



This Jewish American Life

Cultivating Community & *Chesed*
in Western Diaspora

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After spending a summer immersed in Jewish culture in the heart of Jerusalem, I returned home with a newfound recognition that Judaism is an American counterculture.

I longed to, at home, feel like Jewish objects and behaviors are loved. I wanted to make things that would bring the happiest parts of Judaism into my home.

I began to study Jewish behaviors, texts, and culture to identify some of the family and lifestyle values that are most important to me. I spoke with rabbis, Jewish and non-Jewish peers, my family, instructors, and Jewish community members in the area to develop concepts that could lead to a more attentive and present home life. I aimed to create objects that promote lovingkindness – or, in Kabbalism, *chesed* – and that encourage the cultivation of Jewish community.

A piece of literature that guided me through defining the realm of my thesis work, how I think about objects in relation to Judaism, and how I have been grappling with the subject of Jewish material culture is Vanessa L. Ochs's "What Makes a Jewish Home Jewish?" Ochs discusses in this essay the interdependent relationship between culture and objects. She suggests but does not attempt to definitively claim that objects potentially shape culture and religion more than the culture or religion defines its affiliated objects. She says that, "material objects – things made by people – are vessels that create, express, embody, and reflect sacredness," (Ochs 1) describing the dependency of objects on their origin culture; though the majority of this essay describes the opposite relationship, that is the dependency of Judaism on its objects.

Ochs theorizes that Jewish objects into three categories: Articulate Objects, Jewish-Signifying Objects, and Ordinary Objects Transformed. The first describes Jewish items that are clearly assigned Jewish roles, whether they be explicitly ritual-related or just indicative of Judaism. She says these Articulate Jewish Objects are "signs, props, and catalysts" (9) – identifying, aiding, and promoting Judaism. This includes items like mezzuzot, chanukkiyahs, seder plates... she gives the example of a can of Israeli Coca-Cola with Hebrew letters (10) as a Jewish signifier. The second category,

Jewish-Signifying Objects, describes objects that are not intentionally and specifically Jewish objects in themselves, but facilitate Jewish core values and lifestyle. She gives examples like books – Jewish books, sure, but just the presence of or plethora of books – and food – again, including Jewish traditional foods but also including the general abundance of food – and "shrine-like displays" (11) of family photos in frames and on refrigerators. The third category, Ordinary Objects Transformed, describes everything else: things that are very much not intended to be Jewish but accumulate Jewish value and significance through use and association. This includes things around the house like cleaning supplies, that are objects extremely unrelated to Judaism until they are used to clean before Shabbat or completely scour the house clean of hametz before Passover. Because these not-Jewish objects facilitate holiness, they can be recognized as holy vessels.

Ochs's overarching concept in this essay is that objects bring values from an otherwise abstract realm into a tangible and physical reality. I believe that I can adopt this theory to create Jewish objects – Articulate, Jewish-Signifying, and Ordinary – to the underlying Jewish values that are less often spoken about or called attention to but are nonetheless crucial nuances that make up Jewish family life.

Proposal

With my senior degree project, I set out to answer the question, “How can I implement Jewish values into domestic objects to contribute to a happy and healthy home?” This exploration will take place in the realm of Artistic Expression, as I incorporate my inherently Jewish design voice with formal aspects of my religion. I am using parts of my culture and parts of my education to contribute to the world of Jewish Art and Design. Through this process, I will learn more deeply about my religion and its practices and create an open conversation with Jews and other Jewish makers.

Adversity to Judaism in the United States and around the world is a visible issue. Throughout history, it has been a religious and communal value to stand up to adversity instead of cowering and backing down in the face of threats. In homage to our ancestral steadfastness, I begin pursuing my question of how to celebrate Jewish customs by way of sculptural, commercial, and performative works; and it is especially important to me that I do this here at RISD. Many factors contribute to American Jews’ hesitance to speak about their Judaism. I hope by bringing Judaism into a broader conversation here, I will encourage others to be able to do so as well.

I am motivated to pursue this path for the remainder of the year because I long to create a more attentive and present home life: to mimic the Shabbat by centering our focuses and values through space, senses, and materiality.

I am creating a network of interested Jewish people in the area and hope to get more international Jewish designers involved as well. I have been meeting with Jews of different areas of work and interests – about half working in the art/design world – talking about Jewish behaviors; individuals’ favorite pieces from their grandparents’ homes; useful texts and further references; and collaboratively generating excitement toward the subject matter of Jewish life and makership.

