

"And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the chiding of the children of Israel and because they tempted the Lord, saying: Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17:7, KJV)¹

A Journey, a Challenge and a Conflict:

Religion, Army and the Existential Fear in the Work of Eliahou Eric Bokobza

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Figures referenced in this paper are displayed in the Hebrew portion of this catalogue.

The *Tzevaot* exhibition is a sort of a journey, taken by the artists Eric Eliahou Bokobza (b. 1963, Paris) into the Israeli culture, with its inert religiousness and militarism. It is a most ambivalent and complex journey: at first it seems nostalgic, but a more perceptive look unravels it as renouncing, as alien and alienated, at times defiant, and almost always critical. From this perspective, this journey contains trials and wonderings, accompanied by "a conflict" (as alluded in the motto by the word *Meribah*). In the *Midrash* commentarial tradition these trials-and-wonderings – and even defiances – are intertwined journeys that produce elevation, construction and growth, like a flag raised up on a flagpole.²

The religious fundamental world and the militaristic one are explored in *Tzevaot* under one roof in order to reveal their resemblance. The exhibition's title *Tzevaot*, not only refers to militarism, but also to the name of God, *Adonay (Jehova) Tzevaot* which, translated to English as Lord of Hosts (KJV) or Lord of Heaven's Armies (New Living Translation), means literally: Lord of Armies. This holy name, with its theological and gender-related meanings, has been referenced in the past in a series of iconic works by Michal Na'aman (b. 1951, figure 1). The local tonality and context are obvious in Bokobza's works, and despite this tonality and context, the *Tzevaot* exhibition, as its name suggests, goes beyond the Israeli experience to distant and different armies and cultures.

A Tourist-Painter – a Spy-Painter

Alongside the *Tzevaot* exhibition's new works, former series are also exhibited in Beit HaOmanim's ground floor: The exhibitions *Powerland* (2003), and *Kir Bar'am (Bar'am Wall)* from 2011-2012 are combined here, creating one exhibition, named *Zot he Ha'Aretz (This is the Land)* which offers the "tourist-painter"'s view, as Bokobza calls it, of the local reality, the seen and the unseen as well.

A new work is presented aside the old series, referring to the movie *Zot he HaAretz (This is the Land)*, directed by Baruch Agadatti, 1935, figure 2), summarizing typical motifs, styles and themes typical to the artist's vast body of works. The abovementioned movie was the first documentary "talkie" filmed in Hebrew. It was presented as a "pioneering [Genesis] movie with genesis powers about the path of a life of a nation starting its way from the Genesis" (from the movie poster, Mugarbi Cinema, 1935). The movie brings up the early Zionist history in Palestine, the very history Bokobza's tourist-painter watches and by doing so, undermines it.

Symbolically, going up (stairs) from *Zot he HaAretz* to *Tzevaot* (presented at Beit HaOmanim's second floor) takes the viewer to another level of observation. "The tourist-painter [from the former series. D.S] usually sees what people want to show him," says Bokobza, "while in *Tzevaot* I seek to define a new kind of looking, the 'spy-painter' kind, which makes an attempt to see and show what he is not shown, the undefined realm, the in-between realm which remains hidden."³

The exhibition *Tzevaot* presents new works, done in the last three years. It is composed of two parts: the *Ayin LeZion (Eye to Zion)* series (p. 20), relating between religion and the actual and mythological-utopian Jerusalem (Heavenly and worldly Jerusalem) and bringing forth – conspicuously at times, and subtly at other times – the separation wall⁴; and the two intertwined series *Milhamot Israel (Israel Wars)*, pp. 36) and *Proyekt Sukajan (The Sukajan Project)*, p. 44). Images from one series appear in the other one. These series deal with colonialism, Israeli wars, the military, and militarism. According to the artist, "religion and the military terms are 'sacred' in Israel in an axiomatic way. The works of these two series are an attempt to examine my position in the landscape of this imaginary reality, to phrase my own concept of these fundamental, basic terms."

