NESSA RAPOPORT AND TOBI KAHN

by EVAN EISENBERG

Two years ago, Tobi Kahn and Nessa Rapoport broke down the wall of their apartment to set up an enormous table at which, every Shabbat afternoon, twenty or twenty-five guests gather to sit, converse, sing and consume the endless succession of dishes Kahn prepares in the still-tiny kitchen.

Traveler: If you seek a Jewish salon, seek no further. Here you will meet a molecular immunologist from the University of Pennsylvania; a renowned novelist and essayist for *The New Yorker*; an Israeli talk-show host; a Jesuit priest who curates a museum in St. Louis; an Obie-award-winning composer, playwright, and director of Broadway and off-Broadway shows. And you will meet your hosts: an editor, essayist, memoirist, poet, short story writer and novelist who was one of the first writers in English to drink deeply from the wellsprings of

Hebrew; and an artist who has reinvented American abstract landscape painting, created meditative spaces of rare beauty, and elevated the art of the Jewish ritual object.

Rapoport and Kahn, besides being creative artists of a high order, are pillars of the Jewish community on Manhattan's Upper West Side. "Their Sabbath lunches are legendary," says Carol Spinner, a frequent guest. "Jewish tradition isn't a thing apart with them. They make it vibrant and alive."

It's just as it was when Kahn was in his twenties and studying art at Hunter and the Pratt Institute, after spending four years in Israel. Back then, he was living in a brownstone apartment that was "basically one huge kitchen and a garden. I would have maybe twenty people on Friday nights and maybe again twenty on Shabbat," Kahn recalls. "I had very little money and a lot of potatoes and salads."

"He is responsible for our Shabbat table's food and ambience – and the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* (blessing of hospitality) is supremely important to him," says his wife fondly.

"I created a *chuppah* when we were married that was open on all four sides," Kahn says. Like the canopy, their home would be open to all.

The apartment Kahn and Rapoport live in with their three children is full of signs of the couple's rich cultural life. Cabinets cluttered with Kahn's flea-market booty – *netsuke* sages, tinplate *pushkas*, mugs with Dickensian faces – rub shoulders with paintings as uncluttered as any in the world. At once pure and earthy, abstract and jarringly real, they oscillate between macrocosm and microcosm, landscape and cellscape, and they are Kahn's. So are the ceremonial Jewish objects – kiddush cups, havdalah sets, menorahs, rich in beauty and meaning. These ceremonial objects are the heart of his 1999 solo exhibition *Avoda: Objects of the Spirit*, which originated at Hebrew Union College, New York and has traveled to a dozen museums around the country.

A painter and sculptor whose work has been shown in more than thirty solo exhibitions and over sixty museum and group shows, and is included in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim

Museum, the Houston Museum of Fine Art, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and The Jewish Museum, among others, Kahn says, "Art transforms the way we think."

Kahn's sense of hospitality, of inclusiveness, is echoed by his wife of over twenty years. Rapoport came to the U.S. from Toronto at the age of twenty-one. "I moved to the Upper West Side in 1974, drawn by the unique possibility that one could be an artificially non-marginal Jew," she recalls. "New York could accommodate all the hyphens in my identity: observant-Jewish-feminist-working-woman-artist, and later, working mother, without my having to choose among them. I wanted a passionate worldly, authentic, unprovincial Jewishness. And I wanted to marry a man who could wear a kippah *and* go to a Rolling Stones concert!"

The Shabbatot she and her husband host continue the happy tradition in which she was raised. "My parents always had guests at our Shabbat table, as indeed most observant families do," she says.

When she moved to New York, she often spent Shabbat at the home of Rabbi Wolfe Kelman and his wife Jackie. Kelman served as executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly for more than forty years, and Rapoport recalls, "What was exhilarating about Wolfe and Jackie's table was the stunning range of accomplished, contributing people who appeared each week; you never knew whom you would meet, but you knew each one would be fascinating. The coffee table was piled to toppling with Jewish books so recently published that only their authors could have brought them, and the pre-Shabbat air was suffused with Chasidic or Ladino or Broadway music. Jackie was a superb cook and a scintillating partner to Wolfe's generosity, her wit complementing his stories.

