נשים Nashim

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH WOMEN'S STUDIES & GENDER ISSUES

Spring ◊ Number 43 ◊ 5784/2024

JEWISH WOMEN, FEMINISM, GENDER, SCHOLARSHIP: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Consulting Editor: Judith R. Baskin

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Symposium on Egalitarian Marriage within Halakhah

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CONTENTS

Archaeology of Metaphor: The Art of Gilah Yelin Hirsch

Milan, Italy: Skira Editore, 2022. 182 pp.

reviewed by Yael Samuel

Long before pronouns started taking a central role in the gender debate, a young Gilah Yelin was questioning the identity of God. In third grade, she asked her male Orthodox Torah teacher why the names of God, as evidenced in the Torah, were both male and female. Pointing to the text, she explained in Yiddish, the language of instruction: *es iz geshribn rekht do*—it's written right here. Rather than answer Gilah's question, her teacher marched down the aisle, grabbed her by her long red hair, and threw her out of the classroom. She was never allowed back.

Two years later, ten-year old Gilah wrote a letter to Albert Einstein, asking him how he could believe in God, especially in view of the world's suffering. Einstein, who famously received and answered letters from children around the world, and who, as he said, believed in the God who created the laws of physics, answered Gilah with the following advice: "Try to form your opinions always according to your own judgement." Her letter already demonstrated her ability to do so, he remarked (*Archaeology of Metaphor* [henceforth: *Archaeology*], p. 9).

Gilah's precocious ability to ask such astute questions about the nature of God was surely influenced by her independent-thinking parents. Her father, journalist Ezra Yelin, a descendent of seven generations of distinguished rabbis,[1] was an atheist Talmud scholar. Her mother, poet, author and early feminist Shulamis Borodensky Yelin, was instrumental in forging a progressive (notwithstanding Gilah's third-grade teacher), tightknit Jewish community of east European immigrants and Holocaust survivors in Montreal, where Gilah was raised. Non-observant yet determinedly literate Jews, they sent Gilah to the Peretz Shule, a quadruple-language elementary school where the day was divided between secular studies in English and French,

and Jewish studies in Hebrew and Yiddish, the language they spoke at home. Her summers were spent at Yiddish and Hebrew-language camps. This multilingual upbringing facilitated Gilah's ability to continue learning new languages with ease and nurtured her life-long fascination with and study of languages, words and alphabets.

Nearly seven decades later, Gilah Yelin Hirsch continues to advocate multilingualism. She has also promulgated her own theory of the origin of alphabets, according to which five fundamental shapes found in nature are the source of all writing systems, with ancient Hebrew as their wellspring. Positing that these shapes mirror neurons and neural processes, she sees a direct link between alphabetic forms and those discovered by science, as portrayed in her films *Cosmography*: *The Writing of the Universe* (1995) and *Reading the Landscape* (2019). Add to this Hirsch's extensive travels and explorations of world languages and cultures, Kabbalah, theosophy, Eastern and Native American spiritual philosophies and practices, yoga, ritual dance

Figure 1. *Ain Soph*. 1977. Oil on canvas, 61 cm diameter. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Plate 6 (p. 49).

and the healing arts.[2] Hirsch has merged art, science, mind and body, using the tools of creativity as consciousness raising.

Navigating a kabbalistic portal into thought and understanding of the infinite light—the *or ayn sof* (Fig. 1, p. 157)—Hirsch elucidates that there is no end to knowledge or to our determination to unlock the mysteries of the universe and of existence. To penetrate this Infinite—the *ayn sof*—she wields a feminist lens, peeling away layer after layer to get to the source of all knowledge. scientific and esoteric, and so arriving at an art of "metaphysical spiritualism," illuminating and luminous (*Archaeology*, p. 56). One might characterize her as a spiritual archaeologist; indeed, she has been likened to a shaman (p. 59). The title of her monograph, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, signifies all that is hidden, waiting to be revealed.

The 182-page volume, published in conjunction with Hirsch's October 2022 retrospective at the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art (OCCCA) in Santa Ana, California, spans Hirsch's oeuvre from 1968, when she became an "accidental" artist at the University of California at Berkeley (*Archaeology*, p. 9), through 2022, when, by now a distinguished and highly esteemed Professor Emerita at California State University Dominguez Hills, she was internationally recognized for her novel ideas on the intersections between art, science, nature, ecology, cosmology, human consciousness, physiology and behavior. Hirsch's *Archaeology of Metaphor* is timely, accentuating a unity of being evident in her ongoing search for meaning and celebration of our shared humanity. Edited by art historian and curator of the OCCCA exhibition Donna Stein, *Archaeology of Metaphor* contains more than 100 images of Hirsch's multiple mixed-media works—paintings, drawings, prints and photographs—accompanied by a comprehensive conversation with Stein and essays by Canadian psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer and American art historian Carolyn Stuart.