A combination of religion and army has occurred, in different modes, in local art. The photograph of the religious body builder by Adi Nes (b. 1966), who, like Bokobza's soldiers, wears US Military uniform (Untitled, 1996), was interpreted in these directions when it was presented at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1997, at the exhibition

After Rabin: New Israeli Art (curated by Susan Goodman, figure 3).⁵ Nes, like Bokobza, connects and confronts different fields. In the first part of his soldiers' series (1994-2000) Nes connected the circus world to the military world: the military tent resembles a circus tent, soldiers are seen performing acrobatics seemingly waving a flag, and the behind-the-scenes of the circus shows a soldier in a pieta scene, taken care by a paramedic.

Udi Charka has also presented such a hybrid in the *Tzav Tzav, Kav LeKav, Ze'er Sham, Ze'er Sham (Decree to Line, Line to Line, Little Here, Little There*, paraphrasing Isaiah 28:10) exhibition (Giv'on Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2004). Similarly to Bokobza, Charka sought to parallel the military world's discipline with the Halachic world. He presented stainless steel boards and military kitchen utensils, marked in blue and red. These marks separate *fleishik* (meat products) from *Milkhik* (dairy products), and are known to many Israelis from the IDF kitchens (figure 4).

In a first glimpse, Bokobza's works are pleasant, cheerful and sometimes even funny. Still, this semi-naïveté that Bokobza gives his figures – the bold colors and the sweet and cute figures – drawing from artists who have influenced the Zionist painting in the past, such as Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) and his contemporaries; as well as the childish nature, inspired by the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami's (b. 1962) works, includes also grotesque components, concealing piercing critical perspectives. "Sweet and sardonic language," and a sort of "poison candies," to borrow from the curator Naomi Aviv's description of the works.⁶ The practice of simultaneous coding and camouflage in these works is vastly present in the current art field. In this mode, the pleasant and tempting look hides underlying critical and even rough content. Bokobza goes as far as to use Far Eastern styles, mainly from the Japanese classic landscape painting, toys and Manga. No doubt that in Bokobza's case, this tactic is working well. These seductive works express naïveté and innocence and thus create empathy and enable the viewer to relate to the work.

Aside from traveling to far-away territories, Bokobza also thematically and iconographically uses contents, shapes and qualities from the old Zionist art world, Jewish iconography and pre-Zionist local aesthetics. Indeed, Japanese culture is conceived here as distant and different, as seen and felt often in the art world.⁷ Yet, in fact, even the act of distancing his art to far away Japan corresponds with the Zionist *Bezalel* works, which used Japanese aesthetics a great deal, inspired by the Japonism spirit that was so common in the modern avant-garde art in the 19th-Century. Bokobza adds: "The concept of Japan as "other" stems from its being familiar only to few here, however, in both Israel and Japan there is an attempt to combine technological progress with a long past tradition, which is involved with race-based identity. There is more resemblance in the way these cultures, which conceive themselves as

homogenous, treat foreigners, and in questions of state and religion and dependence on the Empire. Yet, the significant point of comparison is in that both nations experienced a severe trauma, apocalyptic in many ways, in the Modern era."

As mentioned before, Bokobza's works quote and correspond with a variety of contents and shapes from the past local art scene (Orientalist paintings and architecture) and from the Jewish Zionist idea. As we know, the local art's historiographic discourse excluded entire sections from the art field. The discourse focused mainly on the works of Jewish artists – while non-Jewish artists who worked in this area during the Ottoman and the British Mandate rules, as well as the pre-state-of-Israel Palestinian art, were almost entirely ignored. Additionally, most Israeli art historians begin its story with the opening of *Bezalel* art school in 1906, and thus stress the disconnection between the work of the traditional artists, the *Old Yishuv* people, who lived in the abovementioned area before Zionism and their descendants – and the renewing Jewish art. In the exceptional cases in which the discussion included the *Old Yishuv* artists, their works were belittled and disparaged.⁸ In a way, Bokobza's usage of a semi-naïve language relates to a narrative Jewish genre common among the Old Yishuv painters in Israel-Palestine, who in practice, established a local art, prior to *Bezalel's* existence. Artists such as Yosef Geiger the Safedian, Moshe Ben Yitzhak Mizrahi (Shah) and Shalom (Moskovitz) of Safed were observant Jews who adopted a mode of expression originating in Persian rugs and miniatures, as well as Eastern European Jewish art.

