Barnett Newman's Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah: A Jewish Take
Author(s): Matthew Baigell
Source: American Art, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring, 1994), pp. 32-43
Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Smithsonian American Art Museum
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3109143
Accessed: 05-02-2019 20:20 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms
Barnett Newman’s Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah

*A Jewish Take*

Matthew Baigell

Barnett Newman’s (1905–1970) famous stripe paintings are based on the esoteric teachings of mystical Judaism known as Kabbalah. We know this from Thomas Hess’s account of Newman’s career published in 1971. Since then, this startling piece of information has barely been mentioned and, equally startling, never been explored further. I want to ask here one question: Just how Jewish was Newman’s use of Jewish sources? My conclusions will suggest that neither the artist nor his biographer used Kabbalah from a normative Jewish point of view, or, to say it differently, neither used Jewish sources in a way acceptable to traditional Jewish thought.

I use the term *normative Judaism* to imply acceptance of Jewish interpretations of one’s relationship with God. Equally important in my analysis are esoteric kabbalistic interpretations of the creation of the universe. Most professing Jews, however, rarely study and know little of the mystical Jewish writings collected under the rubric of Kabbalah, and if they did, they might not accept very much of it. But, at the same time, normative Judaism and kabbalistic writings share certain assumptions about one’s relationship with God.

Until I read Hess’s monograph on Newman in the late 1970s, I, like many American Jews raised within nonorthodox families, knew virtually nothing about Kabbalah. Hess’s assertions about Newman’s source in Kabbalah, as well as my knowledge of other artists who used kabbalistic imagery, made me especially intent to know more about this somewhat obscure subject. I turned to the literature of Martin Buber, Gershon Scholem, and other Jewish historians. My father-in-law, a Hasidic scholar, also helped enrich my understanding of Kabbalah.

Thomas Hess, no doubt with Newman’s full cooperation, based his analysis of the vertical stripe on Gershon Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, particularly Scholem’s discussions of Rabbi Isaac Luria, a sixteenth-century mystic from Safad, a community now part of modern-day Israel. According to Scholem (and Hess), Rabbi Luria explained how the world was created from nothing by postulating the concept of *Tsimtsum*. To create a primordial space for the universe, God contracted into himself. *Tsimtsum* is the contraction, the withdrawal, the shrinkage of God. Next, God sent out a ray of light in which he revealed himself as God the Creator. This act set the “cosmic process in motion.” Subsequently, “the first being which emanated from this light was *Adam Kadmon*, the man... He is the first and

highest form in which the divinity begins to manifest itself after the Tsimtsum.2

Newman’s stripe paintings accord with Scholem’s explanation of creation up to this point. The single stripe (frontispiece) may be understood as representing the first ray of light and the first man. But Scholem goes on to say that from Adam’s eyes, mouth, ears, and nose, the lights of the divinity burst forth in an undifferentiated mass. This image calls to mind the random and diffused focal points of Mark Tobey’s white-writing paintings (fig. 1). Clearly, Newman preferred to visualize the moment immediately before light multiplied, that is, the space into which depth had not yet been introduced. In a virtually perfect match of style and content, Newman suggested a pictorial surface in which all forms seem to be on the same plane.

To achieve this surface, Newman manipulated depth cues based on the size and color intensity of the forms. Normally, we read both large shapes and intense colors as projecting toward us, and small shapes and weak colors as receding into the distance. But in his stripe paintings, such as Dionysius (fig. 2), Newman deemphasized the color intensity of the larger rectangular shapes and, by contrast, emphasized the color intensity of the stripes so that the size cues of the large shapes are balanced by the intense color cues of the stripes. The stripes, then, seem to lie on the same plane as the larger rectangular fields, which, despite their size, are held in check because of their more subdued color. Thus, color intensity cues and size cues for suggesting depth cancel out each other. By making the stripes and the rectangular fields appear to be on the same plane, Newman captured on the pictorial surface the very moment of creation that Rabbi Luria described—the moment of the first ray of the light of creation, before matter, and therefore space, became differentiated. This was a brilliant formal solution on Newman’s part to a spatial conundrum—how to make forms without suggesting depth. But it had nothing to do with Jewish influences on Newman’s thinking.

Hess described Newman’s Onement I, the first stripe painting, as a complex symbol, in the purest sense, of Genesis itself. It is an act of division, a gesture of separation, as God separated light from darkness with a line drawn in the void. The artist, Newman pointed out, must start like God, with chaos, the void. . . . Newman’s first move is an act of division, straight down, creating an image. The image . . . reenacts God’s primal gesture. . . . He [Newman] has taken his image of Genesis, of the creative act, of the artist as God.