It was Hirsch's 1970 MFA graduate show[3] at UCLA that first put her in the spotlight. With mundane, everyday food as her subject matter, her paintings, "surreal [in] scale and context" (*Archaeology*, p. 10), and their metaphorical associations with women's bodies and traditional roles in the kitchen, placed her in the company of the New York Pop Artists and such contemporary feminist artists as Audrey Flack, whose works were often exhibited together with Hirsch's in the 1970s and 1980s. While the centrality of food as a hyper-realist metaphor for women's suppression and potential would evolve to become more abstract in Hirsch's work, the imagery of peeling back layers

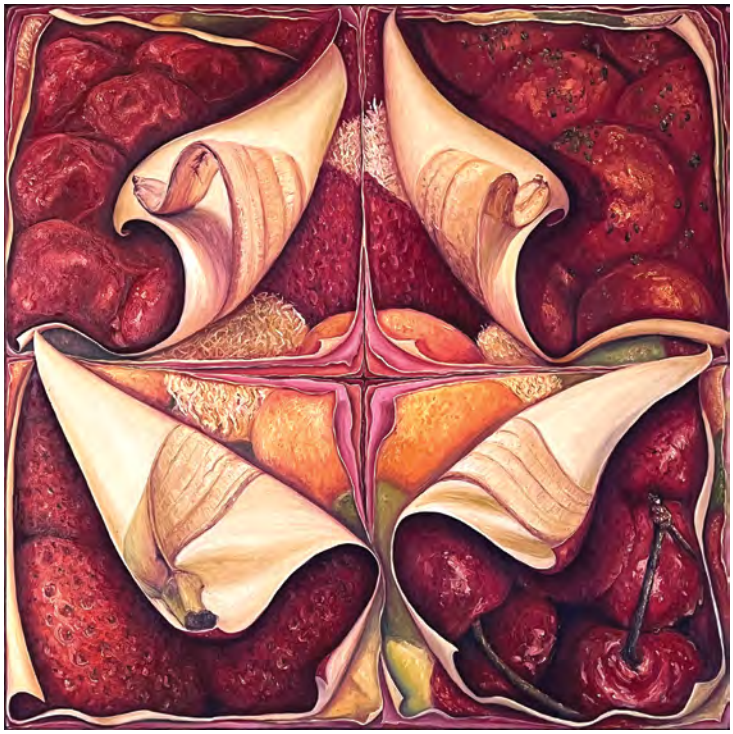

Figure 2. *Four Square Peeler.* 1972. Oil on canvas, 122 × 122 cm. Collection of Shirley Loeb, Los Angeles, CA. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Plate 2 (p. 13).

to unearth histories, both personal and universal, with the attendant spiritual and archaeological implications, continued to infuse her work.

In *Four Square Peeler* (1972) for example, the image is curled back and into itself (Fig. 2). Female potential is depicted in the ripeness of the fruit, bold and blood-red. Banana peels (skins, in British English) unfurl on the canvas to reveal a pumpkin squeezed and quartered by a vulva stretching in four directions, intersecting with and outlining each square. The number four can allude to the kabbalistic worlds of action, emotion, intellect and spirit, in which we live simultaneously. These interconnected kabbalistic worlds are usually configured as trees, ladders or concentric circles, suggesting an infinite number of sides, whereas the square has only four sides. Still, both squares and circles have center points, and the tiny vulvic opening,[4] dead center in *Four Square Peeler,* can be imagined as a portal into the secret, mystical world of Kabbalah.

Figure 3. *House Arrest.* 1972. Oil on canvas, 152 × 152 cm. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Fig. 6 (p. 17).

Portals and doors are often used interchangeably, presaging entrances into inner, outer, and alternative worlds. In Hirsch's work, doors can be construed as entrances to multiple pathways and new beginnings, but also to limitations, exclusion or imprisonment, as in *House Arrest* (1972). On this square canvas (Fig. 3), Hirsch painted a 10-foot tomato "'imprisoned' by 6-foot bars of fried eggs" (*Archaeology*, p. 17), sunny side up, the eggs signifying female biology and the tomato female potentiality and sensuality, a recurring feminist trope in Hirsch's work. In another example, *Miracle of the Peaches* (1970), halved, pitted peaches hover above a glass punch bowl filled with lemon slices.[5] The bloody inside of the peach, normally seen with or without the pit removed, fills the bowl, from which the peaches have miraculously escaped. Peaches have long been associated with sensuality, sexuality and female genitalia; here we see the metaphor of turning lemons into lemonade with a new twist.