"I met Chaim Grade at their house, I met Elie Wiesel, I met Heschel. And what it corresponded to was actually my own picture of the grandeur of Judaism, and the passion of it…And I made up my mind that that was the kind of Jewish life that was possible and that I wanted to be part of."

Rapoport's writing, like her life, is a table at which identities meet. Born in 1953, she was in her twenties when she wrote her first

novel, *Preparing for Sabbath* (1981), the story of the awakening, in body and soul, of an observant young woman. "It was a Jewish story I hadn't yet read," she says, "and when I started playing with those sources in the novel – the *Song of Songs*, the *Ne'ilah* service of Yom Kippur – I was entranced by the prospects."

Preparing for Sabbath bespeaks "a rage of love, unquenchable. She would seal him into a tower, a jeweled wall, board him in cedar. A sea of light, she would wash him in light, anoint him with air, with water." The power is such that though the novel was published more than a quarter of a century ago, "I still hear about it once a week," Rapoport says.

. . .

Born in 1952, Kahn graduated from Manhattan Talmudic Academy, Yeshiva University's high school, then studied in Tel Aviv for four years before returning to New York at the age of twenty-two. He attended Hunter College then received his graduate degree from Pratt Institute.

He is proud to be Jewish and proud to be an artist, but don't call him a Jewish artist. "An artist is the entire, undivided person," he says. "I'm not only a Jewish artist or a male artist or a married artist or a father artist. Everything I am makes me the artist I am becoming."

Kahn has received several recent notable awards, including Pratt Institute's Alumni Achievement Award in 2000. He also received the Cultural Achievement Award for the Visual Arts from the National Foundation of Jewish Culture in 2004 and an honorary doctorate from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2007. "I'm very proud of that," he says. Recent commissions include work for a synagogue in Milwaukee, the lobby of the JCC in New York, and he has an upcoming solo show at the Museum of Biblical Art, an interfaith museum.

The critics have named Kahn the heir to the Romantic tradition of American landscape painting. If he has to be pigeonholed, this is a hole he is fairly comfortable in. Though his canvasses can be large, his landscapes are done on what seems to be a cellular scale –

sperm and egg, seed and bud, embryo, dividing cell – all suddenly writ large. The paintings from his 2002 show *Tobi Kahn: Microcosmos*, based on the biblical narrative of creation and held at the Yeshiva University Museum, both magnify and shrink the world and in doing so, change the way you see.

In the catalogue for the exhibition, curator Reba Wulkan writes:

> Kahn has infused the visual elements of the biblical tradition with his own spirituality…Kahn has chosen to capture the paradoxes of nature, the seeming simplicity of its design and the infinite complexity of its structure, reducing them to minimal formations that reflect sky, land, water, molecules, cells, blood, and the nuclei of life itself. The names he has given his paintings suggest Divine acronyms that invoke passages from the text of Genesis and allude to Hebrew words. His paintings become metaphors for creation. This artist illustrates the beginnings of the universe with the sparest of means. In so doing, Tobi Kahn demands both interpretation and participation; his work becomes the vehicle through which we can reach our own sacredness.

"Taking people on a journey visually, that's what I want, but I want it to be a positive journey, one of contemplation and healing," says Kahn, who in 2001 created a meditative room for the HealthCare Chaplaincy of New York. The permanent installation consists of nine painted murals and sculptured furniture, all done in nature's palate of pale blues, soothing greens and rich, warm browns. "Art should take you to another place, a higher place."

The notion of Jewish art, of "Jewish artist" – the label that Kahn rejects – brings up clichés and misconceptions. Jews, it is said, are people of the book, and the book is not illustrated. Jews, it is thought, are verbal, not visual – another cliché, and one as entrenched as the hooked nose. Some blame this notion on the graven

tablets that forbade all future graving, at least of a representational sort.

