as a tactic, but because it lacks a certain authenticity and humility.

So the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, for me, is really the inverse—in that there's actually an aesthetic quality to ethics. Human behavior and the search for positive, effective, sensitive human behavior benefits when we consider the aesthetic element. In other words, when we consider the ethics of speech, the ethics of commerce, or the ethics of activism, we might bring in the experience of painting, and of noticing that this brush stroke really works, it really is beautiful for reasons I can't articulate, but it works; and this other brush stroke really doesn't work, also for reasons I can't articulate.

That teaches me that there is something in me that recognizes beauty. It's also not something that's reducible to a concept—"symmetry"—or something like that. It's much deeper. Something in me recognizes, for example, that the juxtaposition of these two colors is deeply moving. Or, the juxtaposition of these two chords is deeply moving. Even though there's something dissonant there, the dissonance itself is deeply moving.

When I apply that kind of experience to ethical questions, I think it improves our effectiveness in determining ethical courses of action. Part of the reason for this, I think, is that ethical courses of action are often counterintuitive, and they also are not reducible to concepts like symmetry, or proportional response, or fairness. There's something in ethics, and in interpersonal behavior, that transcends those categories. And when we limit ourselves to what we think of as purely ethical or didactic language, we're also limiting the conversation and doing ourselves a disservice.

So for me, it's more that there's an aesthetic component to ethics than that there is an ethical component in aesthetic work. But it turns out that the more we integrate the two, the more I can look at a piece of art that I've made and say, "This is closer to my ethical vision." It's not because it's didactic in any

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way, but because somehow my heart recognizes within it a beauty that inspires me to be better.

**works:** Well, I'm very glad I asked you this, because you put it so well. Sometimes I tell people that I'm old enough to remember the phrase from my college years: art, philosophy and religion. The three were always together and just rolled off the tongue. These were the three avenues through which one might get to the deepest human truths, right? But after the post-modern critique, it's out the window. You never hear that phrase anymore.

But what you just said about knowing when a stroke is just right—and when it isn't—makes me ask: Is it possible? I mean, it raises the question, really—or the possibility. I think this is what you're speaking to: that there is this deep something, which is objectively real. Maybe beauty is a word for that. Maybe truth is a word for that. Maybe goodness is a word for that. It kind of covers the spectrum there. I like it, because

I can only, in the deepest part of myself, hope this is true. I feel what you've said is very much along those lines.

**Ariel:** Well, I love that you've said that. The truth is, for me, my life for the last 20 years, perhaps my whole life, has been a process of really pushing on that, questioning that, and learning, as the result of many painful experiments, to trust that more and more. To trust that there is some truth and reality to our subjective sense of beauty, right and wrong. Of course, it requires consistent reflection. And it requires community—or at least friendship—so that I'm in the presence of others who have different ways of looking at the world. And then I can challenge myself and not become too comfortable with my own invisible assumptions or biases, or ethical or aesthetic leanings. It's good to be challenged. But, it's also good to learn to trust that still, small voice. There is some truth to it, and it's very subjective and often difficult to articulate. I can say as a writer, this is the most difficult thing for me. It's capturing that voice, and translating and communicating it to others in a way that maintains the mystery of its subjectivity and the lyrical nature of its voice, while also connecting with other people's experiences.

So in a certain way, my feeling is, you know it when you see it. When I hear a voice in a book or in a speaker or in a poet or an artist and I hear *my voice*—the voice that I reach for and haven't really heard yet, there's something on a physical level there. There are goose bumps, there's a recognition—an almost wild, animalistic recognition of encounter that tells me I'm on the trail here, of my life and my path. For a long time, I didn't really trust that. If it wasn't explicitly in a sacred text, I didn't trust it. But slowly, slowly I learned that the sacred texts in my tradition are telling me to trust that.

There's a great Hasidic story called "The Exchanged Children" by the great Hasidic storyteller, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. The main character in the story is a prince, who had been switched at birth and grew up as a pauper (a version of the prince and the pauper tale). He is lost in the forest, like Dante in middle age, and he doesn't know where to go. He's in grave danger from the wild animals and from starvation. Then he encounters this non-human person, who is called the Forest-man. The Forest-man says, "I have always lived here in the forest, and my ancestors always lived here

in the wilderness." Then he says to the young man, "Come with me, and you will come to your birthright." And that's the turning point of the story.

