

Ezra Cappell

The College of Charleston, South Carolina, USA

cappelle@cofc.edu

Steve Marcus' *Yad*: Pointing Towards Peace

Steve Marcus i „jad pokoju”

Abstract

The article explores how artist Steve Marcus reinterprets Jewish ritual and identity through the visual language of contemporary Pop Art. It considers how Marcus combines humor, tradition, and countercultural imagery to reflect on the contradictions of modern Jewish life. The discussion situates his art within the concept of *Bein HaShmashot*—the twilight space of transition and creative uncertainty—suggesting that Marcus's work resists fixed boundaries and underscoring the artist's humorous yet deeply reflective engagement with faith, creativity, and modern Jewish experience.

Keywords

Steve Marcus, Jewish art, Pop Art, ritual objects, *The Jewish Quarter Pipe*, *Peace Yad*, *Bein HaShmashot*

Abstrakt

Artykuł analizuje twórczość Steve'a Marcusa, który w swojej sztuce reinterpretuje żydowskie rytuały i tożsamość, korzystając z języka współczesnego pop-artu. Ukazując sprzeczności współczesnego życia żydowskiego, Marcus łączy humor, tradycję oraz wizualny język kontrkultury. Jego prace, wpisujące się w ideę *Bein HaShmashot* – symbolicznego zmięczenia, czasu przejścia i twórczej niejednoznaczności – unikają sztywnych granic, tworząc pełne humoru, a zarazem refleksyjne spojrzenie na wiarę i kreatywność.

Słowa kluczowe:

Steve Marcus, sztuka żydowska, pop-art, obiekty rytualne, *The Jewish Quarter Pipe*, *Peace Yad*, *Bein HaShmashoth*

Walking through Krakow's Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, a few years ago, I couldn't help but lament the attempts of bar owners and restaurateurs to capitalize on Jewish tourism with clichéd images of a destroyed community. The district was filled with depictions of smiling, bearded rabbis holding aloft gold coins. These disturbing images were designed to entice passersby to enter dimly lit bars in search of overpriced Cosmopolitans and Mojitos stirred with pineapple straws—beverages the earlier denizens of the neighborhood could hardly imagine. As I ruefully shook my head and turned a corner to leave the ancient district, I was confronted by a poster (Figure 1) of a disembodied hand pointing towards the entrance to the

Galicia Jewish Museum nearby. Obeying this directive, I strolled inside and discovered Steve Marcus' art installation, "The Jewish Quarter Pipe," celebrating Jewish tradition and culture in this historic neighborhood.

Marcus' exhibit was not just inspired by skateboarding culture, rather the skateboards themselves, or the "decks;" it became the "canvas" upon which Marcus painted his wry, humorous, and deeply felt commentary on contemporary American culture and its interplay with Jewish texts and traditions. Whereas for an earlier generation, the image of a fiddler dangerously perched on a shetl roof might represent the precariousness of prewar Jewish life in Europe, through his art exhibition, Marcus has wryly updated that hackneyed symbol and replaced it with the slick image of an urban skateboarder speeding through traffic. As I discovered during my



Figure 1. Poster in Kazimierz for "The Jewish Quarter Pipe" art exhibit (photo by Ezra Cappell)

tour of the exhibit, that disembodied hand beckoning tourists towards the Galicia Jewish Museum was, rather appropriately, reproduced on the exhibition poster from a painted deck unironically titled "Shul Sign," (Figure 2) a helpful marker pointing people in the direction of the local synagogue. Much like a house of worship is sanctified by the prayers recited in that hallowed space, Marcus' art installation transformed the Galicia Museum in Krakow into a place of meditation and thoughtful repose on the nature of contemporary Jewish identity (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Do synagogi/Shul Sign, 2023
(wood and paint, 32.7" L x 8.5" H, Steve Marcus, New York City, USA)



Figure 3. Shul Sign pointing towards the exhibition space at the Galicia Museum

This important dialogue between artist and viewer concerning the changing nature of Jewish identity is glimpsed in one “deck” from the Jewish Quarter Pipe installation: “Hechsher Bench” (Figure 4). This one deck stands apart from all the others as it is the only work of art in the exhibit not installed on a wall. It is also separated from the other works in this exhibit because it does not just comment on one specific Biblical story, festival, or commandment (see for example: “Moses and the 10 Commandments Tryptic,” “Purim,” and “Talit 613”); rather, “Hechsher Bench” might be seen as a gathering place for multiple strands of Jewish stories—tales of inter-cultural perseverance, ingenuity, and tradition.