In normative Judaism, however, Jews do not try to act like God, except in the sense of leading holy lives, nor do they merge with him. There is instead a clear distinction between humans and God. Hess understood this key distinction between
Jewish and Christian mysticism when he acknowledged that, in Jewish mysticism, there is no union with God. What kind of Jewish artist would violate a basic tenet of Judaism by confusing his own creative powers with those of the deity? A Jew might answer, one possessed by a dybbuk (a demon) or, far more likely, one who read and thought about Jewish writings very selectively. The latter possibility gains

Jews do not try to act like God, except in the sense of leading holy lives, nor do they merge with him.

credibility if we examine Newman’s thinking as it evolved in the years just before he began to make the first stripe paintings in 1948.

To see Newman assuming a God-like role in the creation of art, we need go back no further than 1945. By that time, Newman had already begun to speak of himself and of his fellow artists, including Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Rufino Tamayo, as creating a new American religious art,

a modern mythology concerned with numinous ideas and feelings. ... The present movement in American art transcends nature. It is concerned with metaphorical implications, with divine mysteries. These new painters have brought the artist back to his original primitive role as the maker of gods.

This is a very immodest statement, as Newman is asserting that the artist possesses transcendent power. But Newman also implies a distinction

1 Mark Tobey, Edge of August, 1953. Casein on composition board, 121.9 x 71.1 cm (48 x 28 in.). The Museum of Modern Art, New York
between humans and divine beings, between humans and forces or energies in the universe.

By early 1947, Newman began to identify the artist with those forces, specifically with a vaguely identified sense of nature. In his review of an exhibition of Theodoros Stamos’s paintings (fig. 3), Newman appeared to be drifting toward a secular pantheism. Stamos, according to Newman, “redefines the pastoral experience as one of participation with the inner life of the natural phenomenon.” Of such communion with nature, “one might say that instead of going to the rock, he comes out of it.” Here, Newman seems to be saying that the artist is either on equal terms with nature’s creative forces or at least an intimate part of them.

But by the end of 1947 or the beginning of the next year, Newman began to foreground the artist to the exclusion of all else. Writing about an exhibition of Herbert Ferber’s sculpture (fig. 4), Newman said:

By insisting on the heroic gesture, and on the gesture only, the artist made the heroic style the property of each one of us, transforming, in the process, this style from an art that is public to one that is personal. For each man is, or should be, his own hero.

By becoming his own hero, Newman asserted, each man emphasizes his own centrality in the universe and, by implication, his need for self-realization. In this statement, communion with whatever is out there is replaced by a defiant need for self-aggrandizement and self-assertion. The artist now, according to Newman, creates, or recreates, himself.

In 1948, Newman’s evolving thought achieved its definitive formulation when he wrote “The Sublime Is Now”:

We are asserting man’s natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions. . . . We are creating images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you. . . . Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or “life,” we are making [them] out of ourselves, out of our feelings.

The key phrase here—“making cathedrals . . . out of ourselves”—is an extraordinary assertion of self-willed strength that has no precedent in the history of American art. Earlier artists clearly distinguished their creative acts from the divine, their paintings from God’s handiwork in nature. Thomas Cole, for example, a deeply religious artist associated with the Hudson River school, wrote, “Art is in fact man’s lowly imitation of the creative power of the Almighty.”

Newman’s idea of the artist as creator can be positioned with the individualism, self-worship, and self-creation associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. Newman had great respect for Emerson, whose home he visited in 1936. He may well have been familiar with Emerson’s essay “Circles,” which claims, “No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back.” Newman may also have known these
lines from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: "There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done. . . . A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest."8


In the aftermath of World War II, conventional morality and public values were being called into question. By the late 1940s, Sartre and his philosophy were widely discussed in the periodical literature. As a high school student at the time, I remember clearly the interest that Sartre generated, and I assume that Newman, too, was familiar with Existentialism's exhortations to independent action and personal responsibility, modified by an accountability to society. Quite possibly, Newman was moved by passages such as this: "Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is nothing else than the ensemble of his acts; nothing else than his life."10

It would seem a short step from these words to "making cathedrals . . . out of ourselves," but to get from Sartre's secularism to the Jewish elements in Newman's stripe paintings, we must pass through the books of Martin Buber and Gershon Scholem.