So for me, the Forest-man is a very important figure. He's not a rabbi or a priest or a minister, and he's not living in civilized society and culture. He doesn't have any degrees—he doesn't have a BA, much less a PhD. He grew up in the forest, and you find out later he lives in a house that floats in the air! He's an otherworldly, wild dream teacher who holds the key to the prince finding his kingdom. The prince does find his kingdom, but at the end of the story, it's not the same kingdom in which he started. It's not his inherited kingdom, it's his own.

So there's something about this. Again, in our society, I think we're terribly afraid of the Forest-man. The prince is afraid, also. He's in terror of this man who becomes his teacher. It's terrifying to encounter that wildness that holds the path to truth, or the keys to the gates, that can bring you to your life and your path. For me, the Forest-man is art, the Forest-man is music, the Forest-man is myth, stories, poetry—they have a certain quality that I cannot name, but I recognize they are pointing me toward my path and my birthright.

**works:** Yes. I'm glad you brought up earlier that it's important to be in a community and have ways to verify or check one's experience. Because it's a dangerous path, really, to encounter the Forest-man and then maybe go astray. If you don't have some help, you can really get off the path in this realm. So this is dangerous. In a way, I think Jung was very familiar with something about the danger of these things and the need for a way of verifying and confirming them. At the same time, this deep truth must be something I find in myself, in my own experience, you know?

**Ariel:** It's a very narrow bridge, and there's an abyss on each side. There's a lot stacked against us finding our path. There's a lot of pressure to conform. But then, once we're looking for our own path, it's very easy and possible—and I've done this—to fall into solipsism or narcissism, or to lose track of the implications for other people of your own quest. I have fallen into that at times, and I have repented those moments. It's one of the things that Professor Wiesel taught us. You have to find your own path. You have to perceive your unique form of mystical madness.



That's important. But the test of that path is always: Am I becoming kinder? Am I becoming more sensitive to other people? Am I becoming more compassionate? Am I becoming more responsible?

It's a doubly difficult task. Not only do you want me to transcend the pressure to conform, but you want me to do it and still be kind. It's very, very difficult, but it is possible. Ultimately, the Forest-man is the one who teaches us how to do both.

**works:** Yes. Pavi, you have some important questions, I know. Ariel, I'm so grateful we're having this conversation.

**Pavi:** It's so essential. That's the word that comes up. There's a quality—the essence of what we're here for. Not the purpose so much, it's the deep questions and these deep quests that are so easy to miss, as you said, in the pressure to conform. There's something about just sitting up and listening that's been so nourishing to me and such a reminder of how I want to live each moment.

There are a couple of questions from the book that we didn't get to touch on in the earlier conversation that we had, Ariel. The Yiddish folktale of Sarah Chana—how did that story show up in your art? It seems like a very significant thread that touches on much of what we've discussed here. That is one of the questions. Could you share what comes up for you around that painting?

The other question is about Professor Wiesel's relationship to your art, and to your artistic journey.

**Ariel:** Beautiful, thank you. Well, they're related, those two things. What I write about in the book is the end of that period where I hadn't made art for five years. I spoke earlier about that period when I was really focused on the attempts to live into an ideal version of myself with a kind of aggressive approach. At the end of that period, when I realized I hadn't made art for five years, I asked myself, *what was going on?*

Not making art wasn't a decision, it was just something that happened. Where did my art go? It wasn't that I had lost inspiration or that the Muse left me. It was that I somehow had tucked away that part of myself for a long time. So when I came back from Israel, and I was in the midst of recalibrating all this and finding a new way, and discovering that beauty