Kahn begs to differ. "I happen to believe in *Torah misinai*. Since for me God wrote the Torah, then God must think that the visual aspect of the world is really important," says Kahn. "And if you believe the Torah was written by many people, then all those people must have cared. It's not just the *mishkan* [the Sanctuary, whose decorations and appointments are spelled out to the last laver and curtain rod, the bane of *leyners* (Torah readers) everywhere], it's the garments of the High Priest and the flags of the Twelve Tribes, among so many other visual elements."

What happened? Jews were shut out, art was taken away, says Kahn. "During the Renaissance, we weren't allowed in the guilds. If you're not allowed in the guilds and you're not allowed to make things, you simply don't. But go through the contemporary wing at any major museum. You'll be amazed by the percentage of artists who are Jewish. We are a very visual people."

These notions, this historic turning away from the visual, has shut out many of those who, like Kahn, think visually. "Everything I learn is through seeing: color, shadow, light and their juxtaposition are a language, as illuminating as words. What interests me about the world is visual," he says. "I believe we [the Jews] are losing people who do not connect as easily to an ancient text without linking it to the visual world. By excluding their perspective from our understanding of Judaism, we are all poorer."

Kahn is acutely aware of the visual-verbal divide. Despite his gregariousness, despite being undeniably talkative, he contends that, "English is my second language. Knowing Nessa for twenty years has helped. I'm far more articulate than I was – but I'm still translating. This is coming to you from a camera in my brain."

One of Kahn's goals, then, is to invite visual Jews into the dialogue by giving them something to look at. He wants to create Jewish objects – Kiddush cups, havdalah sets – that are as rich in beauty and meaning as words. He did this in his exhibition, *Avoda: Objects of the Spirit*, which has traveled to nine museums with more to come. But

in welcoming in the visual, Kahn doesn't want to exclude the verbal. That's why, for *Avoda*, he twisted Rapoport's arm (her words) to write "meditations" that would escort his objects on their travels, acting as their ambassadors to the verbal world. Here, for example, is Rapoport's meditation on the three high-backed chairs, teaming with shapes of sea, hills and sky, that Kahn designed for the *shalom bat* ritual with which their daughters were ushered into the world: "Leap into our lives, from the hidden places to the hills of spice, garden of pomegranate, apple of paradise, awakened by the perfume of your name, we sing you into our mothers' house and listen for your voice."

Similarly, this drive to open the discussion visually led Kahn to collaborate with Carol Brennglass Spinner to create Avoda Arts, a national nonprofit arts and education program that uses visual arts to foster creativity and communicate the lessons of Judaism to teens and young adults. They launched Avoda, which means both work and worship, in 1999. Since then, it has reached over forty-five thousand students through art exhibits, film, multimedia elements, academic courses and tutorials, many taught by Kahn himself, who serves as the organization's visual arts director.

. . .

Rapoport, of course, has a completely different relationship with language than does Kahn; her words become lyrical when describing what seems an almost physical relationship to language. "The moment I noticed our sacred texts flowing through me without cease," she writes in her essay "Body of Love" from *Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer* (2005), "was the moment I became a Jewish writer." And again: "My great-grandfather said: 'Yiddish is my mistress, but Hebrew is my wife.' I say: 'English is my mate, but Hebrew is my lover.'"

As with Kahn, her art is informed by her spirituality and commitment to tradition. "I am fascinated by the retrieval and rendering of our vast body of literature, commentary, law, ode, parable and praise into art," she says.

Rapoport's acute sense of ancestry, of legacy, flows through

her memoir, *House on the River* (2004). The house in question belonged to her grandmother, Mattie Levi Rotenberg, a well-known commentator on CBC radio, and the first woman *and* the first Jew to earn a doctorate in physics from the University of Toronto. Her summer cottage in Bobcaygeon, Ontario is where Rapoport and her cousins spent the summer weekends of their youth, a place of golden memories.

"The house has lived within me all these years," Rapoport writes. In the summer of 1997, Rapoport, pregnant with their third child, rented a houseboat and with her two children, mother, aunt and uncle, floated along lakes and rivers to revisit the cottage and the memories it kindled. *House on the River* is notable not only for its sense of the intergenerational, complex currents, warm and cool, of an enviable family life, but also for its melding of sacred and secular Sabbaths.

