

NA'ASEH: Ritual in Practice

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by

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Abstract

This body of work is an exploration of Jewish identity through pattern and ritual. Pattern is used as a tool to question and reinterpret these actions. Drawings, prints and papercuts are created through repetitive and evolutionary actions performed over time.

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SANCTUARY

As a young girl, I was often restless while sitting in synagogue during services. I would sing the songs, stand up and sit down with the rest of the congregation, but most of the time I looked for something to do. I would often play with the *tzitzit* hanging from my father's *tallit*. Sometimes I would look through the prayer book for the Hebrew words I knew, testing my knowledge. But most of the time I ended up trying to solve the pattern in the sanctuary.

Bimah, or **בימה**, is the platform at the front of the sanctuary and where the ark holds the Torah. The *bimah* at our synagogue has steps along all sides, inviting and connecting the raised area of the sanctuary with the congregation below.

In our sanctuary, there is a *bimah* where the rabbi and cantor stand to lead us, where the Torah lives in its ark, and where congregants are invited up to perform rituals. Looming high above all this is a white patterned screen, behind which the music would play. The screen is made up of several columns, each filled with a repeating pattern. There are horizontal lines and lines that go diagonally in both directions. Where these lines meet, they make shapes between them: hexagons and triangles; *Magen David*, the Star of David.

Each week, going to that service in that sanctuary, I got lost in that pattern. I wanted to understand it. To draw it. To recreate it. To continue it. The lines were just lines. But when they met each other, they made new shapes. And when those shapes fit together, they made the recognizable symbol of the six pointed Jewish star.

Tzitzit, or **ציצית**, are the fringe at the ends of a *tallit*. The fringe is made up of ritualistically tied knots. I would play with these endlessly, braiding and unbraiding and twisting them.

Tallit, or **טלית**, is the prayer shawl worn while praying, usually presented to the wearer during their *Bar Mitzvah* service. My father's *tallit* is a traditional style, blue and a creamy white.

CHALLAH

Every week on *Shabbat*, Jews all over the world repeat certain rituals. One of these is making, blessing, and eating *challah* bread. For this weekly celebration, it is usually braided with three or more strands together into one loaf. The braided unit is the result of these different entities coming together. On *Rosh Hashanah*, this *challah* is formed into a circle. This symbolizes the cycle of life, and the continuity of the years as they repeat.

The special new year *challah* can be made in many different ways. It may be braided straight and joined to make a circle. It may be spiraled into a circle. Or it may be woven from the center out, creating a circle. The *Rosh Hashanah challah* may be made sweet, too, baked with raisins or honey, to symbolize the beginning of a sweet new year.

Rosh Hashanah, or ראש השנה, is the Jewish New Year. *Rosh* means head, *Ha* means the, and *shanah* means year. But *shanah* can also mean repetition and change.

While this ritual is performed all over the world at the same time, each of us performs it differently. In some families, someone may braid and bake the *challah* for the holiday. Growing up, my family did not make this bread at home, instead buying it from a local bakery. Now as an adult, I have sought out this ritual, adopting it and practicing it regularly. I want to perform this action and learn from it. On *Rosh Hashanah*, I weave a knot out from the center to create the circle.

This woven knot is my pattern unit.

My pattern begins with a single unit: the woven knot of the *challah*. This unit repeats again and again to form a pattern. As I draw this unit over and over I learn it and I understand it. Through this repetition I come to truly know the knot. My hand goes through every line that creates it. It learns how each line intersects to create shape and how each shape fits with another.

My hand then finds its own way. As it repeats the unit, it may favor certain lines of the knot over others. It may choose to repeat some lines, but not all. My hand is aware of one shape and wants to understand it. So it repeats it, over and over again. My hand notices another shape, another line, a new pattern. That pattern is no longer the woven knot of the *challah*, it transforms into something new.

My hand continues the pattern, varying as it draws. One patterned area fades away into nothing. Void. Just the grid. Other areas end up back at the original pattern unit of the *challah*. The pattern evolves, transitions, changes. But it all comes from that one original unit. While the pattern ebbs and flows, it rediscovers itself. And that one original unit can be found throughout. It persists. It repeats. It returns.

PATTERN

Whenever I begin a work, I start with a grid. If I am not working on graph paper, I draw out the grid. The grid is simple. Repeating horizontal lines, crossed perpendicularly with repeating vertical lines. Though they may end at the edges of the paper, I know how they will continue. No matter where the lines go, they always make the grid. They continue to intersect, making perfect squares in every direction. The grid is continuous, even though I may not see it continue. I know how it will extend. I understand the grid.

GRID

I always begin with the grid. It is my ground. It is my center. The grid holds so much truth and fact. This grid will be the same no matter where it is, or what substrate it is on. The lines will always be straight. The squares will always be continuous. I know the grid.