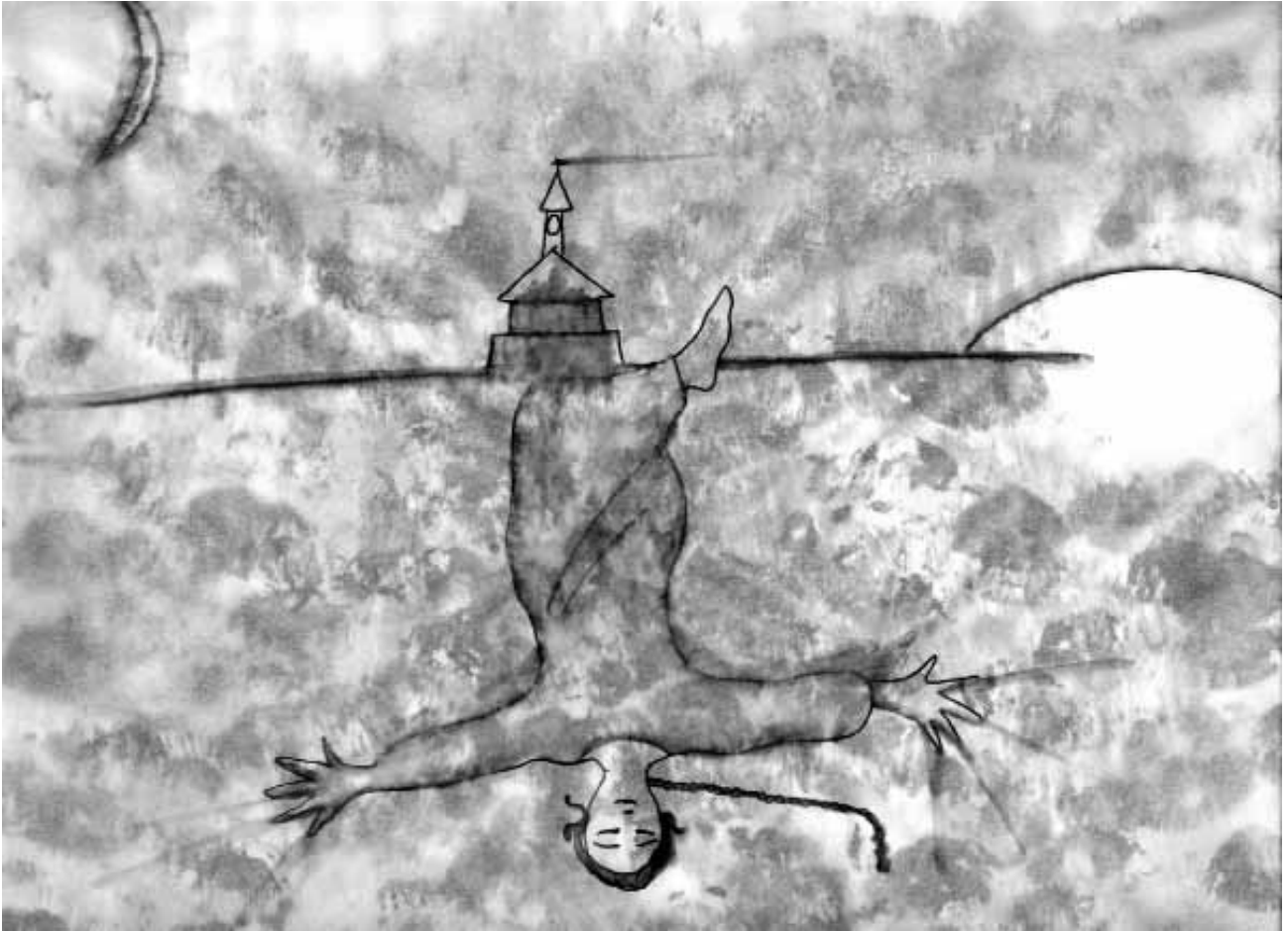
“It's a story about a young woman who is left at home by her parents. As she's sweeping the floor, a raven comes and grabs her up and takes her to the tip of the church tower and leaves her there. So already, I was fascinated. Where do you find a Jewish story with a church tower?”

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might hold the secret to the kind of growth I was pursuing, I came across a story.

It was a Yiddish story told by a grandmother to Shimon Ansky, author of the play, *The Dybbuk*, a story of demonic possession, which was later made into a movie. Professor Wiesel taught this play in class, and there's a lot to say about it. But Ansky also led an ethnographic expedition in around 1913 to Eastern Europe, because he intuited that the future of this community was in doubt. He wanted to capture the stories that had been told by grandmothers and grandfathers to their children and grandchildren for centuries. So he went around, and he gathered stories. He recorded songs, riddles, and stories, and he also asked a lot of questions about the mysticism, folklore, and superstitions of that community. The book where I found the story is *Yiddish Folk Tales*, by Beatrice Weinreich. It's just a remarkable collection, and this story jumped out at me.

It's a story about a young woman who is left at home by her parents. As she's sweeping the floor, a raven comes and grabs her up and takes her to the tip of the church tower and leaves her there. So already, I was fascinated. Where do you find a Jewish story



with a church tower? What's going on here? Was there perhaps a true story about a young woman who actually left the Jewish community? What does it represent symbolically? The story continues. The girl's father comes to the church tower and implores her, "Sarah dear, Sarah dear, come down from the tower!" She says, "No, Father, no! You don't know what I want. All the maidens are married, and I'm still all alone." Then her mother comes, and they have the same exchange. Her brother comes, and then her sister. But she still refuses to come down from the tower. Then night falls.

