

# faith

## Making rituals his own

Artist Tobi Kahn personalizes religious traditions with handmade objects that reflect his spirituality



Tobi Kahn, at his Long Island City studio, leads workshops around the country to help people find their faith through handmade religious objects.

BY LISA CHAMOFF

**T**obi Kahn associates some of his first visual memories as a boy growing up in Washington Heights with a certain kind of beauty his grandparents would incorporate into their celebration of the Jewish holidays.

Before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Kahn's grandfather, an importer for the textile industry, donated money to have cotton coverings made for the stark, individual wooden chairs in his synagogue, making them look like a sea of

white. The walls of the family's sukkah — a hut occupied during Sukkot, a harvest festival that also commemorates the Jews' period of wandering the desert after their exodus from Egypt — were covered with crushed velvet.

Since the early 1970s, Kahn, an artist whose paintings and sculptures have been exhibited in dozens of individual and group shows around the world, has tried to make his own holiday celebrations beautiful and mean-

ingful by using ritual objects he makes himself. On Hanukkah, which begins at sundown Dec. 7, the artist's Manhattan apartment will be filled with menorahs he has created over the years.

### Displaying his art

Kahn, whose studio is based in Long Island City, began using his art work — menorahs, a Passover seder plate, spice boxes for the Sabbath — in place of those that he already had. "I just didn't think that they resonated with

me," Kahn, 52, says of the older objects. "I felt that, since I'm an artist, I should really love the pieces that I used."

His work, including some of the menorahs he has made, has been traveling in an exhibition called "Avoda: Objects of the Spirit" since 2000, now on display at Rutgers University's Robeson Gallery. Photos of more than 75 of Kahn's ceremonial objects were published in a hardcover book this year, "Objects of the Spirit: Ritual and the Art of Tobi Kahn" (Avoda and Hudson Hills Press, \$50).

Kahn's ritual objects do not have the characteristics that many people associate with Judaism. There are no Stars of David or Hebrew inscriptions. Instead, Kahn fashions them with his own — and his family's — artistic and spiritual interpretation.

One Hanukkah eight years ago, Kahn sculpted a wood menorah with the look of a space-age weapon for his son, Josh. The shape reflected his now-16-year-old son's obsession with rocket ships and "Star Wars."

"He loved the one that we had, but he thought it wasn't him," Kahn says.

#### A floral menorah

Another menorah on the tour looks like a series of three tulips, a design of older German lamps that Kahn reinterpreted. Kahn also likes to make his work functional, so the lamp can hold either candles or oil, and any of the lights can become the Shmash, the candle that is used to light the others, by attaching a small additional piece.

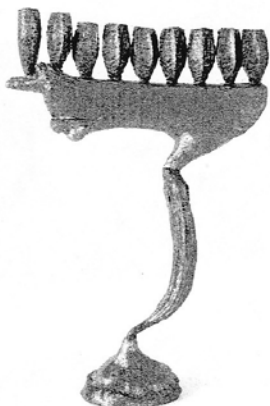
A bronze cast of the lamp now sits in Kahn's studio, a packed space above a steakhouse on Jackson Avenue, which he established in 1978 after studying art at Pratt Institute.

Kahn, who teaches at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, says he has also used the objects to mark special life passages. For his 1986 wedding to poet Nessa Rapoport, he made the huppah — a canopy under which the bride and groom stand during the ceremony to symbolize the home they will create. The traditional huppah is held up by four people, but Kahn says he didn't like the effect and wanted something sturdier to signify the foundation necessary for a strong marriage. He attached the canopy to four poles that stood on the ground.

"I think it is important to commemorate things in life [so] that you become part of the act," says

Kahn, whose ritual objects represent about 10 percent to 15 percent of his overall work.

For the past several years, Kahn has conducted workshops around the country, mostly at high schools and colleges, to help people make their own ritual objects. It is at these workshops that Kahn says he hangs up his role as an art "explorer" and transforms into a guide so that others can gain a deeper insight into their own faith.



Kahn's ritual objects, such as this menorah, don't use traditional Jewish symbols or themes.

## Kindling the lights

**C**andle lighting is the essential Hanukkah observance.

The eight lights of the menorah must sit at equal height and burn for at least half an hour.

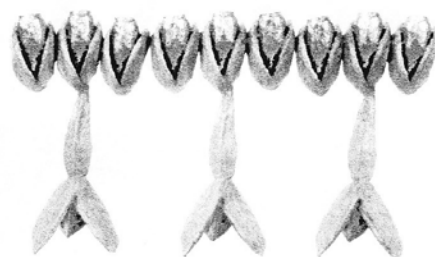
In many homes, each family member lights his or her lamp; in others, the head of the household lights one for everyone.

Two blessings are sung during the ceremony.

On the first night of the eight-night festival, an additional blessing is said.

SOURCE: Avoda Arts

# Personalizing the ritual



Tobi Kahn made a tulip-like menorah based on an older German design.

Kahn is fond of asking viewers how they would interpret his abstract paintings, and he does almost the same thing at the workshops. Instead of telling people what they can make, he gives them suggestions, wanting them ultimately to come up with an object that has a special meaning for them. Then they create the object using the materials Kahn and his colleagues supply, including glass, wire, beads, paint and even nail polish.

"I like doing it [art] my own way, and I want everyone else to do it their own way," Kahn says.

#### Campus workshop

Rabbi Meir Mitelman, executive director of Hofstra University's chapter of Hillel, the Jewish student group, and Kahn's friend for 25 years, invited him to conduct a workshop on campus last spring after seeing him in action at an international student leader conference in the Poconos.

"It really gives students just a wonderful opportunity to express themselves creatively and entwine their artistic skills and creative skills and Jewish faith," Mitelman says of the workshops. "He walks around among students and encourages them, makes suggestions without being directive. They walk away with... something that's meaningful because it's Jewish and because it's something they created from scratch."

At the spring workshop, sophomore Jessie Barthlow made a set of Shabbat candlesticks by wrapping two test tubes in wire-strung beads and gluing them to a glass base. She made the candlesticks to display in her dorm room, as a reminder to observe the Sabbath.

Kahn helped found the Manhattan-based Avoda Institute — a group that organizes the

workshops and is developing other spiritual arts programs — in 1999 with Manhattan resident Carol Brennglass Spinner, incoming president of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. Avoda is the Hebrew word for "worship," "work" or "service."

#### Life and ritual

While she was volunteering with the United Jewish Federation, Spinner observed Kahn teaching a workshop at the Jewish Museum of New York in Manhattan. "He has the remarkable ability of taking ritual objects and creating an environment in which students can relate their own life to these ritual objects," she says. "We're trying to take old rituals and help people explore what the meaning of that ritual is to themselves."

At a workshop after Avoda was founded four years ago, Spinner invented an object of her own. She took a small clock face, set the time to 3 p.m., mounted it on a piece of wood and placed it on her desk. It reminds her to eventually stop what she is doing on Fridays and observe the Sabbath.

Kahn also has made nontraditional Jewish objects commissioned by friends. For one friend, he made a Plexiglas holder for the shofar, the ram's horn that is blown during high holiday services.

Since the Avoda exhibit began traveling in 2000, Kahn has had to make other objects for his family to replace the ones that are on display.

"Avoda has been a dream," Kahn says. "People say that it's transforming. That's what I believe art should be."

Lisa Chamoff is a freelance writer.