Marcus’ work over many decades has been inspired by the counter-cultural street aesthetic of the early develop-

mental period of New York City street and subway art. Marcus’ “Hechsher Bench” therefore does not just connect to Jewish dietary traditions and foodways, but it also powerfully interacts with an important symbol from the early days of Hip Hop culture: the “Writers’ Bench” at 149th Street and the Grand Concourse in the Bronx—a well-known

gathering spot for graffiti artists, breakdancers, and, of course, skateboarders in the 1970's and 1980's (Figure 5).¹ Marcus' bench, rather



Figure 4. Hechsher Bench, 2023 (wood and paint, 32.7" L x 8.5" H, Steve Marcus, New York City, USA)

than function as a gathering spot for "taggers" wanting to go "All-City," instead becomes a congregational space for dozens of *Hechsherim*—which Marcus has faithfully reproduced on a white skateboard deck that functions as both an intricate work of art as well as a seat for a bench—a place of rest, repose, and contemplation.

A "Hechsher" symbol is literally the "stamp" of kosher certification on a food product, and it denotes the approval of a board of rabbis in a community who ensures that the food product containing their hechsher symbol adheres to halachic standards of kashrut. Marcus has reproduced kosher symbols on "Hechsher Bench" from around the world: the Caribbean, Thailand, Manchester, Portugal, Toronto, and of course, numerous examples from New York City have all been gathered on this one bench to which museumgoers are invited to sit and contemplate all that they have just seen on the walls of this exhibition space (Figure 6). When one considers that after eating a meal, according to Halachah (Jewish religious law), Jewish people are obligated to recite the "Grace After Meals" prayer, a ritual often referred to colloquially as "benching," derived from the Yiddish word "bentshn," to bless. Marcus' wry pun on this word reminds those sitting on his "bench" of the multifaceted linguistic, cultural, and religio-

us heritage contained within even the most mundane of Jewish ritual acts. His work also reminds viewers how blessed or "benched" museumgoers are to be free to roam this art exhibition.

¹ As is documented in Tony Silver's 1983 film *Style Wars*, the "Writers' Bench" was a place where artists could gather together to watch each other's work pass by on the "2" and "5" IRT subway lines. Sitting together on the Writers' Bench with fellow artists watching their spray-can creations pass by on the sides of NYC subway cars became known as "benching." NYC artists would come to the bench to settle disputes, pass judgment on each other's work, make plans to collaborate on projects, and listen and learn from one another. It became known as a hallowed space for early Hip Hop culture in NYC.



Figure 5. Screenshot from Tony Silver's 1983 documentary (*Style Wars*, 00:46:25) of graffiti artists discussing the importance of the "Writers' Bench" located at 149th street and Grand Concourse in the Bronx



Figure 6. Exhibition hall at the Galicia Museum in Krakow—note the Hechsher Bench at the center of the space (photo by Ezra Cappell)

The Jewish Quarter Pipe exhibition opened in Kazimierz during the summer of 2023, a time of tremendous flux, dislocation, and war. Just a few short blocks away from the Galicia Museum stands the Krakow JCC, where each morning (as of this writing we are over three years into the war...) hundreds of displaced Ukrainians gather for meals and food supplies to nurture them through their unexpected dislocation from their homeland. In a time of global upheaval, Marcus' "Hechsher Bench," is a testament to the persistence of Jewish communal activity, sustenance, and care. Despite the many vagaries and reversals of history and no matter how distant or inhospitable a place Jews have found themselves in, each of these symbols gathered on Marcus' "Hechsher Bench," represents a vibrant Jewish community adhering to ancient dietary laws and enacting traditions that connect these disparate communities no matter the geographic separation and challenges. Consequently, instead of walking away from the ancient Jewish Quarter of Krakow saddened by hackneyed images of bearded and long-coated Jews holding aloft coins in Kazimierz, I returned home to the US inspired by Marcus' wry humor and serious "Pop Art" installed on 40 skateboard decks—a reminder of Jewish continuity and resiliency.