Each person I have met with has connected me to two to three additional people, which demands acknowledgment toward the Jewish 2 Degrees of Separation; my role within the Jewish network; and how this work interacts with the Jewish Network. I hope to contribute to American Judaism, and I plan to continue building upon this network of Jewish artists and designers. The relationships I build, and the things I learn from them, are more important to me than the resulting pieces.

I must present my work in ways that create dialogue about Judaism in this non-Jewish space. I must decide what kind of conversation I want to have with

RISD instructors and peers and want to avoid secularizing my work for the sake of understanding. Creating cultural work in a space that doesn’t belong to the culture requires acknowledgment of the disconnect. I anticipate that accepting RISD as my audience, as I make work meant for Jews and a Jewish audience, will be my biggest challenge. Though I speculate that compromise of conceptual matters will be inevitable, I aim to remain on the side of honesty and to take on the challenge of communication. It is my responsibility only to communicate my ideas to the non-Jews with whom I share this space, and not to consider them as my audience during ideation. Drawing and maintaining this line is an important condition throughout this project.

I have always viewed Judaica as stagnant Jewish decoration, existing objectively as ritual items. Some modern Jewish designers attempt to redesign rituals rather than critique or contribute to the culture that surrounds Jewish life. This kind of work is not what I aspire to put forth with my degree project. Some ideas I have begun thinking about for this project involve family practices and generational relationships in my family. I hope to collaborate with my mother and grandmother on a crocheted piece, to have three generations of women work together on an afghan. I aim to acknowledge and welcome the evolution of traditions, instead of denying the validity of that evolution

or feeling “not Jewish enough” when those evolutions do surface in the ways we work with our religion. I hope to work with Jewish interactions and the ways we celebrate and make Judaism our own. I will talk over ideas with a rabbi, my Jewish peers, family, and my RISD peers. I will test objects by analyzing the conversations they stir up and by seeing how the objects exist in their intended homes.

I will know throughout my project that I am on the right path by my conversations within the Jewish network and by reactions from my peers. While making Jewish objects, I hope to maintain my own design voice and produce objects that I would like to live with regardless of their significances. Work made by me is inherently Jewish work, and so it is unnecessary that I succumb my design voice to the vernacular of traditional Jewish art.



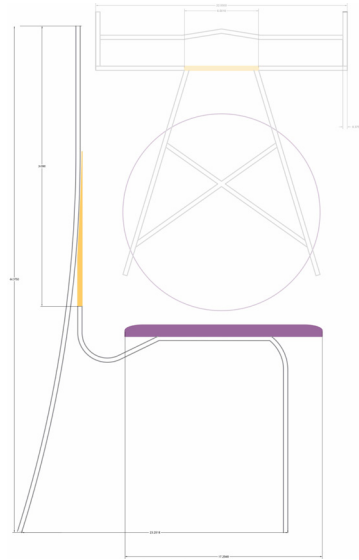
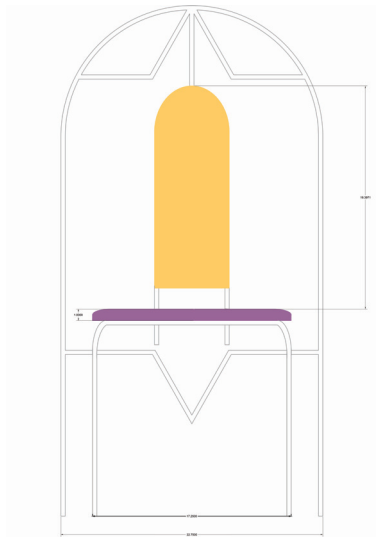
Chair for a Guest

Chairs have a few underappreciated roles in Jewish lives. They're what we use to gather on high holidays, and as a community during services. They're what little ones need to stand on to be able to light Shabbat candles with their mother, and to watch the stovetop to learn what goes into a great chicken soup. On Passover we add a pillow to the backs of our chairs to recline and relax. Chairs are used to celebrate, by lifting a bride and groom and a bat/bar mitzvah while dancing the Horah; and appreciation of "good chairs" is obvious through the recognition of their uncomfortable opposites, in the Jewish custom to sit on egg crates or something low to the ground in times of mourning. Some of us keep a chair for Elijah during the Seder and during a brit milah, the Jewish ritual circumcision that occurs eight days after a boy's birth. This tradition can be interpreted as an open invitation to anyone who might need a seat at a meal. This is the concept I chose to work with.