As universal symbols, the doors, windows, rounds and diamond shapes that figure so prominently in Hirsch's work speak to her underlying theme

of interconnectedness. Notwithstanding the antisemitic "Jewish Janus Face" trope, the Jewish encounter with the Roman Empire, at times a positive cultural exchange, calls Janus to mind. The mythological Roman god of gates, doors and transitions holds the key to accessibility, guarding the gates of heaven where other gods reside, his iconic two-faced image signifying openings and boundaries, one side facing the past, the other the future.

Affinities can be seen between the key held by Janus in his right hand, symbolic of protection, and the *mezuzah* affixed to the right side of a Jewish home's doorframe to guard and protect the home. The inside of the tightly rolled parchment encased in the *mezuzah* bears the passages in the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4–9, 11:13–21) instructing us to love God and to fix this commandment to our doorposts and gates, while its back bears the single word *Shaddai*, one of the mystical names of God and an acronym of the words *Shomer delatot Yisrael*—Guardian of the gates of Israel. The case must either have an opening through which the word *Shaddai* is visible or bear its first letter, *shin*.

The parchment-colored banana skin in *Four Square Peeler* evokes the parchments inside the mezuzah and those of the Torah scroll used in the synagogue and the Megillah containing the Book of Esther, ritually read on Purim. But *shad* is also the female breast, and *Shaddai*, when invoked in the Torah, refers to fruitfulness and fertility (see Gen. 28:3, 35:11 and 49:25). The Hebrew root *s.t.r* can be seen in Esther's name, evoking the word *nistar*, hidden; in the Kabbalah, it refers to the hidden meanings to be sought in sacred texts such as the Megillah, in which God's name is not mentioned. The Purim story is like a game of hide and seek, or hiding and revealing. Using the mind's eye to peel back the layers of Hirsch's work is akin to searching for the *nistar*.

Such connections are endless, as Hirsch would have it. She describes her creative process as a "call and response," one that is "unplanned . . . with no thought as to what will emerge . . . a constant search . . . allowing my sense of vision to expand with each new layer of recognition" (*Archaeology*, p. 100). The viewer, lured by the unknown, is invited to reenact this endless search, the journey into the *ayn sof*. Reenactment is integral to Jewish tradition and ritual. We reenact the experience of being slaves in Egypt at our Passover Seder, our story told as a response to four questions raised by the youngest child present, who calls on the adults to account for how and why we tell it. In the *Ne'ilah* (locking) service that concludes Yom Kippur, we reenact the

closing of the gates of the destroyed Temple, reimagining them as spiritual gates, new pathways to return and renewal.

In conversation with Stein, Hirsch uses the letter *ḥet*, the eighth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is shaped like a door or gate, as an example of the "physiological importance" of the letter shapes: In visualizing the letter "as a gate, you would be transported from this reality to another consciousness" (*Archaeology*, p. 47). This is particularly true after an extended period of communal fasting and prayer. On Yom Kippur we are called to atone collectively, taking communal responsibility for the sins, failings and suffering of all: if one suffers, we all suffer. We repeat the *Unetanneh tokef* prayer first recited on Rosh Hashana: Who will live, who will die, and how, beseeching God to judge humanity mercifully. Famously adapted by Leonard Cohen in *Who by Fire* (1974), sung for Israeli soldiers based in the Sinai during the Yom Kippur War, the *Unetanneh tokef* prayer is reechoed in the title of Hirsch's *Who Will Live and Who Will Die* (1998), the power of the words generating a meditative visual guide and a means for Hirsch to heal after her own encounter with a life-threatening accident (Fig. 4; and see below). *Unetanneh Tokef* is an appeal: On Yom Kippur we ask God to open the gates of righteousness; once they are locked, we are locked in spiritually for the year.

Hirsch's search for unity in the diversity of languages, like Noam Chomsky's initial and revised theory of universal grammar, is one of looking for patterns. Focused as she is on the spiritual energy of the Hebrew alphabet, what she sees in the Hebrew root system and its relationship to all alphabetic systems universalizes her quest. And though she doesn't think it essential for the viewer to decode her work in order to appreciate it, she poses thought-provoking questions that underscore the interdependence of all things, often utilizing the power of chiasmus to elicit a call and response: "Do we think because of what we see, or do we see because of what we think?" (*Archaeology*, Chapter 1). This causality dilemma has the ring of a talmudic line of questioning, of the method used when studying texts to find harmony in contradiction.

