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Kaddish for an Unborn Avant-Garde



APPLIED RESEARCH COLLECTIVE

Maia Ipp, *Jewish Currents*

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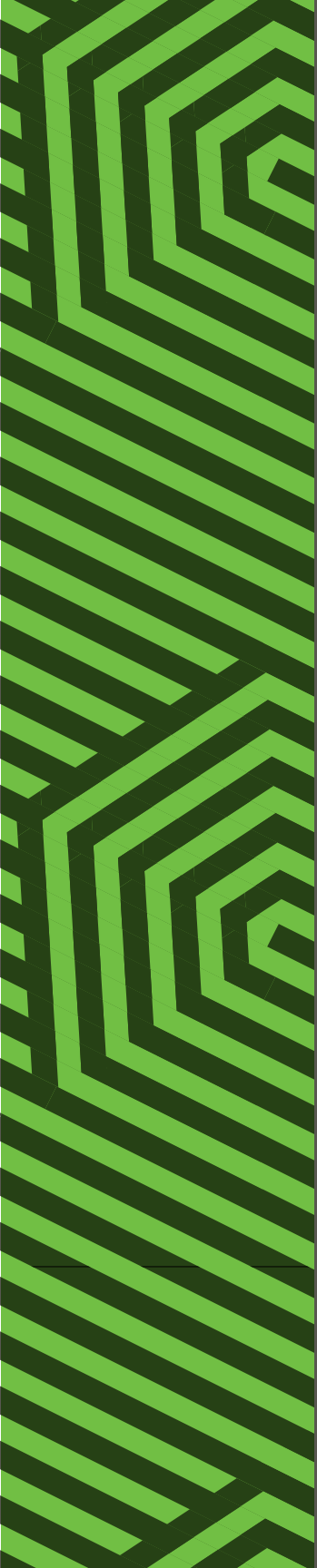


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APPLIED RESEARCH COLLECTIVE
FOR AMERICAN JEWRY

Kaddish for an Unborn Avant-Garde

Maia Ipp

Jewish Currents

PART ONE

Art, Torah, and leadership: a meeting

Recently I was tasked with writing a *dvar torah* for an audience comprising mostly rabbis-in-training. I was anxious about it—my lack of authority relative to that of my readers, my poor Hebrew, the general sense of insufficiency that accompanies so many of us in formal Jewish spaces. But in preparation, as I went from the *parsha* to its interpretations and back again, I felt something familiar, something powerful. I realized that though the content itself was profound, something else was lifting my spirits: the very act of reading closely, of slowing down, considering commentaries, dwelling in the language. Placing myself in a tradition that studies a book every week of every year, again and again and again, I was comforted by the reminder that I belong to a people who belong to a piece of writing, who stand humbly before it and each other, or try to.

The contemplative charge I experienced while studying Torah might be familiar to observant Jews, but what I found interesting was that it echoed my experience of great art or literature, which is more typically my pathway to the transcendent.

As the novelist and critic Jeanette Winterson writes,

When you take time to read a book or listen to music or look at a picture, the first thing you are doing is turning your attention inwards. The outside world, with all of its demands, has to wait. As you withdraw your energy from the world, the artwork begins to reach you with energies of its own (2002).

She continues—and I believe (begging Winterson's pardon) one could imagine using “Torah” and “art” interchangeably in these lines—

The time you spend on art is the time it spends with you; there are no shortcuts, no crash courses, no fast tracks. Only the experience. Art can't change your life; it is not a diet programme or the latest guru—it offers no quick fixes. What art can do is prompt in us authentic desire. By that I mean it can waken us to truths about ourselves and our lives; truths that normally lie suffocated under the pressure of the 24-hour emergency zone called real life.

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This desire to awaken is the heart of the artistic tradition, and one could argue, the purpose of religious practice. Making art, like Jewish observance, is premised on the belief that a careful attention to process itself is necessary to imagine and ultimately reach an unknown, but desired, outcome. A serious artistic practice, like spiritual observance, demands both surrender and determination, precision and wild abandon, patience and urgency, solitude and community. Like in the most profound art, there is a Jewish tradition of wrestling (with text, with God). We know that it is in the act of meaning-making that the mystical occurs; our tradition teaches not to receive wisdom passively, but to struggle. And too, at the very center of both Judaism and experimental art-making is a generative tension between modernity and tradition, between a commitment to the lineage that formed us, and the desire to see and represent the world anew. For all of these reasons, Jews should be, and historically have been, a community that nurtures and produces trailblazing artists.

