

The Kallah Arch: An experiment in reinvesting imagery

In Memory of my teacher, Dr. Eugene Mihaly, who taught me to think about beauty (Tiferet) in the center of the Sefirotic system. "All paths pass through beauty,"

-- Dr. M

I live in the city of arches, but it is a symbol so over-used here that I would never suggest it for a logo or a design. Not because it isn't profound, but because where I live, it is done.

In the Mediterranean design, it may be more interesting, even more accurate to translate sha'ar as arch, rather than gate. The gate imagery is also a little tired for me, but I suppose that is what I came to do: make something new, a chiddush, out of something old.

The Secret of Shabbat

We moved the synagogue into a large space that once was a school. It has a series of smaller rooms off of one main room. We do concerts, teachings, prayers, yoga, meditation, dinners, dancing, in the large room. I looked at the room and remembered how Dr. Mihaly taught me to look at synagogue space: everything means something, inwardly and outwardly.

The welcoming of the Kallah, the Sabbath Bride, I had learned from my teachers, is a lofty concept. It is the return of the upper root of a person's holy soul, the integration of something that had been exiled at Creation (God separated the upper waters from the lower waters, as quoted by the Sefas Emes on Genesis) and this integration is what the Zohar referred to as Raza de Shabbat, the secret of Shabbat. The Secret of Shabbat is a midrashic introduction to Kabbalat Shabbat prayer in the old Sefardi nusach of the prayer book, and it was introduced to us as students by Dr. Mihaly.

We also reclaimed the Lecha Dodi as the prayer we say just before we acknowledge our mourners, our grief. In the tradition, the mourners would stay out of the synagogue until they heard Lecha Dodi, then they would enter. It was a way of acknowledging both the separation of grief in time and a way of identifying who were the mourners in the community.

I wrote a poem, set it to music, to sing/speak to acknowledge our grief, just before the Kallah arrives.

Prayer for Friday night
On grief, before Lekhah Dodi

Your greatest fear is a dragon
guarding your deepest gift -- Rilke

The holy the blessed, she is descending
joining the upper root to the lower,
the singular *ner* of Shabbat,
the candle of Shabbat.

I am up down
happy sad
clear confused,
light, I am dark.

Let me pause for a moment,
release an idea that obstructs,
what I think I know that obscures.
Let me release an old idea,
welcome the softness of mind
free of expectations
that arrives with the Bride.

The Bride will love me just the way I am.
Teach me to float the great Sea,
up and down the gentle cadence,
reliable, infallible, ineffable.

This is a sea we float,
not swim,
when I learn to float
I wonder how I ever did anything else.

The Cosmic Wedding

In our former synagogue space, we had a joke: the Kallah/Bride entered from the east, through the kitchen door. It was funny and inelegant, such grand mythology, such a modest entryway. In our new space, one of our members who is an architect and a designer noticed that we had been released from the kitchen entry, the Kallah could enter in a loftier way. She suggested creating an appropriate entry for the Sabbath Bride, something dignified, imaginative, playful, clever, like our community.

She did her research. She took a look at the sources on the Kallah, the Shekhinah, its relation with the Community or Israel, and she dreamed an interior architectural design that suggests the dreamy approach of Chagall.

She picked an entry between a wall and a column toward the east. We angled the Kallah archway, the ark placement, everything on the oblique line that was east. A Chagall image she found suggested a Cubist approach which helped the designer conceptualize the structure. We searched for a material and a jewelry artist in our group suggested beads.

We made an arch, a Kallah arch out of beads. The entire community sat together and strung beads for the sake of heaven. We gave birth to a new-old interior synagogal form, one I wish I could have shared with my teacher, who would have chuckled, and said, "good, my boy, yes, that's correct, of course, the Kallah arch. Beautiful," dripping words, like honey.

The Kallah comes looking every Friday night for the holy integration of upper and lower, inner and outer, masculine and feminine, the imaginative return of Shabbes from the Exile of the week. With the imagery of cosmic marriage we sing the Kallah to her place. She needs not only a place to light, to live, but also a proper place to enter. She needs an archway made out of beads, something clever, something beautiful.

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