Jewish liturgical practice is also a form of call and response, an enactment or performance in which the Torah scroll stars. Dressed, belted and adorned with a breastplate and crowns reminiscent of the garments and adornments worn by the Temple priests, the Torah scrolls are kept in an ark with its doors or curtains shut until the congregation is called to stand, reenacting the moment in which the Torah was revealed to Moses at Mt. Sinai as the

Figure 4. *Who Will Live and Who Will Die*. 1999. Oil on canvas, 216 × 216 cm. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Plate 25 (p. 140).

Israelites stood at the bottom of the mountain, anticipating the revelation. Once removed from the ark, the Torah is paraded around the synagogue or temple, a reenactment of the Israelites marching with the holy ark through the wilderness to the ultimate destination: Jerusalem.

Torah (teaching), a word that refers both to the entire vast world of Jewish learning and specifically to the Five Books of Moses, is a feminine noun and as such takes the feminine demonstrative pronoun *zot* (this), so that, in essence, it is feminine to begin with, while *sefer* (book) is a masculine noun. If God is both male and female, as the young Gilah Yelin readily deduced from the pronouns, it stands to reason that the Torah is also both feminine and masculine. Aware of the Orthodox ban against men hearing a woman's voice (*kol ishah*), lest they be distracted from Torah study, she painted *Kol Eesha* (1999), a female Torah replete with a bushy, pubic-haired "V" surging upward from the bottom center of the painting (Fig. 5, overleaf). The warm earth tones, alive and glowing, can evoke the burning bush from which God called out to Moses (Exodus, chap. 3) or suggest the roots of a tree.[6] The

Figure 5. *Kol Eesha*. *Venice Psalter* series. 1999. Oil on canvas, 81 × 71 cm. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Plate 14 (p. 115).

Torah is also called a "Tree of Life" (*'etz ḥayim*),[7] an image that, in Kabbalah, represents the ten divine emanations and paths to the *Ayn Sof*. It derives from Prov. 3:18: "she is a tree of life to those who grasp her," sung in the synagogue while the Torah scroll is being returned to the ark—which, with its wooden doors, Hirsch has likened to "a military style garrison."[8] Hirsch's female scroll, by contrast, is clothed in a negligee and might easily be removed by loosening the twine wrapped around the strings of pearls only partially curtaining its boudoir, evoking a chain of being and our matriarchal lineage from Eve. The Hebrew words *kol ishah* can be seen inscribed repeatedly on the outer parchment of the scroll, further amplifying the voice of a woman.

The artist, the scientist and the philosopher are driven by a quest to unfurl, to penetrate the mysteries of the universe. The universe calls to us, and our instinct is to respond. Whether or not religion plays a part in this endeavor or merely reflects wishful thinking, as an atheist might claim, the underlying desire for the universe to conform to a received narrative based on mythological writings (Bible, Qur'an, Vedas, etc.) aligns with Hirsch's manifesto:

"Form evokes feeling. Feeling conjures metaphor. Metaphor demands expression" (*Archaeology*, p. 103).

From generation to generation, Jews have expressed their Jewishness within the contexts in which they have found themselves. When the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans around 2,000 years ago, and our ancestors were expelled from their homeland, they reimagined the indigenous set of traditions and rituals performed by the temple priests by adapting them into a practice focused on texts and rigorous study, encompassing all aspects of life. For a diasporic people scattered around the world, this dialogic religion created an opportunity for everyone—not just the priests—to participate in the cycles of Jewish life, from celebrating annual festivals to leading ceremonies marking rites of passage, such as burials. The requirement has been the same for centuries: to be aware of, and in conversation with, the traditions and literature of the Jewish people.

Because Judaism is open to many interpretations, both religious and secular, it is not necessarily at odds with philosophy or science.[9] Pointing to Hirsch's self-described role as an artist/scientist, Laurence Kirmayer explains:

> The confluence of science, art, and the spiritual quest was perfectly suited to [Hirsch's] own ongoing exploration of the immanence of imagination. Both artist and scientist find patterns in natural phenomena; both explore these through imagery and imagination. (*Archaeology*, p. 86)

Whereas art may be a visual interpretation of an artist's feeling and understanding of the nature of the universe and its laws, science is based on empirical data: The formulae of physics are the ultimate illustration of the physical laws of the universe.