And with this understanding and knowledge of the grid, I am free to break away. The grid is consistent, so I don't have to be. This certainty in the grid frees me to experiment. No matter what decisions my hand may make, I can always come back to the grid. It will always be there, persisting through time. I feel free to evolve and transition, while the grid keeps me grounded. I have faith in the grid..

DIFFERENCE

Being Jewish for me has never really had anything to do with my beliefs. It has always been about the rituals and traditions. It is about my family. My people. My culture. Judaism has a basis, like the grid, and being Jewish is about interpretations and actions, like the pattern.

My father's mother, my Grandma Bobbie, converted to Judaism before marrying my Grandpa Alec. She raised her family to be Jewish, but even so, some may not consider her Jewish because she was not converted by an orthodox Rabbi. Some may not even consider my father Jewish because his mother was not born Jewish.

My father was raised in a conservative Jewish family in England, while my mother was raised in a secular Jewish family in New York City. My father learned Hebrew through the prayers, while my mother learned Yiddish through song and conversation. They raised us in a reform Jewish household. We went to synagogue most Fridays for *Shabbat*, and weekly for Hebrew School. We also always made *Shabbat* at home. We lit the candles. We drank the wine. We ate the *challah*. And we said the blessings over each action. We did things a certain way in our home. But that wasn't the same in every Jewish home.

When we would visit other Jewish families in other parts of New York, other parts of the US, or other parts of the world, *Shabbat* was always a little bit different. It was a little uncomfortable to be doing something so inherently Jewish and a part of who I am, but so differently than what I grew up with. It was so different, but so familiar. Some families would sing different tunes. Some families didn't put salt on their *challah* (we always did). Some families broke their bread differently. They might cut slices and pass it around on a plate. My father would always cut a large end off the *challah*, and then use his hands to tear it into smaller chunks, sprinkling these with salt before throwing them across the table to us. We all have this common grid, but our interpretations and patterns differ.

Growing up with rituals that identified my Judaism, it was always startling to experience how differently other Jews observe their Judaism. My maternal grandmother, who lives in New York,

would never say the blessings. She would occasionally light the candles if we came over for dinner, but the blessings were never her thing. She was always reluctant to come to services with us, only attending for major celebrations like our *B'nai Mitzvah*. She is Jewish, but not that kind of Jewish.

My grandmother and I travel a lot together. We've been to Morocco and Spain and France and Germany. Wherever we go, she always wants to find the local historic synagogue. She wants to find the Jewish community. In Berlin, we went to a *Shabbat* service at a local synagogue. The sanctuary was beautifully ornate. So different from the one I grew up with, it was ornate in a completely different way. And they sat differently. The women on one side and the men on the other. We arrived a little late, joining the women. Another woman who walked in with us pointed out the prayer books, and what page to be on. Following the service was a challenge. Neither of us understands German. But the Hebrew I could follow. I knew the songs. I knew the prayers. All the way across oceans and countries, here we were in this different synagogue, where we were able to follow along. While our patterns differ, we had that common grid.

After the service, we went up to the rabbi to introduce ourselves. We both felt a little out of place and uncomfortable, but then my grandmother grabbed my arm and walked right up to him. She stood up straight and, beaming, declared: "This is my granddaughter, she was *Bat Mitzvah*'d at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City." My secular grandmother, who never goes to synagogue, but insisted on attending when we went to a foreign city, was so filled with pride that I had become *Bat Mitzvah*, a child of the commandment. Even though our patterns on Judaism varied from one another, she wanted to make that connection with the Rabbi, to point out how our patterns aligned.

B'nai Mitzvah (plural), or בני מצוה, is the Jewish coming of age ritual, usually performed when someone is 12 or 13 years old. My brother and sister and I all performed this action, of reading the Torah and leading our congregation in prayer. My father had one, too, but not my mother. *Bat Mitzvah*, בת מצוה, is the feminine singular, and *Bar Mitzvah*, בר מצוה, is the masculine singular, and literally means child of the commandment.

INTAGLIO

Printmaking is a ritual. It is a process that combines repeated actions over a long period of time. I begin with a copper plate. To create the matrix I draw into the surface a drypoint grid. The matrix physically records my actions by retaining these lines. They are embedded into the surface. In preparation for the etching process, I draw with an oil based marker with the grid as my guide. I begin with my single unit, repeating and varying as I draw. There are areas of repetition and areas of originality. They all come from that initial unit. With the pattern drawn on the plate, I place it into the corrosive bath of ferric chloride. Over a specific length of time, the bath eats away at the exposed areas of the plate. Anywhere that I did not record my action with the oil based marker begins to disintegrate over time. Time is making the decisions here, not my hand.