As with Sartre's book, I cannot confirm that Newman read Buber's account of the early history of the pious and ultrareligious Hasidim, whose mysticism has strong kabbalistic roots, but by recalling the response to Buber by Newman's contemporary and
acquaintance, the critic Harold Rosenberg, we might find some explanation for Newman’s desire to make cathedrals out of the self. Reviewing *Tales of the Hasidism* for *Commentary*, Rosenberg found—quite mistakenly I believe—confirmation for the seeking of self-fulfillment. For Rosenberg, Hasidism turned out to be a quite modern religious movement that “was primarily a training of individuals in the direction of an infinitely extended sublimated discovery and recreation of the self.” According to Rosenberg, one of the principal tenets of Hasidism was to claim one’s own identity. As an example, he cited a passage from Buber about a certain Rabbi Zusya. When near death, Rabbi Zusya said, “In the world to come they will not ask me ‘why were you not Moses?’ They will ask ‘why were you not Zusya?’” For Rosenberg, the “Hasid reached toward his highest possibility . . . through the world itself, through his way of appropriating concrete things and relations into his subjective experiences.”

The modern secular reader, following Rosenberg, might imagine that making cathedrals out of the self has roots in Hasidism. But it does not. My own studies indicate that Rosenberg misunderstood the movement and totally misread Buber’s account of Hasidism, missing entirely Buber’s insistence both on finding personal fulfillment within religious channels and on discovering the right paths to God. In addition, Rosenberg ignored the fulfillment that members of the various Hasidic groups find in community religious worship, their service to God, and, as an ideal, their efforts to be God-like in their behavior. Self-fulfillment comes through service to God, not to the self.

Rosenberg also singled out the one anecdote in Buber’s entire book—the deathbed statement by Rabbi Zusya—that, removed from context, lent itself to a secular, existential interpretation. A more typical anecdote from *Tales of the Hasidism* concerns Rabbi Dov Baer, an early major figure of the movement. Rabbi Dov Baer is reported to have said:

*I shall teach you the best way to say Torah [the first five books of the Bible]. You must cease to be aware of yourselves. You must be nothing but an ear which hears what the universe of the word is constantly saying within you. The moment you start hearing what you yourself are saying, you must stop.*

Rosenberg also gave scant regard to Buber’s exhortations in his introduction concerning one’s relationship to God, which Buber claimed was above and beyond all individual experience. In effect, Rosenberg interpreted Buber’s concern for personal fulfillment at the expense of religion.

Almost twenty years later, Rosenberg explored the same issues in an article for *Commentary* entitled “Is There a Jewish
Art?" He held that the most serious theme in Jewish life was the problem of identity, but he noted that this problem was as much a modern dilemma as it was a Jewish one. Rosenberg believed that Jewish American artists asserted "their individual relation to art in an independent and personal way." They and other American artists who retained their ethnic identities were creating, Rosenberg proposed, "a genuine American art by creating as individuals." This enterprise amounted to an "aesthetics of self." Rosenberg then came full circle in his argument by saying that this type of independent creativity amounted to "a profound Jewish expression." For Rosenberg, the Jew was a modern everyman searching for identity in the modern world, an identity based on the self as the source of its own creation—through, as Newman would have it, making cathedrals out of the self.

As a Jew, Rosenberg undoubtedly had some knowledge of Jewish culture. But in sorting out his identity he recognized himself also as an acculturated, though not fully assimilated, American and as a citizen of the world. To reinvent himself as a citizen of the larger American and world communities, he had to exalt his independent self at the expense of his parochial Jewish cultural and religious identity. Rosenberg and Newman belonged to the generation of my parents, a generation that knew it was Jewish but at the same time wanted, desperately sometimes, to transcend its origins and gain access to those larger communities. I should also add that Buber was immensely popular among Jews of that generation because he wrote within a Jewish milieu but demanded minimal responses and responsibilities from his largely secular Jewish readers. Traditional Jews, on the other hand, do not respond favorably to Buber. Just as Rosenberg misread Buber in 1947, Newman misread Scholem the following year. For Newman, the misreading was in assuming a God-like pose of creativity, a pose foreign to normative Judaism. In addition, in his stripe paintings Newman disregarded one of the most important parts of Rabbi Luria's cosmogony—the concept of Tikkun, which completes the process of creation, of Tsimtsum, by restoring the harmony that existed before the creation of the universe. According to Rabbi Luria, in the creation just after the great contraction, some divine sparks were lost. Mankind was responsible for their restitution. That is, every Jew shared responsibility to prepare the way for the final restoration of all the scattered and exiled lights and sparks. The Jew who is in close contact with the divine life through the Torah, the fulfillment of the commandments, and through prayer, has it in his power to accelerate or to hinder this process. . . . The individual's prayers, as well as those of the community, but particularly the latter, are under certain conditions the vehicle of the soul's mystical ascent to God.

This responsibility of the Jew was not a part of Newman's vision. Newman, a secular person, happened upon a concept of creation in a book by Gershon Scholem that allowed him to visualize the moment
of creation. The artist’s connection to Kabbalah was nothing more and nothing less.