Kahn, too, believes in the need for rejoicing and reflection in daily life. "That's why I create meditative spaces; that's why I'm so interested in ceremonial art," he says. Whether it's his miniature sacred spaces or the fourteen-foot granite *Shalev* (1991–1993), commissioned as an outdoor sculpture by the Jane Owen and Robert Lee Blaffer Trust, his painted wooden baby-naming chairs or his bronze ceremonial objects, Kahn integrates art into people's lives. "I want my art to be redemptive," he says.

. . .

In addition to her writing, Rapoport has held several day jobs. She first worked in publishing, where in the 1980s, she edited memoirs by Jimmy Carter, Geraldine Ferraro and the bestseller, *Iacocca: An Autobiography*.

She left publishing to work with foundations involved with the Jewish world. "I moved to the nonprofit world because of what my friend Reynold Levy [president of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts] taught me: The task of the nonprofit sector is to step in where the for-profit world cannot," she explains.

She brought her organizational and editing skills to the

Mandel Foundation, where she has edited publications including *Visions of a Jewish Education* (2003), and to the Revson Foundation, where she is senior program officer.

"I began to work here [the Revson Foundation] at the beginning of 2005, because my brilliant friend, Lisa Goldberg, was president and brought me to the foundation as a consultant in the Jewish program area," says Rapoport. "She died in an instant on January 22, 2007 – and I honor her memory by trying to extend the work she had begun to teach me: to support talented people with original ideas, especially young people, women and others who may not have found a receptive ear."

Kahn, too, is "committed to giving back, especially through art. In my twenties, I developed art curricula for several Jewish high schools that had not previously had an art program. In addition to Avoda, I also cofounded the Artists' Beit Midrash at the Skirball Center in Manhattan with Rabbi Leon Morris. And I teach at the School of Visual Arts," he says, but doesn't mention that he has done so for twenty-five years.

This is all in addition to the sculpture and paintings Kahn creates in his five-thousand-foot studio, working on "between eight and ten projects at a time, including one or two museum shows, two or three installations and a gallery show." Fortunately, says Kahn, "I don't need a lot of down time."

Neither, apparently, does Rapoport, who often speaks about Judaism, culture and imagination and has led writing workshops, "especially in Jewish contexts," she says.

. . .

Kahn's desire to share, to communicate, to celebrate has an almost urgent sense to it, an urgency played out in his artwork. As he writes in the catalogue of *Tobi Kahn: Microcosmos*:

> I am continually aware of time's passing, of the possibility of loss, an abrupt reversal of safety. In the face of the world's instability, I want to reveal those elements that are transcen-

> dent, not the evident reality but its essence, the inherent vitality that is possible. I want to transmute the darkness, salvage it for meditation without denying its power, revealing the spirit of our inner lives – mysterious, resonant, a sanctuary in a still struggling world.

Ancestry, expectations, family, responsibility – the obligations of history preoccupy and drive both Kahn and Rapoport.

"It's impossible," Rapoport says, "to overestimate the degree of responsibility that each of us feels, from different family narratives, to embody and fulfill the gifts we were given because of what our ancestors sacrificed for us. I have a cousin who, when he married, said at his wedding speech – I still remember this – 'Compared to our immigrant ancestors, we're pygmies.' He meant people like my paternal grandfather: an *ilui* [prodigy] in Talmud, he came to Canada and worked like a dog all his life – the store in the Depression that went under, and the milk delivery that was backbreaking. There isn't an elevator man or a doorman I pass in New York who does not make me think: that could have been my grandfather."

Kahn's feelings are similar: "Every day of my life I think about my uncle, my father's brother, for whom I'm named," says Kahn. (He is Tobi Aaron Kahn, named for his Uncle Arthur, or Aaron in Hebrew.) "My uncle, who was a medical student, was one of the first three Jews killed by Hitler in 1933 for protesting against the Nazis."

His other side of the family also gives rise to much thought. "The great rabbinic family is on my mother's side. When Nessa and I got married, one of our friends joked that we would have been a *shidduch* [a match] in Europe, because I'm from the Levush and she's a descendant of the Shach."