At nightfall, she comes down of her own accord and she makes her way back home. She knocks on the door, and they won't let her in. She knocks on her father's window, her mother's window and her brother's window, but none of them will let her in, because she's crossed a line. Maybe she left the community or what she did was taboo somehow, even though she seems to have been passive—but maybe she wasn't entirely. Finally, she goes to her sister's window

and her sister lets her in, feeds her and puts her on the stove to warm her up (at that time in Eastern Europe, poor people sometimes slept above their stoves in winter). She goes to sleep and sleeps like a baby. That's the story.

Somehow, I couldn't get it of my head. It struck me in a very deep way. I was sitting at the table at dinner with my family, and I said, "Excuse me," and ran upstairs and quickly sketched a drawing of Sarah Chana at the top of the church tower, with the raven flying away. I sketched it on a piece of parchment paper that was translucent. Later, I started working with that and creating background for that story, and made a series of 13 drawings that illustrated the whole story. I used the technique of a pen and ink with water on translucent parchment paper, then overlaid that on a background. The backgrounds were carefully chosen—there's a page of Talmud; there's a dress with flowers on it. There's also the slide frame that I used when I applied to art school.

The story is fascinating to me, partly because it's



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about the process of leaving and coming back, and how we welcome back someone who has crossed lines or been marginalized. I realized that this is also the story about my art. Sarah Chana, the character in the story, is my art that somehow left and went to the church tower, and now is knocking on the door and I'm not letting it back in. And I need to. So this process of illustrating became the process of saying, “Yes, I'm going to open the door, and open the windows, and I'm going to feed my art.” It was a life-changing thing. Suddenly, the dam burst, and I started making art—tons and tons of paintings and drawings for the first time in five years. So that's really the role of that story, it was life-changing.

As for Professor Wiesel, we would talk about art, and he would talk about his process as a writer. As a writer, he was very much an artist. I would ask him, “What are you working on?” and he would say, “You know I don't talk about what I'm writing.” He was very protective of that sacred space of the writing and the unfolding and the listening. He didn't want to reveal it too early. There's a Hasidic teaching that if you have a new idea, you should give it nine months to grow before you share it with anyone—let it gestate. And he was very serious about that. I learned something from him about that.

Then about a year and a half after I illustrated

that story, I had an exhibit. When I was 18, I'd had an exhibit. I was part of a group show, and this was now ten years later, or something like that. The exhibit was in Boston, and when I told Professor Wiesel, he said he'd like to go see it. I was really surprised, because he was so busy and so in demand. We set a date for the next Monday night, and when classes were over, we got in the car—he had a security detail—and they drove us to Cambridge where the exhibit was. We walked in. The person at the desk looked up and he sees Elie Wiesel walking in to see this exhibit!

Well, we spent about 35 minutes—he was just walking around looking at the pieces of art; and I was watching him looking at my art [laughs]—taking in that moment. In a certain way, it was revealing a part of myself to him that I had never fully shared. I had given him one piece of art years earlier as a gift, and he kept it in his office. But this was radically different and varied. A lot of those images are on my website now.

There was a black and white painting—you know how I was talking about letting go of control before? I literally made this painting as I was cleaning my brush at the end of a painting session. I did a drawing using the paint that was left on the brush—very simple, very minimalist. It almost looks like a Chinese brush painting, but it's a face. It's the face of a man with a mustache who almost looks like a Russian revolutionary. I think I did it with my left hand and I'm a righty. It was a very unconscious, casual thing, and that's the piece that Professor Wiesel stopped in front of and looked at for a very long time. Then he said, “I like this piece. It's *art*.” [Laughs] And I was too taken aback to ask him, “What do you mean? What do you like about it?” After many other conversations, I realized that he liked things that were minimal, created with some kind of process of subtraction, that have a certain rigor and also a letting go of control. It's counterintuitive—it's not the rigor of effort, it's the rigor of *no* effort, and he really liked that.

So every time we talked about this, and especially at this encounter, I learned more about what he saw as the role of the artist. It's reflecting things ethically, but it has to start with the truth of an aesthetic vision and a loss of ego—where you're not trying too hard to create something beautiful or special. And this was one of the pieces where I had the least amount of intention in making it. But my hands had their intention and their rigor. ♦

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