Newman was consistent in his misreading of Rabbi Isaac Luria. In 1963, while explaining the kind of ritual that might take place in a synagogue he had happened upon a concept of creation in a book by Scholem that allowed him to visualize the moment of creation. The artist’s connection to Kabbalah was nothing more and nothing less.

Designed, Newman echoed Rosenberg’s misreading of Buber by asserting that personal fulfillment equaled religious exaltation. But Newman’s description of the latter bears little resemblance to the true nature of kabbalistic ecstasy:

"[In the synagogue] each man sits, private and secluded in the dugouts [along the side walls] waiting to be called, not to ascend a stage, but to go up on the mound, where, under the tension of that “Tzim-Tzum” [sic] that created light and the world, he can experience a total sense of his own personality before the Torah and His name."

This is the existentialist in Newman talking. But then, wanting to connect to that sense of exalted spiritual ascendance one can find in Kabbalah, Newman said: “My purpose is to create a place, not an environment, to deny contemplation of the objects of ritual for the sake of that ultimate courtesy where each person, man or woman, can experience the vision and feel exaltation of ‘His trailing robes filling the Temple.’”

In Judaism, one cannot experience that vision by exalting oneself. Only through God can one begin to approach the fulfillment of the self. Newman’s thoughts and ultimate sources here seem to lie not in normative Judaism or even in Buber’s religious existentialism but in nineteenth-century Romanticism, in Emerson and Whitman and in Samuel Tayler Coleridge and William Wordsworth, who portray the artist as a God-like creator.

In addition to the discussions of Rabbi Luria, Hess found a possible source for Newman’s stripe paintings in Scholem’s discussion of the hymn “Zoharariel, Adonoi, God of Israel,” derived from the Greater Hekaloth (sixth century C.E.), a compilation of texts that includes apocalyptic writings. Hess cites these two lines as the likely genesis of Newman’s stripe:

"With a gleam of His ray he encompasses the sky
And his splendor radiates from the heights."

But the hymn, “Zoharariel” describes God on his throne surrounded by attendants, not God in the act of creation. And as all of the hymns in the Greater Hekaloth celebrate God, not man, they are an unlikely source for Newman’s stripes.

Hess found justification of his claim for Kabbalah as the source of Newman’s stripes in another book by Scholem—On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism, published in 1965, long after the first stripes were painted in 1948. The passage that Hess found relevant comes from Scholem’s discussion of the Book of Yetzirah, or Book of Creation (third through sixth centuries C.E.), concerning Abraham’s presumed ability to imitate God’s powers to create human forms. But Scholem’s discussion is about the
creation of a golem, the humanoid figure made from clay that has a long history in Jewish esoteric literature and folklore. The golem, always a flawed creature, can hardly stand as a model for Rabbi Luria's version of the creation of the world and of the Adamic figure. And Newman would hardly have wanted to exert God-like powers to make cathedrals out of the self that would be imperfect.

Yet this book by Scholem includes a passage that might help explain Newman's frame of mind in 1948, if not the image of the stripe. Considering medieval interpretations of the legend of the golem, Scholem wrote:

_The members of the strong esoteric movements that sprang up among Jews in the age of the crusades were eager to perpetuate, if only in rites of initiation which gave the adept a mystical experience of the creative power inherent in pious men, the achievement attributed to Abraham... and other pious men of old in apocryphal legends._

I take this passage to mean that in times of stress—and here stress includes the pogroms of the Crusaders—people imagine mythical or mystical powers that can overcome the oppressor. In the late 1940s, as Newman began his stripe paintings, Jews throughout the world remained profoundly affected by the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel. No Jew could have remained unmoved or neutral to either event. Even today, as Donald Kuspit has suggested, “every Jew has a Holocaust within him; in his innermost heart he has gone up in smoke or been starved to death, after being castrated by society.”

Newman's stripes, then, might be understood as an act of resistance as well as a celebration of renewal and rebirth, an affirmation of life during a time of Jewish trauma and national revival. Nourished by his cultural rather than his religious identification as a Jew, Newman created the stripes as one person's single and solitary gesture, a raw assertion of the self against a society and a god that did not merit his full respect. His desire to make “cathedrals... out of ourselves” is a reproach as well as a universalizing gesture that reaches beyond his Jewish identity to all humanity. It is an affirmation of individual strength and spirit in a world he wanted metaphorically to recreate.
Notes


3. Hess, pp. 56, 71; see also pp. 52–61, 83.


12. Ibid., p. 240, quoting Buber, pp. 107, 2, 4.