Cosmology, writes physicist Lisa Randall, is how scientists "go about trying to deduce the nature of the universe," as they "knock on heaven's door in an attempt to cross the threshold separating the known from the unknown."[10] Hirsch, conversely, endeavors to penetrate the universe of nature to find harmony in scientific findings, uniting the purposes of the artist, the scientist and, to a larger extent than Randall, the theologian. Randall points out that theologians sometimes ask scientific questions, and scientists are often inspired by the questions theologians ask.[11]

Einstein held that spiritual enlightenment and rational knowledge were one and the same, and that the only path to spiritual enlightenment is that taken in pursuit of rational knowledge and scientific discovery. As a child at summer camp, Hirsch often separated herself from the group to spend time alone outdoors. Her metaphysical spiritualism came about as a cosmic awakening guided by science, inspired by the wonders she experienced while spending extensive time in nature.

In 1981, Hirsch was the first artist to be invited to the Dorland Mountain Colony Artists Retreat in Temecula, California, where she spent many residencies contemplating the surface of Dorland Pond and painting it, photographing the outdoors and becoming one with nature. As she explains in a 2017 article:

> The pond had become my teacher [. . .] It perfectly reflected both heaven and earth. [. . .] The surface of the water was discerned only by floating leaves, much as human behavior reifies the dynamics of relationships. [. . .] [which] led me to believe that there is no randomness in natural pattern, that a grand design exists.[12]

God is likened in the Kabbalah to a *mekor mayim ḥayim*, a natural spring. God is the source or wellspring of life, and the Hebrew alphabet is the source of Torah. It was at Dorland Pond that Hirsch intuited connections between patterns she saw in nature and alphabetic writing systems. She saw in the shapes of the reeds on and surrounding the pond the forms inherent to all alphabets: line, angle, arc, meander and X.

Hirsch looked for these same shapes on land. In 1985, during a residency at the Banff Center for the Arts in Canada, the letters *alef* and *tav*, the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, appeared before her on a mountain trail, in the form of roots (Fig. 6), affirming the ideas that had come to her at Dorland Pond. In *OT*, her painting of what she saw, her rendering of the letters is more upright, anthropomorphic and dynamic, the two forms in conversation with one another (Fig. 7). The Hebrew word *ot*, meaning "sign" or "letter," is formed by the letters *alef* and *tav*. By adding the letter *vav* in between, functioning as a vowel, we obtain the reading *ot*, as suggested by the painting's title. In an alternate spelling, the *vav* can be replaced by a vowel sign, a dot to the upper left of the letter; placed to the upper left of the *alef*, it would again yield the word *ot*.

Figure 6. Roots found on the trail spelling the Hebrew word *ot*, "letter," composed of *aleph* on the right and *taf* on the left. 1985. Photograph, Banff, Canada © Gilah Hirsch. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Fig. 17 (p. 34).

Figure 7. *OT*. 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 25 × 51 cm. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Fig. 18 (p. 34).

However, when I look at Hirsch's photograph and painting, I don't see a dot there. I do see a rectangular shape trailing behind and to the left of the *tav*, but its significance is not clear to me. The letters *alef*, *tav*, can also be read as the second-person singular feminine pronoun *at*, "you," or as the grammatical connector *et*, marking a direct object. Read as *at*, it might connote a direct address, reaffirming Hirsch's creative practice as a "call and response" and her feminist identity;[13] read as *et*, it might lead us to ask: "To what does it connect?" These readings are not mutually exclusive, in line with Hirsch's belief that "seeing multiple connections . . . and the ability to extrapolate, associate, riff, and improvise, is the essence of the creative act" (*Archaeology*, p. 34).

The arc, angle, straight, line, X and meander, the five mimetic forms that Hirsch calls "alphabetic morphology" (*Archaeology*, p. 27), are implicit in the Dorland Pond series, where the reeds take all five shapes. The landscape is written and read, yielding exemplars of Hirsch's cosmography. The title of *Dorland Pond #16 (Also called What Lies Between and As Above so Below)* (1982) indicates that the scientific, spiritual and material worlds are mirrored (Fig. 8). "As above so below" is immediately recognizable as referring to macrocosm and microcosm, with a myriad of esoteric associations, including kabbalistic ones.