My favorite Jewish behavior involving chairs is offering a guest a seat at a meal. Over the course of this year, I have heard many stories from non-Jews about their experiences at friends' Shabbat dinners or Passover Seders or at their campus's Hillel. It is a subtle practice but being outgoing and welcoming of everyone into Jewish spaces, holidays, and meals is a beautiful part of the Jewish community.

At the end of my stay in Jerusalem this past summer, my Modern-Orthodox boss invited me to his home for Shabbat lunch with his family. He and his daughters are all Israeli but his wife is American, from upstate New York. Their Shabbat looked a lot different from mine: I am not observant, and they did not use electricity on Shabbat; and my family mostly stopped celebrating Shabbat when I was little, except for every once in a while, when we get challah and wine on Friday nights. At home, too, when I'm invited to my friends' houses to have Shabbat dinner with their families I am graced with pleasant discomfort and the differences between how they do things and how I'm used to doing things. In America especially, amongst less observant Jews, every Jew does their thing differently. In a Jews of Mixed Identity meeting at Hillel, someone brought up the point that having one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent was a good thing for her developing Jewish identity because her parents didn't have to argue over what was the right way to do the Jewish stuff. I'm under the hypothesis that no two diasporic, non- or less-observant Jews





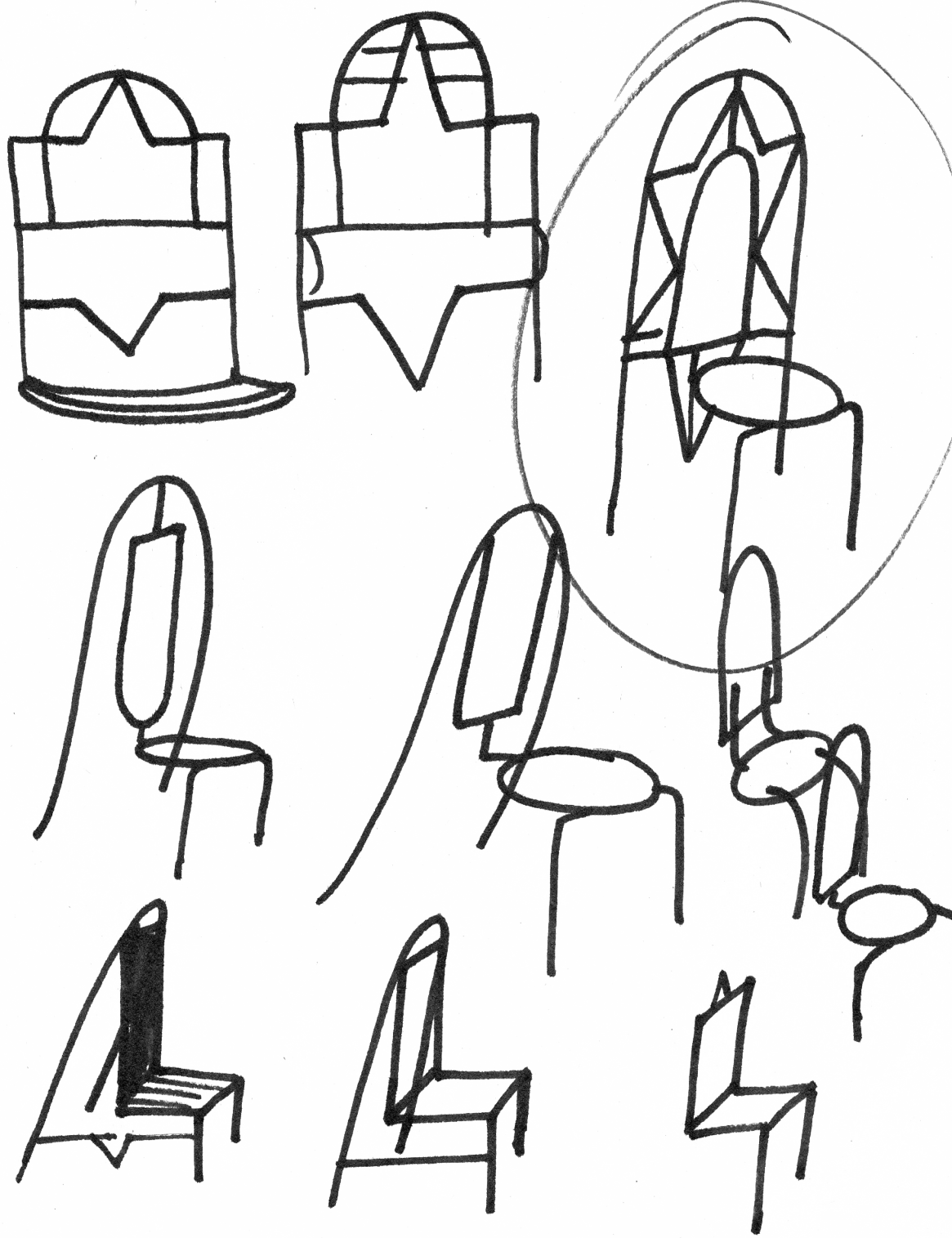
do the “Jewish thing” exactly the same. Because Judaism is ever evolving and ever open to being changed, it is fun and beautiful and interesting to invite each other into our differences.