The Levush is Rabbi Mordecai Jaffe (1530–1612), a halachist, kabbalist, astronomer and philosopher, who was born in Prague, lived in Poland and authored an alternative to the *Shulchan Aruch*, Yosef Caro's great codification of Jewish law, called *Levush Malchut* (Royal Vestments). The Shach is Rabbi Shabbetai ben Meir HaKohen

(1621–1662), a Lithuanian scholar and poet who wrote the *Siftei Kohen*, a renowned commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*, while living in Moravia as a refugee from the Chmielniki pogroms.

"I was amused," Rapoport says, "to find out how iconoclastic they both were. The Shach was fearless in his legal rulings. Yet the tradition came to accept him and his interpretations over others.'" Savoring her ancestor's glory, Nessa smiles. "The perfume of the past is intoxicating."

Rapoport is currently completing work on a new novel which, she says, "reflects my customary obsessions – Jewishness, memory, family, Canada, sisters, the allure of the past – and the quest for love." The themes that haunted her at the start of her career haunt her still. She reflects on her work in *House on the River*: "All of my work, I believe, is praise of my Creator," she writes. "Whatever I've done, and in whatever form it's taken, I see it as a form of service, an attempt to give back some of what was given to me."

Rapoport is also working on another collaboration with her husband. Commissioned by their friend, Rabbi Saul Berman, it is, explains Rapoport, "an English 'rendering' of *birkat hamazon*, the grace after meals." It is the perfect project for Kahn and Rapoport, a bringing together of ceremonial objects and lyrical, reflective prose, all to celebrate bounty, togetherness, joy and kinship at the table, to celebrate "the grandeur of Judaism," says Rapoport, "and the passion of it."

. . .

Sukkot is Kahn's favorite holiday. Rumpled, expansive, exuberant in a collarless linen shirt and a woolen vest, he circumambulates a table the length of a sixteen-wheeler, making sure his two dozen guests are well stocked with salads, potatoes, chicken, artichokes. But his attention, his focus, is not confined to this table – in a sense, he presides over all of the tables in this enormous *sukkah*, which seems extruded from the Lincoln Square Synagogue like the spiral of a chambered nautilus. Every year Kahn supervises the homeless people who build the sukkah and the children who decorate it.

"I'm a city person, which makes Sukkot particularly beautiful. To sit beneath the stars, if you're lucky enough to have access to a sukkah, is to be aware of yourself as a created being in the natural world, part of something much larger," he says. "I love a sukkah where you don't know everyone at the table and you don't have to talk to them, but they're there. To me it's like the beach. It's very open, everyone's on their own blanket, and you're just going around."

What interests Kahn is community in the true sense of the word, the co-mingling of souls. He has always invited people to the feast, whether it's a feast for the senses or the stomach – or both. While Kahn wanders through the sukkah greeting and offering sustenance, Nessa is still: seated, serene, communing with her near neighbors, her children, her thoughts, bringing to mind words she wrote a quarter of a century ago in *Preparing for Sabbath*; words that, like her entire body of work, communicate an awe about her own good fortune coupled with her sense of responsibility to those who have come before:

> Nothing but a series of becomings and extinctions, holiness certain to be profaned. Last night, bathed and rested, I feasted before the fast, and left to pray for emptiness. Now, as cleansed a vessel as I will be, when the moon begins to rise, ready to leave the earth I must return to it, to enter a door, to sit among cushions, peopled, at ease. The hammering together of sukkah beams, festival of fruition, ripeness of food and drink one degree from dust. After the holiday, chairs pushed back, sated, near sleep, the table strewn with peels, pits, half-eaten things, who will know that we stood empty and clean so recently. The manifold dyings implanted in our birth.

An image, lyrical as well as visual: Rapoport as the roots of the tree, seeking hidden waters, Kahn as the branches, reaching up, reaching out, embracing and sheltering. Together, a family tree, a tree of the Jewish people, even – if the Kabbalists are correct – the Tree of Life.