In his latest art installations: “Psychedelicatessen,” (Figure 7) “Blotter Art,” and “Free Your Mind,” (Figure 8) Marcus brings his wry sense of Je-

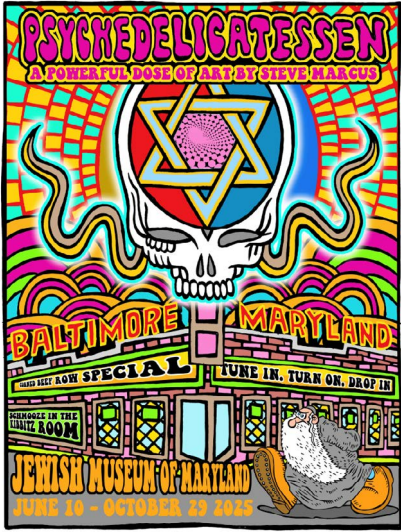


Figure 7. Psychedelicatessen Exhibition Poster, 2024 (pen and ink, Giclée print on Innova Fabriano watercolor paper 310 gsm, 20" W x 26" H, Steve Marcus, New York City, USA)

wish humor to a new set of ritual objects, transforming the hackneyed and time-worn into fresh forms. With each of these installations, Marcus seems to find innovative ways of incorporating Jewish ritual into contemporary lives. Take, for example, “Bong Shabbos Candle Set” (Figure 9)—an art object which brings new meaning to the extra spirits associated with the holy day of rest. Jewish women’s ritual of lighting candles at the beginning of the Sabbath day, marking the separation of the everyday, week from the holy day that begins at sundown Friday evening has been an important *mitzvah* (commandment) for time immemorial. Marcus’ ritual object arrives just in time to welcome the “Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act,”² (Figure 10) in NYC, and coupled with the *Kabbalat Shabbos* prayers and the refrain from *L’Cha Dodi*—“Come my Beloved to greet the bride—the Sabbath presence, let us welcome!” (*The Complete Artscroll Sid-*

dur, p. 316), is an amusing addition to the long arc of Jewish candelabra design. Marcus’ re-imagined ritual candle set empowers Jewish women to “light up” their Sabbath in new, mind-altering ways.

In “Free Your Mind,” and “Blotter Art,” Marcus playfully combines aspects of “Pop Art,” made famous by Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, with repeating exposures punctuated by exclamation-laden captions like “Zap!,” and “Pow!”, evoking 1960’s comix culture. Whereas Warhol, in his Pop-Art, often focused on famous cultural figures like John Lennon and Marilyn Monroe, icons used to highlight the “flattening” or leveling effect of American popular

² The Marihuana Regulation & Taxation Act (MRTA) was signed into law on March 31, 2021 legalizing adult-use cannabis (also known as marijuana, or recreational marijuana) in New York State. The legislation created a new Office of Cannabis Management (OCM) governed by a Cannabis Control Board to comprehensively regulate adult-use, medical, and hemp cannabis. The OCM will issue licenses and develop regulations outlining how and when business can participate in the new industry.” <https://cannabis.ny.gov/marihuana-regulation-and-taxation-act-mrta>.

culture on even the most inspiring individuals, in his series, Marcus replaces these pop-cultural figures with recurring exposures of Rabbinic “Gadols” or Jewish spiritual leaders. Marcus’ art series “Rabbinic Blotter Art” highlights earlier generations of Jewish sages, figures like Maimonides and the Rema (Figure 11) from centuries ago, all the way through modern and contemporary Rabbinic leaders like Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

In “Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk,” (Figure 12) for example, instead of highlighting the ennui and lack of depth of contemporary popular culture—a centering idea in many of Warhol’s and Lichtenstein’s images—Marcus subverts the flattening effect of the multichromatic repeated images by having powerful words “break” through the flattened surface of the image to reveal a three-dimensional perspective of Reb Elimelech’s *kever*—his tombstone and

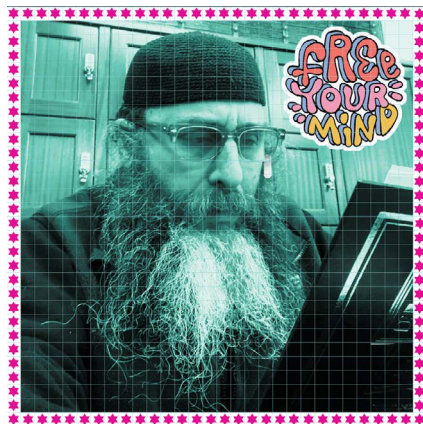


Figure 8. *Artist Portrait Blotter*, 2024 (pen and ink, Giclée print on Innova Fabriano Watercolor paper 310 gsm, 7.5" W x 7.5" H, Steve Marcus, New York City, USA)

burial place. The graves of many of these famous rabbis have become pilgrimage sites for people seeking a connection to the holy person; still other questers seek posthumous blessings which augur business success or relief from sickness and pain.

