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Creative Partnership Continues With NYC Congregational Schools

For three years running, Avoda Arts continues its productive partnership with [The Jewish Education Project](#) on the "LOMED" initiative. LOMED supports New York-area congregations in creating contemporary models of Jewish learning that include families, maximize powerful learning, and build community. Avoda Arts is proud to support these innovating congregations with broad-based programs and services, including staff development, curriculum resources and arts integration consulting.

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An Interview with Tobi Kahn, Artist and Co-Founder of Avoda Arts

Etan Marciano: *What inspired you to launch Avoda Arts?*

Tobi Kahn: I knew from an early age that I would be an artist. I could not in those early years distinguish between my vision as an artist and my Judaism. As I got older I realized, that not all Jews saw the world the way that I did and that Judaism can and should be expressed visually. Themes and issues inherent in ritual practice and holidays can be difficult to communicate with words alone. Art is not separate from life, it is like breathing. Not everyone can become an artist, but everyone can try to understand what it means to think like an artist, just as not everyone is an opera singer, but everyone should sing. Our society is about "quickness". I believe that the art can slow the viewer down so that seeing becomes a medium for understanding the world. These are some of the reasons that lead me to get involved with the founding of Avoda Arts.

EM: *Why do you believe it's important for a teacher or educator to integrate the visual arts into a curriculum?*

TK: Although Judaism has emphasized words, language, interpretation, and commentary, I have found the visual in our tradition equally illuminating. For me, the life of the soul is integrally bound up with the beauty of the created world, with the rituals and symbols that are our people's medium. Like language, what we see can be a benediction. Our stories are visual as are our historical images. As Jews are a very small percentage of the world's population, we are a huge percentage of the world's architects, painters, sculptors, ceramicists and filmmakers. I am passionate about retrieving Jewish visual knowledge and helping people become better visual learners.

EM: *Specifically, how do you feel the visual arts complement a Jewish curriculum?*

TK: Knowing how to "see" is like learning a foreign language: it is a life-long gift, best acquired when you are young. No matter who you are, visual intelligence can be transformative. It is also one of the highest ways to praise God's creation.

EM: *How would you describe a Jewish classroom environment in which the use of visual arts as an educational tool is absent (present)?*

TK: Since working with Avoda Arts, I have taken many Jewish student groups to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I begin the lecture showing them art of the Cyclades. These small objects including figurines and functional art, were made around 2800 BC, the era of the Jewish exodus from Egypt. I then show the group a hammered gold gravy boat that was made at the same time as the Golden Calf was being fashioned in the desert. The household idols our foremother Rachel hid or the Golden Calf are no longer ancient, remote abstractions when we see their analogues in the art of the surrounding culture. As Jews we have always used our senses in our ritual practices. We breathe in spices at Sabbath's end; we shake the lulav; we kiss the Torah. We are performance artists. I am passionate about retrieving Jewish visual knowledge and helping people become better visual learners.