Upon removal from the bath, some of the prior actions fade away. The drypoint lines are less severe, but the more recent actions are crisp and clear, made so by the corrosive bath. I take action again. I respond again. I leave more marks on the plate with the oil-based marker. Although the plate has been removed from the corrosive bath and rinsed with water, the copper still retains some of the ferric chloride. The memory of the corrosive allows only some of my mark making to hold. It does not adhere to the surface of the plate as definitively. I put the copper plate back in the bath. The earliest actions of the grid continue to dissolve, while the more recent actions seem to become more defined by the bath. The most recent marks made by the marker do not hold. The ferric chloride eats through them. My actions fight with time.

The matrix is ready. It has recorded my actions, pushing some back into history as memories and bringing the more recent forward in crisp lines. To proof this print I perform more actions. I dampen the paper. I mix the ink. I clean the plate. I am ready. I push the mixed ink into the crevices throughout the surface of the plate. Over and over again, I wipe the surface with a tarlatan rag. Instead of a few forceful wipes, repetitive subtle actions are more effective. The plate is ready to be proofed. I lay the dampened paper carefully on the surface of the plate. As it runs through the press, the paper is forced into the surface of the plate, taking not only the ink, but also the impressions of the surface of the plate. On the other side of the press, I peel off the paper, now a record of my actions.

I continue printing proofs of this state until my ink runs out. Each print is extremely similar, almost an edition. I performed the set of actions over and over again for each print. They are records of my ritual. Each one is the same: the same plate, the same state of the matrix, the same ink, the same paper, the

same methods. But each is also different. My body performed these repetitive actions in succession, and although they are made with the same intention, they are different. My body did not wipe the plate in the exact same motions each time. The paper was a little less damp each time. I had a little less ink to work with each time. They are all the same, but they are all different.

As I continue this ritual, time passes. My actions, though they persist and continue with the same intention, vary. I will record more changes on the plate, etch further, change the state of the matrix. The image will retain its integrity, but I will repeat certain areas, enforce the pattern unit, the grid will continue to soften and fade into history. I will continue to print, to record the state of the matrix, but the ink will be a little different each time I mix it. The paper will stay the same, but the humidity in the air, as the seasons change, will affect it differently each time. My actions remain the same, but differ each time they are performed. Printmaking is a ritual.

Printmaking is a ritual. It is a process that combines repeated actions over a long period of time. I begin with my drawing. Laying a transparency over the drawing, I draw again with an oil based pen. I draw the same lines, repeat those actions. They are not exact, but are still true. My pen dries out as I draw, leaving some areas more opaque than others. Sometimes the pen leaks, leaving a small pool of ink. Sometimes the pen slips, I cannot control it completely. Finishing the transparency, I hold it up to the light to see the marks I have made. The level of opacity varies throughout each line. It is not perfect.

Ready for my screen, I lay the hand drawn transparency on the glass bed of the exposure unit. The screen, prepared with the photo-sensitive emulsion, lies on top. I have to choose an exposure time, how long will I allow the light to shine through the drawn transparency, solidifying the emulsion stencil on the screen? Some drawn lines are more opaque than others. I choose to over expose.

I let the light shine through for longer, forcing its way through the less opaque lines, showing the inconsistencies, showing the imperfections. I don't want to pretend that I'm perfect. I want to show the actions, the marks my hand made.

SCREENPRINTING

After the exposure, I wash out the screen. The areas that have been exposed to the light remain. Any area blocked by my pen's mark washes away. The stencil is made.

With my screen ready, I prepare my station: the mixed inks, the paper, the squeegee. I lay a paper down on the table. With my screen on top, I spread some ink along the surface. I push the ink through the stencil with my squeegee. Lifting up the screen, I have made a print. I complete these actions again. I place my paper on the table, push the ink through with the squeegee, and lift the screen. I pull these prints again and again. Each one is the same: the same ink, the same image, the same screen, the same paper, the same methods. But each is also different. Although I performed these actions with the same intention, they are different. My body did not push the squeegee with the exact same pressure each time. The paper was in a slightly different place every time. They are all the same, but they are all different.

ACTION NA'ASEH

Being Jewish is about taking action and about practice, rather than about belief. “The sages tell us first *na'aseh*, first we're going to do, *v'nishma*, then we'll understand.”

Whenever I have explained my Judaism, it has never been about my beliefs, it has always been about the traditions, about the actions. I remember in elementary school, I was the only Jew, and I would regularly be explaining it to my classmates.

I'm Jewish.

So you believe in God, right?

Well, no, actually.

But I go to synagogue, I make Shabbat every Friday, and we have all these other holidays...

People didn't really seem to get it. Even in college, it was the same conversation over and over again. My Judaism is not only about my beliefs, but also about what I do. It is about the traditions we repeat weekly and yearly. It is about the food we make. It is about the objects we have in our home. It is about the stories we tell. It is about the actions we take. And it is about the meaning we make from these actions.