Marcus’ use of the flattened and repeated use of the face of the rabbis exploded in the center of his artwork to reveal the gravesite, becomes itself another layer of commentary on the scriptural interpretations of these renowned rabbis. Marcus’ paintings form a midrashic reversal of the intent and meaning of Pop Art. Instead of such images highlighting the shallowness of contemporary popular culture, in Marcus’ art, it isn’t the repeated image that gains power, but rather the power of words (representing the rabbinic texts) which break through the flattened space of contemporary monotony to reveal the depth of Jewish experience and meaning. Marcus’ series “Free Your Mind” recalls the ancient words of Jewish sage



Figure 9. *Shabbat Bong Candle Sticks*, 2024 (glass, 6.25" H x 17.25" W x 3" D, Steve Marcus, New York City, USA)

Hillel: תָּמַר הַבָּרֶמ, רֶשֶׁב הַבָּרֶמ. —“The more flesh, the more worms” (*Pirkei Avot*, “The Ethics of the Fathers,” 2:7).



Figure 10. Remah Blotter, 2024 (pen and ink, Giclée print on Innova Fabriano Watercolor paper 310 gsm, 7.5" W x 7.5" H, Steve Marcus, New York City, USA)



Figure 11. Rebbe Elimelech Blotter, 2024 (Pen and ink, Giclée print on Innova Fabriano Watercolor paper 310 gsm, 7.5" W x 7.5" H, Steve Marcus, New York City, USA)

There is a sacred solemnity to ancient Jewish rituals, perhaps best exemplified in the many objects and implements adorning the weekly reading of the Torah, which takes place during the Sabbath morning communal prayer service. To this day Torah scrolls are still created the same way they have been produced for thousands of years: ritual scribes still prepare the parchment and the ink, and they still write each letter by hand—taking nearly a year to complete a Torah scroll. While reading from the scroll, the *ba'al koreh* or “ritual reader” is not supposed to use his finger to keep his place in the scroll as he reads. The rabbis discuss several reasons why the *ba'al koreh* should not touch the Torah scroll, one main issue seems to center around ritual purity, while other concerns are more mundane and are focused on the potential to damage or chip the handwritten letters with the oils of human skin (scrolls with broken or incomplete letters would be invalidated for ritual use). Therefore, the *ba'al koreh* uses a long pointer or “Yad,” (which literally means “Hand”), to follow the words in the scroll. This pointer almost always takes the form of a long stick-like object with a handle on one end and a small silver (or other precious material) hand at the opposite end. This hand usually features an extended index finger designed to assist the *Ba'al Koreh*, the ritual reader, in following the holy text and in the proper recitation and chanting of each word and syllable of the weekly Torah portion.

The Second Commandment of the Decalogue forbids the creation of any “graven image.” This is usually interpreted as any idol and has often led to more abstract or allegorical representations in Jewish art without obviously recognizable human forms. The *parochet* or curtain covering the holy ark will often contain an *Eitz Chaim*, a “Tree of Life” image representing the deep rootedness of Jewish history. Over many centuries this prohibition has seemed to loosen when it comes to Torah pointers. There is nothing allegorical or abstract about most “Yads” which are almost universally represented as actual anatomically correct human hands.

Walter Benjamin once said that “all great works of literature either found a genre or dissolve one” (*Illuminations*, p. 201). I was reminded of this line when I first saw Marcus’ “Peace Yad” (Figure 13) at the center of this important exhibit. A great work of art forces us to reconsider the very nature of its genre. Marcus’ innovative work invites viewers to ask questions: why not replace stretched canvas (used for centuries), with a skateboard deck as a panel for painted art? Why create a Yad with just one extended index finger (also used for centuries), when you can add a second? Therefore, in his exuberant and brilliant excess, Marcus has created a Yad with two fingers—a ritual object he calls “Peace Yad” with both an index and middle finger extended, which together form the well-known peace sign.

Surely Marcus’ “Peace Yad” is a ritual object for our divisive culture. For what could be more instructive, or freeing of old forms and ways of thinking and worshipping, than to literally point to each word of the ancient Torah with a universal symbol of peace, a constant reminder for the *Ba’al Koreh*, and all those assembled who hear the chanted words, that faith and tradition should, instead of dividing us into warring camps and political movements, should ideally help bind us together in a ritual of peace and celebration?