Chair for a Guest is literally a chair meant to sit amongst the normal dining chairs at a dining table. It is throne-like and ornamental and calls respectful attention to a guest when there is one present, and place-holds for a guest when there isn't one. It represents a space at the table and a space in our minds that is kept open to the idea of bringing someone in, whether they are in need of a meal or they are a friend of the family.

A lesson in Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe's book *Alei Shur* on Mussar, practices to improve one's moral conduct, speaks most highly of treating a guest well. He uses

the biblical anecdote of Abraham asking God to wait for him as he tended to his guests. God had sent angels to Abraham in disguise of Arabs, to see how Abraham would treat them; and He approved of Abraham's choice to first welcome and serve his guests before serving Him. And so R' Shlomo concludes, “Welcoming guests supersedes receiving the face of the Shechinah [the Divine Spirit], and the Holy Blessed One agreed with him about this” (*Va'ad Shishi/Sixth Lesson; Alei Shur* by Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, translation by Rabbi Alex Weissman). The claim that welcoming guests is a priority that ranks even higher than the holiest of expectations is shocking to me and I would not attempt to make it; though I don't reject such extreme validation of my favorite Jewish value.





Tisch



Imagine a large group of religious Jewish men sitting around a table before a community celebration. They raise their wine cups and joyously shout, “*L’chaim!*” – “To Life!” – and their cups return back down, clumsily hitting the surface of the table: the *tisch*, or “table” in German and Yiddish. I have nothing to do with this sect of Judaism and will certainly never have anything to do with such a table of highly religious men. However, this custom reminds me of something I have been involved in, and in many different places. From sleep-away camp to USY (United Synagogue Youth) to the Brown/RISD Hillel, the prayers for after a meal – called *Birkat HaMazon* – are informally, and very unofficially, accompanied by a routine of hand motions, involving banging on the table. Regardless of whether or not *Birkat HaMazon* is said after family meals at home, what tales would the holiday

Kids’ Table tell you if it could speak of the twenty-plus years of being in the family? To have a visual record of every time you celebrated as a family would be beautiful.

Tisch is a functional table with a wax block tabletop. The top is made using paraffin wax – a visual and tactile reference to Shabbat candles – with a high melting point to ensure hardness and security for full functionality and decelerated wear. Its use is straightforward, and its design fits inconspicuously in any interior. Use during children’s play dates, holidays, house parties, and for your everyday tasks to bring your table “to life.”

Ash wood
Paraffin wax
30”W x 30”D x 27”H



Tisch concept, first sketch; envisioned with unfinished copper top

Most discussion I had surrounding this project regarded material choice for the table top. The concern arose that the values of recording use or showing utility of an object, and the unclean appearance that it entails, would not pass with every culture or family. Conversations with peers helped clarify how my work and I were fitting in on a larger scheme of things.

This project was one of realization and development in that I decided to allow this

collective body of work to become eclectic, as Jewish homes often aesthetically are. Tisch works with the visual vernacular of today's Western and Scandinavian design.