Sometimes this work is commercially successful, but often it isn't; art that demands we slow down and evaluate what we think we know doesn't function as clickbait or produce the numbing effects most entertainment provides. This kind of art holds the truths of multiple perspectives at once; it forces us to reckon with a lack of easy certainties. This truth-seeking art is of vital importance to the culture of any people; beyond its demand that we turn toward the things we may not want to see, it can also serve as a hopeful vision, a prophecy, or a warning cry. We, the People of the Book, should know to heed those visions.

And yet. Art in the Jewish community today is seen mainly as a tool for education or didactic nostalgia, a rhetorical flourish or mere entertainment. Political agendas determine what gets funded, and even the (rare) financial support that exists usually remains at the one or two thousand dollar micro-grant level, which is insufficient for serious artistic production. Although it's not unique to Jewish institutions, our award councils, film festivals, and museums suffer from an **aesthetically conservative** orientation, endorsing works that at their best may represent consciousness but don't seek to expand it.

The art that seeks to intervene, to waken—whether it's called experimental, counterculture, or avant-garde—does so not only in its content, but in its form. This work is often misunderstood (weird! too difficult!) or dismissed (vulgar! abhorrent!). A historical example: a Jewish painter who identified as a political, social, and religious revolutionary produced erotic scenes so provocative they were deemed pornographic and removed from a major Parisian exhibit. One of his most famous paintings is of Christ on the cross, wrapped in a tallis. (Imagine conservative Jewish funders considering this portfolio!) So it's a kind of punchline that this artist is Marc Chagall, and notable too that Chagall's work is no longer seen in the context of its visionary intent and instead has been embraced as a comforting, nostalgic representation of a lost world.

So much contemporary Jewish art doesn't challenge; it pacifies. Seeing familiar Jewish themes or characters appear in expected ways can feel good precisely because those tropes have been made to feel familiar; but writ large, a fixed canon of familiar plot lines, ideas, and visual imagery reinforces dominant, often flawed, normative messages within (and, importantly, outside) our community.

Without visionary experiments, the status quo instead gets sanctified, absolutized, and rendered invisibly “natural” or “right.” (Some philosophers say this nearly mystical power of visual art was the source of the religious ban on idolatry; that images of this world, *olam hazeh*, so forcefully fix and legitimize it that they don’t allow, let alone inspire, an orientation toward *olam haba*, the world to come.) Art that demands we participate in meaning-making suggests an alternative to a fixed version of the world and empowers us to see ourselves as creators and agents of change.

Art that demands we participate in meaning-making, suggests an alternative to a fixed version of the world, and empowers us to see ourselves as creators and agents of change.

The role of art in our community is worth considering on its own merits. It’s also a mirror for the value placed on visionary leadership. And what does our current state of art show us? That the last 35 years of communal Jewish American life has often suffered from an orientation that is intrinsically backward-looking and outward-looking—to a somewhat real and somewhat imagined past and a somewhat real and somewhat imagined Israel. A current of fear animates this period, which happens to be the crucible in which my generation was born and raised. One could say that we are the result of an experiment in Jewish education oriented toward survivalism, connection to Israel, and a relentless instrumentalization of Jewish engagement that prioritizes a vague idea of “continuity” over content. **How did we get here? And how can we reclaim a Jewish visionary tradition in our art, and in our collectivity?**

PART TWO

“Religion is true as long as it is creative.”

—Martin Buber

In examining why we lack a robust Jewish avant-garde today, it's instructive to trace the course of how mega-donors armed to fight a perceived threat to “Jewish continuity” came to define the boundaries of what (and whose) understandings could be challenged, and what's been deemed off-limits, ideologically *trayf*.

As the writer and activist Leonard Fein put it, the 1990 National Jewish Population Study “induced terror” with “its report that our rate of intermarriage has now reached some 50 percent” (1994).