While traditional Judaism is often perceived as cleaving to a strict separation of opposites, such as the “holy” from the “profane,” or *treif* from *kosher*, Marcus’ work often fills the space between these obvious binaries. Immersed in the most serious and deeply contested issues of contemporary Jewish identity, Marcus addresses these conundrums with a wry humor and a light touch. But make no mistake: Marcus’ art, celebrating rabbinic leaders and containing inspiring scriptural quotations might be labeled by some as “strictly kosher,” but it is also deeply irreverent—each object and painting scored by doubt and contradiction. In many ways Marcus is an artist for our turbulent and politically contentious times.

Halacha, the realm of Jewish law and jurisprudence, is particularly concerned with establishing boundaries and setting borders. The concept of *Bein HaShmashot*, “twilight,” is governed by a whole set of specific rules and regulations since it presents numerous Halachic problems. One obvious example of this issue concerns the rabbinic imperative to set the various

times for the daily morning, afternoon, and evening prayer services. As everyone knows, the day doesn't immediately transform into night the instant the sun falls beneath the horizon; rather, the light of day slowly transforms into dusk, before slowly fading into the dark of evening. Therefore, halachically speaking, at what time of day is it no longer permissible to recite the afternoon prayers? Furthermore, how long after sunset must you wait before chanting the evening prayers? We can easily see how a *posek* (a legal scholar who determines the rules of Jewish ritual) might find twilight a complex and confusing time.

When looking at Steve Marcus' art I am often drawn to consider the indeterminacy of *Bein HaShmashot*. Much like twilight, Marcus' art creates an ephemeral place of contemplation that is neither a naïve celebration of Jewish tradition, nor is it simply a strident critique of old-world traditions. Instead, Marcus is focused not on defining a separation and codifying difference; his work remains immersed in the messy, occasionally incoherent, but always fascinating world of contemporary Jewish life. As Marcus' work intuits, according to the Mishnah and numerous rabbinic sources, *Bein HaShmashot* "Twilight" is also a time of great creativity in the universe (*Pirkei Avot*, "The Ethics of the Fathers," 5:6).

Marcus' art bridges the holy and the profane, connects the old world to the new, and forms a midrashic commentary on Pop Art with the *Shulchan Aruch*. Thus, rather than limiting perspectives, Marcus' art reminds his viewers to not even attempt to reconcile and codify the many contradictions of 21st century Jewish life. Instead, Marcus' work, his "Peace Yad" for example, reminds us to literally read the space and feel the light between two outstretched fingers. Rather than point to one letter at a time, Marcus' two fingered Yad gently prods us to embrace the ephemeral space between—the twilight space of *Bein Ha'Shmashot*—inchoate and ever-changing, beautiful and troubling Jewish present.

Wherever his work is installed in Krakow, Baltimore, or New York City, Marcus' art honors the past of Jewish tradition while simultaneously charting a meaningfully hopeful Jewish future. We're all familiar with the famous Yiddish aphorism: "With one ass you cannot dance at two weddings." Yet somehow, with humor and beauty, in the many evocative paintings, comics, sculptures, posters, and ritual objects presented in this book, Marcus has found a way to do just that. Through his provocative art Marcus



Figure 12. Peace Sign Yad, 2024
(sterling silver, brass and stainless
steel, 6.25" H x 17.25" W x 3" D,
Steve Marcus, New York City, USA)

launches his viewers on a quarter pipe path forward, and while airborne for the briefest of moments we gain a stunning view of the complicated state of the American Jewish present.

Earlier in this essay, we discussed the Mishnaic passage in *The Ethics of the Fathers* highlighting Hillel's warning of the perils of material pursuits. Later in the same chapter of the Mishnah, Hillel suggests that: הַבְּרָמָה הַמְּקַחַת הַבְּרָמָה, הַבִּישׁׁי—"The more study, the more wisdom" (*Pirkei Avot*, "The Ethics of the Fathers," 2:8). Although the great sage specifically refers to studying the texts of scholars, I would suggest adding the work of artists to Hillel's formulation. Before we too become food for worms, we could all benefit from spending time *Bein HaShmashot* contemplating Marcus' art, which delivers on the promise of more humor, more light, and more wisdom. Even a sage like Hillel couldn't argue with that.

References

- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- Pirkei Avos: The Ethics of the Fathers*. Edited by Rabbi Moshe Lieber. New York: Mesorah Publications, 1995.
- Silver, Tony. *Style Wars* MVD Entertainment Group, 1983.
- Suggs, Jack M. et al., eds. *The Oxford Study Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- The Complete Artscroll Siddur*. Eds. Rabbi Nosson Sherman and Rabbi Gedalia Zlotowitz. New York: Mesorah Publications, 2022.