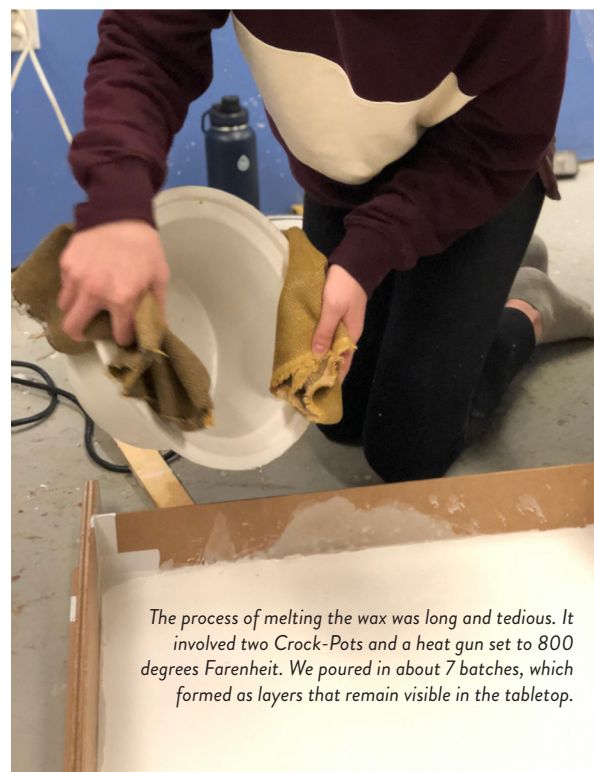
The concepts of nostalgia and celebration that lie beneath the creation of Tisch are valued in many cultures. During the designing of this table, I was stubborn about using wax because I wanted the reference of paraffin to Shabbat candles, and I thought it would create a nice visual and a fun tactile experience. Tisch is targeted to a Jewish audience, specifically Jewish young adults with young children. It is an "inarticulately" Jewish object in that it is just a table, and it will become Jewish by nature of the associations that are meant to grow with it and through its use in a Jewish home; through facilitating experiences with Jewish food, studies, family, and celebration.

I am interested in bringing the concept into a broader cultural context and applying the optimism of deterioration to other kinds of usable pieces. Why not floorboards that quickly wear, or rugs that completely transform as they become used? If we mark, celebrate, value our own lives, why not celebrate the aging of the things that contribute to our surroundings? And why not market these entirely functional objects toward a general design market?

I am excited for Tisch to begin its life and receive authentic use.



Table parts, neatly organized and ready for glue-up



The process of melting the wax was long and tedious. It involved two Crock-Pots and a heat gun set to 800 degrees Fahrenheit. We poured in about 7 batches, which formed as layers that remain visible in the tabletop.





Afghan

I asked her to collaborate with me on a project that entails my learning this pattern from her and

crocheting lots of yarmulkes together to form a blanket.

Soon after I decided that I wanted to collaborate with her on a crocheting project, Tickah was injured and unable to walk for quite a bit of time. I was glad to have already spoken to her about this project because it gave me an excuse to hang out with her almost every day that I was home during this time. Tickah has since recovered tremendously and I cannot wait to bring my first afghan home to her.

I look at my afghan entirely as a project of love for my grandmother. I am also, of course, paying homage to a cultural craft and a family tradition, and I hope that if I have Jewish grandchildren one day that I will be able to crochet millions of yarmulkes for their bar/bat mitzvah services. But mostly this was out of respect, admiration, and love for my grandmother and I enjoyed learning and getting to hang out with her for this project.

I call this blanket *Afghan* after all of the afghans made by my maternal grandmother – her name to me is Tickah, but more formally Marlene Miller – that I grew up around. As far as I know she has always crocheted, and I took an interest to learning the craft from her when I was about 12 years old. I kept attempting to crochet scarves and blankets like she did but I lacked the dedication to get further than the scale of a headband. Ten years later, I have practiced practicing things a bit more than I had when I was little and wanted to re-learn the crocheting craft from her.

For each of my brothers' and my bar/bat mitzvahs, Tickah crocheted yarmulkes – *kippot*, in Hebrew – to give to the guests during the services. This meant about 200 yarmulkes for each of our services, and she would begin to make them a year or two in advance. I love the yarmulkes that she made for my bat mitzvah and have always admired how she executes the same pattern seemingly without a flaw.