That terror inspired many responses, one of which was the Nathan Cummings Foundation commissioning Fein to write a monograph, which was published in 1994 with the exceptionally good title *Smashing Idols and Other Prescriptions for Jewish Continuity*. (This commission is one example of how funders can support individual artists, writers, and thinkers, who sometimes continue to influence and inspire discourse decades later.) Fein's monograph was a broad, collective call to social action as a Jewish form of life, and it made visionary prescriptions for philanthropies to turn toward burgeoning Jewish social justice projects. *Smashing Idols* also, importantly, lays out a comprehensive argument for Jewish institutions to reject the alarmist analyses that had proliferated in response to the NJPS. As Fein writes:

Whichever the yesterday we try to copy, we will fail, for yesterday was not an abstraction. It was a specific point in space and time and a specific community living and responding there and then. Here and now, it is our own story we must write, and live. That is the starting place for authenticity.

Tellingly, the same year that Fein's monograph was published (1994), Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman founded Taglit-Birthright Israel, taking a divergent, Israel-oriented approach to the question of American Jewish continuity. As the *Forward* reports, "The program was originally the brainchild of [politician] Yossi Beilin... Beilin saw the trip as a way of curbing intermarriage and ensuring Jewish continuity, or as he told *The Nation*, 'to create a situation whereby spouses are available.' Beilin sold Steinhardt on the idea that the free trip would 'plug the dam of assimilation'" (Ungar-Sargon, 2018).

A few years later, the terror of intermarriage and assimilation was provoked anew by the 2001 NJPS data. Echoing the panic of the early 1990s, sociologist Steven M. Cohen's famous/infamous "Tale of Two Jewries" (2006) reinforced the course for Jewish philanthropic giving that had already been set by alarmist analyses of the 1990 study. (Illustrating the reach of Cohen's report even today, it was used as a one of the opening texts for this research collective.) In conjunction with the rise of mega-donors, as scholar Lila Corwin Berman has documented (2019), it is worth reiterating that this mindset, what some thinkers have called survivalist or scarcity-oriented, is the one that has dominated the last 30 years of communal Jewish life.

And yet, there are (a few) examples of philanthropic support for the kind of dynamic visioning that artists provide: at a time of general financial abundance in the late 1990s, the Jewish

social entrepreneur incubator Joshua Venture was founded, out of which came the Six Points Fellowship. What several former fellows described to me as a truly life-changing, career-launching program, Six Points offered emerging Jewish artists a two-year learning cohort and a \$40,000 living stipend and project grant to prioritize their creative work.

But Six Points lasted for only three cycles (seven years) before funding was not renewed in 2013. The explanation? In the words of the UJA-Federation employee quoted in the *Forward* article covering the closure: “There’s been a complete proliferation of new startup organizations, and it became clear to us that very few of them are going anywhere near Israel. That seemed to us like a very solid gap in the field...” (Gliner, 2013).

The UJA funding was reported ended in May 2013, three months after the widely reported announcement that Sheldon Adelson had doubled his annual funding commitment to Birthright, a \$20 million grant. In other words, the UJA decided to turn away from a successful project that centered the creation of new Jewish American culture, to turn toward Israel-focused programming, citing a “gap.”

It’s worth noting that in this example, as in many others, the money wasn’t redirected to the building of Israeli barricades or schools or hospitals. The funding was directed to change American minds, to change our *feelings* about Israel. The communal Jewish world invests so much in imaginative

funding of this kind, in programs that aspire to shape the way young people think and feel. Yet time and again the same philanthropies and federations identify art as an “unquantifiable” value, with impacts impossible to measure, and thus impossible to fund.

One contemporary exception is the Asylum Arts network, which in some senses is tasked with filling the dramatic gap left by the dissolution of a national, multi-million-dollar institution, the Foundation for Jewish Culture (1960-2014). With only two staff members and a fraction of the FJC’s budget, Asylum Arts plays a vital role in supporting the creation of relevant and dynamic new Jewish culture precisely because its founder, Rebecca Guber, sees the value in politically and aesthetically risk-taking work. The network’s local and international retreats and micro-grants do crucial work to foster Jewish culture and connection, but the initiative is inhibited by a lack of stable, long-term funding and limited partners. **One could say the whole Jewish project is an imaginative exercise, yet our funders and communal leaders seem to fear the act of radical imagining that is at the heart of our own prophetic tradition.**