First *na'aseh*, then *v'nishma*. This is how so many of us learn, and is the way I have been exploring my Judaism. First I practiced the rituals. I performed the actions, repeating the Hebrew, saying the prayers. Then I began to understand and to question. As I spent more time with each action, I learned from them. As I began to learn the Hebrew and understand the prayers I was reciting, I questioned why I was saying these words. Do I believe in the words that I am saying? As I performed the ritualistic actions, over and over again through the years, I learned more about them. Why do we do it this way? They were once superficial actions that I did not consider, but now are actions that I question. The rituals I perform now have more meaning for me. The grid is continuing, but the patterns are changing. I may have started the patterns without meaning, but as I spend more and more time with them, they change. Some patterns persist, while I continue to form my own interpretations.

A few months ago, I was staying in New York City at the home I grew up in, and had a childhood friend over. She had been over to that apartment countless times, but this time, she noticed something new: the *mezuzah* on our doorpost. She had touched it, curious about what it was, and had accidentally caused it to fall off. We put it right back up, no problem, but I was shocked at how affected I was by the accident.

How had she never noticed this before? How have I never explained it to her? In my childhood home, there is a *mezuzah* on the front doorpost, on my bedroom doorpost, and on several other doorposts throughout the apartment. Each one is completely different: different materials, different sizes, different colors, different styles. Inside they contain the same intention: they have a rolled up scroll of parchment with Hebrew text from the Torah.

For me, the *mezuzah* is a marker of a Jewish home and holds so much meaning. To me, the *mezuzah* signifies not hiding. Just like lighting *Shabbat* and *Hannukah* candles in the window, where everyone can see, the *mezuzah* is a sign of pride. We are here.

DOORWAY MEZUZAH

The *mezuzah* is also a sign of welcoming. It tells whoever walks through that door that they are entering a Jewish home. It is a willingness to tell and to share. The *mezuzah* is an action.

Mezuzah, or מזוזה, literally means doorpost. But it also refers to the object and the parchment scroll inside. This parchment of text is traditionally written by a *sofer*, סופר, or Jewish scribe, who has studied and trained to transcribe various sacred texts. There are many laws and rituals involved in the writing of these texts, and the *mezuzah* is no exception. To be *kosher* it must be written with specific ink, with a specific pen, and on a specific parchment. Once all the rules are followed and the text is complete, it is rolled up and placed inside the *mezuzah*. It is hidden from view, only to be examined twice every seven years for any defects. The words are not meant to be read regularly, but to be embodied in the actions of the home's inhabitants.

Hineini. הניני Here I am. These words are spoken several times in the Torah. They are the answer to a call to action. Where are you? Here I am. הניני I am ready to act.

PRACTICE

Throughout the past few years, I have been questioning my practice. Why do I do the things I do? Why do I perform these rituals? Why do I make these choices? I have made an effort to consider my actions, to reflect with each step and with each process. I have explored my Jewish identity, and what it means to be an artist and printmaker.

Printmaking is a ritual. It is a discipline that has a basis, a grid, but also has endless variations. Printmakers enter into a communal tradition of processes that are taught and passed down from master to apprentice. It is a practice of conformity but also of divergence. We begin our learning by repeating the actions of our teachers, gradually evolving the process to fit into our own practices. Printmaking is a ritual that persists and evolves.

I first learned about Jewish papercuts about a year ago. There is a long history of Jews creating cut paper images for special occasions, and to be hung on walls for certain rituals. This process is not new, it is not original. It is one that has been continued for generations. It is done in a variety of styles, but the basics remain the same: a paper is cut to create an image. This process has persisted so long not only because of its beauty, but because of its accessibility. Anyone can make a papercut. It is not a process that only trained artists can appreciate, but that every person can understand. Cutting paper is an immediate action, one in which we perform and instantly see the results. It is both satisfying and understandable. It is accessible.

My drawings and prints are my rituals. They are the way that I practice. I perform the actions over and over again, learning and making meaning from them. I do not hide my process. On the back of the paper, you can see the steps I've taken: the measurements I've made, the grid I've drawn, and the cuts I've made. I am not perfect. I make mistakes and those mistakes are a part of the process. The pattern is not perfect. While I practice these rituals, I keep the ends of my paper rolled up. The paper, the grid, and the actions are continuous, but I focus on the present. I allow the memories and learning I have to influence my choices, but each action stands alone, only coming together when the piece is unrolled, unveiling the unity of the pattern.

Through doorways constructed with this process, I invite people to enter the space I have created. Often when we perform rituals, we forget the world we live in, with our actions creating an invisible architecture around us.

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This book was screenprinted and bound by the artist, on Kozo and Lokta paper in an edition of ____.

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