"What lies between," by contrast, echoes the creation story. In English translations, Genesis 1:1 is usually rendered: "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth." However, the Hebrew words can be read to mean: "In the beginning *of* God's creating the skies and the earth," suggesting a pre-existing cosmos. The moment of creation is the point at which God takes over to give the cosmos shape, create light and distinguish it from darkness, and divide the waters above from the waters below to create a space for the world in between. It is here that we find the origin of the Jewish imperative of *tikun 'olam*, repairing the world. In the *Aleinu* prayer that concludes every service, we are enjoined "to repair the world of *Shaddai*'s sovereignty," reaffirming our hope that the world will one day be better than it is today, and on that day, according to the prayer, humanity will be united in peace. The messages that Hirsch finds in reading the landscape, intimating that we are simultaneously in nature and *of* nature, are signs, *otot*, from above, directing us to *tikun 'olam*.

Hirsch is among a cohort of Jewish artists involved in the second-wave feminist movement, whose work represents the conjunction of female

Figure 8. *Dorland Pond #16* (also called *What Lies Between* and *As Above So Below*). 1982. Oil on canvas, 94 × 76 cm. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Plate 3 (p. 24).

consciousness, spirituality, engagement with Jewish texts, Kabbalah and the visual power of the Hebrew alphabet. Notable among these are Bruria Finkel, in her *Meditations* and *Aleph* series, Ruth Weisberg, in *The Scroll* (2007), and Helene Ayalon, in her *G-d Project* (1990–2005).[14] I am also reminded of the work of several non-Jewish artists, including Hilma af Klint, whose work reflects the influences of anthroposophy, theosophy, X-rays and Jungian psychology; Cy Twombly, who invites the viewer to decipher his archaeological layering, lettering and markings; the abundant mystical symbolism in the works of Remedios Varo; and Frida Kahlo's self-portraits, with their root imagery, spirituality, cosmography, use of the body as metaphor and shamanistic authenticity. The portal through which these Jewish and non-Jewish women artists searched for hidden meanings in the mystical, and their shared belief in the cosmic correspondence between humans and animals and in the

unity of all things, makes for an interesting alignment between the Jewish and Catholic lenses through which they approached their subject matter.

Remedios Varo (1908–1963) escaped her strict Catholic upbringing via her association with the male surrealists at the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid. Her paintings, like Hirsch's, are infused with religious symbolism that questions the patriarchal nature of God. She, too, turned to esoteric teachings, drawing upon the works of Russian mystics, theosophy, Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and Kabbalah; she was well versed in sacred geometry and the writings of Freud and Jung, and she drew upon scientific resources and cosmology. Varo was in the group of Spanish Surrealist artists who fled World War II to became part of the burgeoning Mexican art community. Though Frida Kahlo, whom Varo had met in Paris, counted Varo among "the overly 'intellectual bitches'"[15] descending upon Mexico, Varo admired Kahlo and immersed herself in the study of Mexican folk tradition, archaeology and shamanism.

Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) was often quoted as saying, "I have suffered two serious accidents in my life, one in which a streetcar ran over me . . . the other accident is [artist] Diego [Rivera]," [16] whom she married in 1929. Kahlo had planned to go to medical school,[17] until her near-fatal injury in the streetcar accident literally derailed her plans. It was when her father[18] supplied her

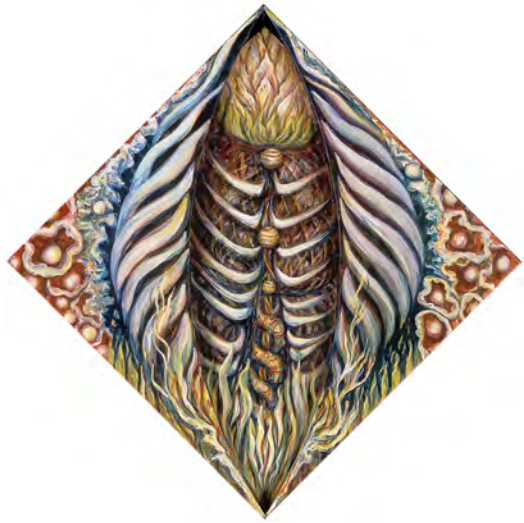

Figure 9. *Refuge. Diamond* series, 2000. Oil on wood, 68.5 × 68.5 cm. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Fig. 55 (p. 116).