PART THREE


The imaginative divide

Our need for prophetic visioning right now is immense. In 1994, as in 2006, as in 2019, we find ourselves at a crossroads: the generation coming of leadership age—my generation, so-called millennials—has different priorities than the leaders who came before and new modes of engagement. Of course, intergenerational tension is not new. But over the last year, as part of the team that relaunched the historic magazine *Jewish Currents* and in the varied Jewish communal worlds of which I'm currently a part—I'm a Wexner Graduate Fellow and Davidson Scholar, a member of the Asylum Arts and ROI networks, co-director of the New Jewish Culture Fellowship, a member of this NYU collective, and an occasional Jewish-left activist—I've come to recognize a chasm of unintelligibility, an imaginative divide between those with communal power and those without. This tends to align with a generational divide, but it's really about power and our understandings thereof. This chasm is visible not only in the *content* of our positions on Israel or intermarriage, but in the fact of having divergent understandings of the very *form* those debates should take, including what is or is not even up for debate.

Truly understanding the nature of the cultural shift occurring today means recognizing that many who have been on the fringes are starting to feel wonderfully entitled to power long withheld from them.

By form, I mean different understandings of the importance of how knowledge is communicated (tone policing, micro-aggressions, mansplaining) and whose knowledge gets valued—which lived experiences are taken as a default norm, and which lived experiences are seen as peripheral and thus dismissible. These issues demand a change in the very nature of our communal conversations: whereas some in power feel they're doing their part by inviting millennials or queers or artists or Jews of color to occasionally (or even often) join them at the table, they don't yet realize the importance of acknowledging who has set that table, and thus controls the discourse, and who will determine the pursuant course of action. And acknowledgment is just the beginning—truly understanding the nature of the cultural shift occurring today means recognizing that many who have been on the fringes are starting to feel wonderfully entitled to power long withheld from them.

We're rooted in a tradition that recognizes the importance of *l'dor v'dor* transmission. What is necessary now is a re-evaluation of the very nature of leadership in our community, and the process of leadership transmission, training, and access. In these collective conversations, artists have something unique to offer; the working experience of being an artist *requires* a process of visioning and a sensitive relationship to change and growth. Yet it's worth noting that as an artist, I'm an outlier in many of the Jewish networks I named earlier. The prestigious and generous Wexner Graduate fellowship, for example, is a leadership training program that for many years funded rabbinical students, then broadened its scope of leadership to include academics, cantorial students, Jewish professionals like those studying social work or nonprofit leadership, and (very, very few) artists (I am the second in the fellowship's 33-year history to receive funding to pursue graduate school in the arts). How would our leadership incubators, and our very communities, transform if those making art and culture worked alongside (and were valued and invested in as) those who will run synagogues, federations, and foundations?



In direct opposition to the dominant story that young Jews are abandoning Judaism, my experience has been the opposite.

Artists are not the only type of leader not typically given access to Jewish institutional power and capital. What about Jewish activists and organizers, even or especially those who are deemed to have crossed a red line by challenging the Israeli government, which too often is conflated with challenging Jewish selfhood? In direct opposition to the dominant story that young Jews are abandoning Judaism, my experience has been the opposite, and in the progressive Jewish circles of which I'm a part, this feels self-evident. One need only look to the growth of organizations like IfNotNow or Jews for Racial and Economic Justice or Svara, the proliferation of interest in Yiddish culture and leftist Jewish histories, the creation of new national initiatives by college students like Judaism On Our Own Terms, and too many other examples to list. **But mainstream communal leaders today don't seem to see this Jewish engagement as such—and even see it as standing in opposition to some monolithic idea of Jewish commitment—if it comes in challenging political or artistic forms.**

These young Jews are fighting an uphill battle to stay connected to a broader sense of Jewish community, the leadership of which tells them through word and deed that they aren't welcome, that their contributions aren't wanted. I cannot count how many brilliant young Jewish artists and activists I know who are rigorously engaged with Jewish life who assume (rightly) that they would never be given access to mainstream Jewish professional networks, fellowships, grants, or leadership roles—I myself often feel as though my inclusion in these spaces is due to an accident or oversight, and definitely relies on my having been less visible about my politics and artistic priorities.