Separation Light





Separation Light is named from *Havdalah*, which translates to “separation” and is the name for the boundary between Shabbat on Saturday night and the incoming week. To permanently install both pieces of this set is to have prepared both forms of light that are used throughout seven days, and an illustration of the relationship between the week and the day of rest. Religiously on Shabbat, electricity is not allowed to be used; and at sundown on Friday nights, to welcome in the sabbath, traditionally women will light candles and welcome in Shabbat as if she were a bride.

The *Havdalah* service, that marks the end of Shabbat and the entrance of the week ahead, utilizes the senses to bring one into the present and into cognizance. While prayers are chanted, ideally standing outside under the stars, spices are passed around to be smelled. A braided, multi-wicked candle is lit, and everyone looks at their hands and is meant to see the reflection of the candlelight on their fingernails. Such specific callings

of attention to sensory experiences are the driving inspiration for *Separation Light*.

The reflections caused by the two parts onto each other are meant to be noticed and contemplated, similar to the intentions of contemplation in observing one’s fingernails in the presence of candlelight. *Separation Light* responds to Shabbat by calling for a dialogue between light from flame and light from electricity; which translates to a dialogue between Shabbat and the rest of the week. More broadly, this light responds to the rush of everyday life, especially in regards to the work culture in America. Working in Jerusalem in a culture that works to live and doesn’t live to work, and seeing how that correlates to a more grounded, experiential way of life, inspired me to design for attentiveness, mental clarity, and presence in the home. If we are not to take sabbath days off for rest, we should grant ourselves at least the benefit of sensory observations as small meditative experiences. Observance vs. observation.

I structured my senior year to kill two birds with one stone: to do work that I've wanted to do on myself while doing work to fulfill my degree. I formed my degree project around Judaism, which I have really wanted to study for reasons of self-discovery, to build myself a stronger place in the Jewish community; to reconcile with America where Jewish is not the norm, and to recreate the spiritual feeling of Jerusalem in my home. I began this project with the foremost goal of creating a Jewish network of artists and designers and Jews who are interested in the topic, riffing off the theory of Jewish 2 Degrees of Separation that I mentioned earlier. If all of the Jews in the world can theoretically be connected by one or two degrees of people, how can I create a similar network, and how much more closely linked would a network of Jewish designers and makers be? Does that community already exist? There are Jewish art communities, such as the Jewish Art Salon, but the ones I have found are exclusive to members, and people who are not members but "Friends of the Jewish Art Salon" are not allowed to do things like post or contribute to their Facebook group. I wanted to make a network similar to this but with no capitalist overtones, not a business, not a curatorial space, just a theoretical communal space for Jewish artists/designers/craftsmen to be able to connect with each other to discuss and depend on each other and unite those from around the world.

As I had to execute three physical projects this last semester and grew to have less time and energy, I gave up a lot of my work on becoming a connection point for Jewish artists/designers/thinkers. That isn't to say that I haven't spoken with a bunch of talented and insightful Jewish people (artists or otherwise) this year and semester specifically, it is just to say that I hope to be able to continue on this aspect of the project post-graduation. I am reflecting on this year with excitement and acknowledgment that my work in this realm has hardly even begun to scratch the surface.

The second part of my degree project was, of course, to build three objects that would help bring nuanced Jewish values that underlie some of the most spiritual parts of Judaism into the home.

My concern throughout these projects was that as I designed three projects that essentially went through my own list of values that I wanted to work with, these objects would be conceptually and aesthetically very disjointed. Now that I've completed all of my pieces and have seen them arranged together as a collective body of work, that concern is mostly appeased. After struggling with the question of Jewish aesthetics – whether to, or to what extent should I reference existing Jewish visuals to communicate Judaism in these objects, and whether or not it is important that I visually express Judaism in these objects – I can confidently say that the disjointedness in my objects' visuals is accurately reflective of the eclecticism of most Jewish American homes. I think the eclectic nature of my home and the homes of my family and friends had been the source of my anxiety surrounding "What will this work look like?" And on the other hand, how does one successfully create an eclectic group of three things? I'm satisfied with how my pieces visually came together. By not forcing existing styles into places that they didn't want to be, everything remained in this small and comfortable realm of Jewish-American, which is similar to where I see myself on the grand scheme of things.