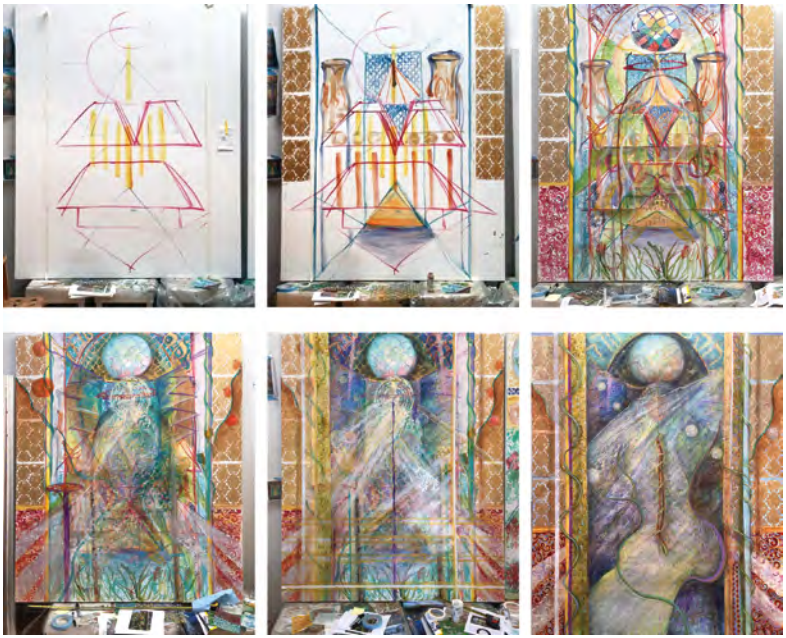

Figure 10. Stages in the painting of *Delicately Tethered in the Sway*. 2021 (April 2020–April 2021). Acrylic on canvas, 183 × 152 cm. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Fig. 33 (p. 69).

with books on art and her mother with an easel, so that she could paint while confined to bed in a body cast, that Kahlo began to paint the self-portraits for which she is known. Depicting her pain and her vision of herself was itself an act of healing. The particulars of the accident, such as the metal rail that broke loose and pierced her body, are depicted in *Wounded Deer* (1946). Her premedical studies of anatomy and physiology are evident in numerous works, such as *The Broken Column* (1944), in which she portrayed her broken spine.

Hirsch, too, suffered near-fatal injuries in a car accident and, like Kahlo, was put in a body cast, an experience that deeply affected her art and art-making. Carolyn Stuart draws the connection between Kahlo's work, notably *The Broken Column*, and Hirsch's. In *Refuge* (*Hassia*) (2000), Hirsch explains, "I painted the opening of my heart so that I could 'wrap' my first given name, Hassia (refuge), around my visualized spinal column" (Fig. 9; *Archaeology*, p. 98). *Delicately Tethered in the Sway* (2021) references the "tethered" spinal cord diagnosed by her doctors (Fig. 10). A green tendril or

twiner wraps around two spindly plant stems, protecting their delicate tissues, with the outstretched torso gracefully balanced in a dynamic pose, as though swaying in tune with and embracing the universe.[19] In *Who Will Live and Who Will Die* (Fig. 4, above), as she observes, "white spheres appeared in my work, organized in a familiar pattern identical to that which I had been taught in the *bodhicitta* visualizations,"[20] referencing her realization of the "correlation between Kabbalistic and Tibetan Bodhicitta practices, [in which] both transmute the psychophysiology of the practitioner through visualization for the intentioned benefit of all sentient beings" (*Archaeology*, p. 47).

Kahlo and Hirsch both turned to visualizing and recording their pain to free themselves from it. Kahlo's wounded deer (modeled after her own pet deer Granizo), despite the bloodied arrows piercing her, remains alert and agile. Trapped between columns of dead trees, Kahlo depicts herself in motion above a fallen branch, the leaves still verdant. Sunlight breaks through the stormy sky in the background, indicative of hope for healing. The trees and branches, and the antlers growing out of Kahlo's hair, form arcs and shapes like those identified by Hirsch with the letter Y. Hirsch means "deer" in German, as does Yelin in Polish. In the context of her love of metaphor, her shamanistic identification with certain animals, and a "magical" encounter with a particular "butterscotch-colored" deer, the deer, by design, became her "totem animal."[21]

In 1980, Hirsch's van broke down in a blizzard on the High Sierras, on her first solo trek into the wilderness. Abandoning the van after a night with no rescuer in sight, she spent a day trudging through the snow and ultimately sank into it. Deer appeared and, as she describes it, "looked askance at the strange presence slowly disappearing before them."[22] The "strange presence" found by the deer in nature was rescued two days later, thanks to a dog, marking its territory on the snowbank, whose barking alerted its master. In words that resonate with Hirsch's own archaeological process, she recounts, "More dead than alive, I was excavated from the snow mound and revived."[23]

This life-threatening yet life-affirming experience, like many that ground *Archaeology of Metaphor*, speaks to the ways in which life's moments become layers of meaning, both personal and universal, and how our interconnectedness permeates all.