This insecurity—the red lines, the fact that communal leaders and funders see some Jewish art or activism as actually (Jewish) life-threatening—is another symptom of our lack of vision, what one could also call a lack of faith. Despite what the panicked analyses of the last 30 years have told us, it isn't intermarriage or a fraying relationship to Israel that threatens the future of our community—it is this toxic undercurrent of fear, red lines, and a lack of forward vision.

PART FOUR

A way forward

So: what to do? The cultural change upon us now, which requires a transfer of power and an acceptance of unknowns, is uncomfortable. If those who lead institutions today take this charge seriously, beyond tokenized representation or veneers of power-granting, the shift inherently means a yielding of power, which can feel like a loss of identity. That transition is uncomfortable—for those losing authority and sometimes for those thrust into it.

But productive discomfort is at the heart of any creative process and any growth. Artists and our processes, which rely on charting paths into the unknown—faith, often by another name—can be natural models for this changing Jewish form of life. The shifting ground of cultural change always begins with those who have the least to lose, those who already see themselves as outside of the power structure or privilege. Avant-garde artists have often constituted, chronicled, and amplified those shifts.


Last weekend, after days of nonstop work on this essay, editing articles for *Jewish Currents*, and refining a piece of my own fiction which—of course—centers Jewish characters, I emerged from my apartment. Truth be told, I was weary and wary of anything Jewish. But I was meeting friends to see a show called “Klezmer for Beginners” by Morgan Bassichis, the 35-year-old Jewish performing artist and songwriter. Bassichis, who uses they/them pronouns, is a rising star in the art world, so I was surprised to hear that, though their work often deals with Jewish material, they didn’t seem to have any Jewish institutional support or recognition for their dynamic, experiential performances (little to no Jewish press coverage, no Jewish grants, fellowships, or funding). When I learned that Bassichis is publicly involved with Jewish Voice for Peace and identifies as anti-Zionist, I understood immediately.



“Klezmer for Beginners” debuted at Abrons Arts Center in April 2019. © The Lo-Down NY.

I’ll pause here to note that even typing the words *anti-Zionist*—a profoundly imprecise descriptor—feels like a transgression. Our community has, in a completely ahistorical mode, made one’s relationship to Israel so defining that to hold a position deemed unaligned—however thoughtful, rooted in Jewish history, or nuanced it may be—casts an artist into communal precarity, cut off from support and engagement. But it is precisely Bassichis’ Diasporism, their deep relationship to a specifically American Jewish culture and lineage, that makes their art so exciting to so many of my peers.

I could write 5,000 words on the show itself—or more, probably. To a criminally half-full house at the Abrons Art Center, Bassichis and the musicians with whom they collaborate performed one of the most affecting and provocative shows I’ve seen in years; not nostalgic, yet completely immersed in historical legacies (Yiddish, queer, lesbian, working class, immigrant, New Yorker); not taboo-breaking for provocation’s sake, but meaningfully challenging and self-aware. New interpretations of



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old songs gave the music entirely new life, and the very binaries of old/new, inherited/created, and Jewish/universal were challenged in form and content. The audience emerged renewed; some of my beleaguered activist friends looked younger, bright-eyed, more energized than I'd ever seen them. My friends and I texted and spoke about the experience for days afterward. I left the theater awed, full of faith in a Jewish prophetic, artistic, and spiritual vision that could contain multitudes.

The next morning, I felt a burst of energy to keep working on this essay, and on all the other projects I do to try to understand and transmit Jewishness across time and space. The risk-taking and depth of the performance made me feel connected to something vast. It reminded me of my position in a Jewish lineage that stretches farther back and farther forward than any of us can see in the right-now.

The best, weirdest, wildest Jewish art isn't parochial or small or safe or expected—it encompasses and responds to and resists and embraces the world while retaining its perfect particularity. We all need more experiences of this kind of art, which humbles us as much as it inspires us, which demands we see ourselves and each other more clearly. Art that requires us to slow down and reconsider can be a path to deeper understanding, a way forward across our imaginative divides. **But do those who purport to lead us want to understand, let alone build bridges across those imaginative divides? The lack of communal support for daring Jewish art demonstrates the necessity of this question: will our leaders be those who turn toward the future, or away from it?**

In Gratitude

The title of this essay is an homage to the Hungarian-Jewish experimental writer Imre Kertész's book *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*.

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