The concern that my three objects would appear disjointed on the grounds of conceptual reasoning was appeased when I realized the aspect of temporality runs throughout my project. My table works with concepts of nostalgia and marking the passing of time, working with the time within a life, and specifically within the growing-up years of children. It is meant to record the twenty or so years that children spend at home with their parents and the celebrations and life that happens during that period. My chair's function is ongoing, with the intentions of becoming an heirloom in my family; thinking about time in terms of generations. Separation Light breaks down time into seven days and speaks of the relationship between the days within a week. Finally, Afghan uses the concept of three generations' time, as I pay homage to my grandmother and learn a craft to pass on to the generation that will come two after my own.

My final point of reflection on my degree project experience is on my change in perception of my audience at RISD and of everyone not directly part of the Jewish community. This is an exchange with a Reconstructionist rabbi at the Brown/RISD Hillel:

Kira Dekhayser <kdekshays@risd.edu>

Sat, May 11, 2:38 AM (11 days ago)



to alexander_weissman ▾

Hello Rabbi Alex!

A Mussar-based, emotional, middle-of-the-night thought, as I am editing some writings I did from the beginning of the year—

All of my original writings and proposals for my degree project included anxieties about having to figure out how to talk about Judaism in a secular space and to people who aren't Jewish, mainly because it's a thing I feel Jews don't do (talk about Judaism with non-Jews,) and so I had been really worried about it. I wrote about how I was planning to push through that initial discomfort because if you're to do cultural work you can't conform to the secular space and dumb down/ dilute your content for the sake of everyone else's comfort and understanding... but TLDR I had thought of the RISD space as a lot of "outsiders" that entire time until our last meeting, and now as I'm figuring out my reflective writings on my project I'm able to think of everyone less as "outsiders" and more of "guests." It lets me feel less defensive about my work and more genuinely wanting to explain and share and let people in. So I just wanted to let you know, and I'm glad we got to this past lesson!! It's a good and important way to close out the year 😊

Thank you and see you soon!

Best,

Kira



Rabbi Alex Weissman

Mon, May 13, 12:09 PM (9 days ago)



to me ▾

Kira!

Thanks for sending this!!

What a deep, meaningful, and chesedic reflection for this big moment of transition for you!

I'm glad the teaching/practice provided a helpful reframe that allowed both to have more chesed for other AND is allowing you to show up more fully as yourself!!

Those are both great gifts to be receiving from the practice. :D

Looking forward to seeing you on Wednesday and hearing more about it!!!

-RA

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A book of all the different plants mentioned in the Torah. Could be used to explore new ranges of materials to work with.

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"Two Types of Innovation for Profit" by Saul M. Olyan

"From Ark of the Covenant to Torah Scroll: Ritualizing Israel's Iconic Texts" by James W. Watts

"Strange Fire before the Lord: Thinking about Ritual Innovation in the Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism" by Nathan MacDonald

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Introduction

Chapter 9: Heshbon Ha-Nefesh An Accounting of the Soul
Mussar is the study of Lifestyle and Lovingkindness.

Bibliography

Crimes and Misdemeanors - Woody Allen; About Jewish/normal guilt. I don't feel that this was an especially "Jewish" film. It was just made by a Jewish director, about a Jewish rich family, but to me it seemed like discussion of Judaism in the film was topical and very shallow; flashbacks to seders with family and cliched Jewish family arguments that don't really scratch the surface of Jewish family nuances at all *Oh, Hello* - John Mulaney and Nick Kroll; "Two delusional geriatrics reveal curious pasts, share a love of tuna and welcome a surprise guest in this filming of the popular comedy show."

Public Speaking (Fran Lebowitz); also the book *The Fran Lebowitz Reader* - I don't know anything about her but she is a Jewish writer and apparently (re: Max Simon) she is "hilarious." I would like to delve a bit into Jewish humor, as it is very specific. This seems like a place to start.

"Schitt's Creek" - Series about a ridiculous (Jewish) rich family who loses everything because of the mistakes of a business partner and are able to hold onto only one of their assets, and they choose a town called Schitt's Creek which the father had bought as a joke for his son's 16th birthday. The show is about them being introduced to a small town/ the real world and having to get jobs and struggle with money for the first time and learn how to become part of human society. It's super funny, highly suggest.

"Transparent" - Hulu Original Series about a (Jewish) family working through individual problems, family problems, and the recent coming out of their trans mother. (Show got cancelled after the second season.)