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Notes:

1. Hirsch's paternal great-grandfather, Arye Loeb Jellin of Bialystok, Poland (1820–1886), was the author of *Yefeh 'einayim*, a commentary on the Babylo-nian Talmud included in the standard Vilna edition. Her grandfather, Benjamin Yelin, was the Chief Rabbi of Bialystok and later of Montreal; though Ortho-dox, he questioned everything.
2. Her father became an invalid early in her life, her mother suffered from mental illness, and Gilah survived life-threatening accidents.
3. The all-male graduate committee included Richard Diebenkorn, William Brice, Charles Garabedian and Les Biller.
4. In Hinduism, the *yoni* (vagina, vulva or womb) is conceived as the gateway to all creation and the source of the universe.
5. *Archaeology*, Figure 54, p.113. All of the images in *Archaeology of Metaphor* may be viewed on the artist's website, at: www.gilah.com.
6. Or the reeds, like those in Dorland Pond, that figure prominently in Hirsch' work; see Fig. 8. In *Entering Earth* (1997), the reeds surround a body of water shaped like a vaginal opening.
7. The Tree of Life, an image recurring in many ancient mythologies, signified both life and the divine right of kings, the latter conception stemming from the belief that the king was an intermediary or agent acting on behalf of the gods to help sustain the cosmic order. Whether myth or archetype, paradigms of the Tree of Life can be found in the Sacred Geometry of Chinese cosmography, with the Jian Tree, in Buddhism, with the Bodhi Tree, and in Nordic mythol-ogy, with the Yggdrasil tree, to name a few.
8. See Carolyn Stuart, in *Archaeology*, p. 114.
9. When we read the Torah today, we ask ourselves what it meant at the time and what it can mean today. We look for relevance and metaphor. The Genesis

story, for example, can be interpreted as a cosmological attempt to explain the origins of the universe.

10. Lisa Randall, *Knocking on Heaven's Door* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), pp. xiv and 28.
11. As in the uncertainty principle in particle physics, where the scientist cannot simultaneously know both the position and the velocity of an elementary particle, a theologian must deal with the uncertainty of the subjective.
12. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, "Artist as Scientist in a Reflective Universe: A Process of Discovery," *Leonardo*, 47/2 (2014), at: https://g6k5f1.a2cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Artist-Scientist_LEON-MIT_Gilah-Yelin-Hirsch_2014-1.pdf (accessed January 15, 2024), p. 122.
13. Hirsch was among the founders of LACWA, the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists (1972).
14. See Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Torah Study, Feminism and Spiritual Quest in the Work of Five American Jewish Artists," *Nashim*, 14: special issue on Women in the Visual Arts (Fall 2007), pp. 97–130.
15. Francesca Wade, "The Woman Alchemist," *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 6, 2023, at: https://www.nybooks.com/online/2023/10/06/the-woman-alchemist-remedios-varo/ (accessed January 24, 2024).
16. Martha Zamora, *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish* (Seattle: Marquand Books, 1990), p. 37.
17. Like Kahlo, Hirsch had intended to go into the sciences, but, though she was offered a four-year fellowship at Stanford University for a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, she turned it down and chose instead to move to Los Angeles with her former husband, Ed Hirsch, whom she met during a year she spent studying in Israel in 1962–1963.
18. Kahlo's father was a German Jewish photographer. Her Jewish roots are depicted in her 1936 painting *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I*.
19. Frida Kahlo wore and painted plaster body casts for most of her life. I am reminded as well of Louise Bourgeois's plaster *Torso: Self-Portrait* (1963–64), an armored breastplate both fleshy and protective.
20. Hirsch, "Artist as Scientist" (above, note 13), p. 127.
21. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, "Deer Deer," post on *Medium*, at: https://medium.com/calm-pond/deer-deer-bf52063d3b37 (accessed January 22, 2024).
22. Hirsch, "Artist as Scientist" (above, note 13), p. 121.
23. *Ibid*.

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COVER ILLUSTRATION: Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Kol Eesha. Venice Psalter* series. 1999. Oil on canvas, 81 × 71 cm. Gilah Yelin Hirsch, *Archaeology of Metaphor*, Plate 14 (p. 115). *See inside*, p. 164.

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