Bokobza generously uses Zionist iconography and local motifs that have appeared in past landscape painting or Orientalist works: the Tower of David, Rachel's Tomb, the map of the Land of Israel etc. Classic Jewish iconography also has an important role in Bokobza's works. Bokobza references, for instance, the Temple Mount (Haram al-Sharif) and the Dome of the Rock, which used to signify the location of the Jewish Temple (for example, p. 32) in Jewish art. In the work *Kadesh* (p. 38) Mt. Sinai is depicted using the common scheme, signifying the mythical event of the Giving of the Torah. The ancient Jewish motif of the Hand of God (for example, in figure 15) appears in the painting *Mivhan Reei'ya* (*Vision Test*, p. 34). The work *Yerushalyim shel Mata/Ma'ala* (*Heavenly/Worldly Jerusalem*, p. 28) refers to the Kabbalistic *Sefirotic Tree* and the *Ktav Stam* (Hebrew font used for Torah books and scrolls, Tefilin and Mezuzahs), and in particular, to the Jewish pathos-filled paintings of Mordecai Ardon. (figure 5).

Despite its pleasant appearance, it is not a "nice" exhibition, but one which contains a critical and piercing view, which states its own otherness, its own alienation. Bokobza does not lead a direct dialogue with concrete reality. His dialogue with the politically criticized reality is done through modes such as grotesque and fiction, mainly through reality's visual representations. The art historian and curator Gideon Ofrat rightfully

stressed the connection between Bokobza's art and the *Desert Cliché* trend, marked as early as the 1990s by the curator Tami Katz-Freiman as having a "distinctive concern for clichés and stereotypes related to the crystallization of Israeli identity".⁹ Works associated with this trend present worn-out nationalistic symbolism, embedded with ironic reversals. The artists mentioned by Katz Freiman aim to show these utopic symbols devoid of their original sacred halo, exposed to criticism. As Katz-Freiman puts it, this is a "fresh gaze at Israeliness, aired-out from the mothballs of Keren Kayemet."¹⁰

In the *Desert Cliché: Israel Now – Local Images'* exhibition catalogue the curator Amy Cappelazzo related the myth-breaking artists to what philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari called: *minor literature*.¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari described Kafka as a Jewish author with a minor group identity; a Jew whose parents spoke Yiddish and later Czech – yet he chose to write in German. Kafka's choice of the oppressor's language created in him, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, an alienation looking for a way out, even if that way out is just an illusion. According to Cappelazzo, *minor literature* (as well as *minor art*) is "a literature that does not aspire to major status but one that constantly confronts its marginalized existence and thus interrogates the ways in which a culture regulates itself."¹²

Similarly, the term *minor art* was brought up recently as part of the *Neo-Barbarism* thesis which, marked and defined by the curators Naomi Aviv and Noam Segal, was one of the strongest and most convincing theses to be produced by the local art world in the recent years. Some of Bokobza's works could be related to this trend. According to Aviv and Segal, *Neo-Barbarism* is a current savage and non-sublimated trend aspiring to create a gap in significance. The Neo-Barbarians are artists who, being post-modern, are aware of political correctness rules, and will never point out a wrong done without framing themselves – oftentimes Bokobza includes his own image in his works, even the most subversive ones. According to this fundamental thesis, the artists subscribed to this thesis examine the limits of their own existence as members of an oppressive society, and question the sense in loyalty to the predominant language and the ruling structures of entertainment and culture.

In this spirit, the Neo-Barbarian artists choose a "betrayal discourse" – they "rob" known formats of the cultural world and use them to generate a passive-aggressive resistance act. The *Neo-Barbarism* exhibition (Rothchild 69 Project, Tel Aviv 2010. Curators: Naomi Aviv and Noam Segal) presented video artworks with a comic thread meant to doubt the traditional Western logics and reveal enclaves of misunderstanding-ness seeking to preserve itself as such.

As mentioned before, in the *Neo-Barbarism's* exhibition catalogue the curators have re-suggested the term *minor art*, inspired by the *minor literature* term, and related it to the *Neo-Barbarism* trend. Later on, Gideon Ofrat, viewing Israel and the Western world relations as a center-margins relationship, bestowed some major Israeli artists – Raffi Lavie, Moshe Gershuni and Michal Na'aman¹³ - with the title of "possessing 'minority' practice". This way or another, Bokobza's practice of representation is characterized, in a way, by being "minority", as, first and foremost a hybrid tool composed of the entanglement of the "I", the ego consciousness and the collective consciousness. Bokobza, like other artists possessing "minority" practice, brings up non-conformist perspectives that aim to undermine and betray the predominant system, without offering an alternative.

Disguises and Voyeurism

The image of the artist as a child frequently appears in Bokobza's work. It is as if he has transformed *Srulik*, the iconic image created by the Israeli caricaturist Dosh, into a more ambivalent and personal image. At times, Bokobza the child appears in all his glory, as a projection of the conflicted reality, yet oftentimes he seems to be the one "standeth behind our wall," and "shewing himself through the lattice." (Song of Solomon 2:9 KJV; see also the picture: *Metzitz Min HaHrakim, shewing himself through the lattice*, p. 22).¹⁴

The work *Bavat Ayin (Apple of the Eye)*, p. 21) from the *Ayin LeZion (Eye to Zion)* series is the opening work in this series, which explores the themes of religion and Jerusalem. Bokobza: "*The Apple of the Eye* between the heavenly Jerusalem wall's eyelids and the worldly ones conceals me in the upper left eye as an ultra Orthodox Peeping Tom, and on the lower right eye it hides me being a Peeping Tom soldier. In this exhibition, this is the first work one sees walking up the Beit HaOmanim stairs. These two images, the soldier and the ultra Orthodox Jew, conceived as very distant from one another in the Israeli collective consciousness, are conceived by me as very similar. They both have in common an unyielding belief in the establishing myths and ethoi; they both wear uniforms; and they both are committed to serve and obey one idea. These two figures, the ultra Orthodox child and the soldier-child, are unified later on in the work *Shomer HaHomot (The Wall Guard)* into one figure, the soldier who is also an ultra Orthodox Jew, and vice versa."

In fact, Bokobza has explored the themes of disguise and uniform in his works previously. His work *Madim (Uniform)*, for example, from his first exhibition (*Plaisir Oriental*, Nelly Aman Gallery, Tel Aviv, 2000), depicts soldiers wearing variously patterned uniforms: one of the soldiers was depicted as a clown, another one as a prisoner, and a third soldier wore a floral garment, challenging gender-based

distinctions. In his *Arlequino-Soldatino* works (p. 18), the clown from the abovementioned picture is replaced with an Israeli soldier, while the Italian background is replaced with 19th-Century Italian Colonialist Jerusalemite architecture. Here, too, there are identical elements with minute dissimilarities – stains, a hat and a mask – whose significance is distinct in the work's two different parts.

The act of disguising, wearing a mask and the mish-mash of identities, as well as the practice of camouflage, are recurring themes in Bokobza's works. The imitation and camouflage themes have been discussed by many thinkers, such as Jacques Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, Roger Caillois and Paul Virilio. These thinkers examined the way the non-existence in the viewer's gaze affect the existence of the hidden subject. We may add to this discussion the question of assimilation in the predominant society, studied by Homi K. Bhabha. Additionally it is impossible not to consider the "mask" term coined by the Post Colonialist theoretician Franz Fanon. Fanon introduced the idea of the mask as an instrumental tool, allowing people to conceal themselves in certain situations and even to replace "the other". According to Fanon, the mask metaphor represents the lingual and cultural expressions that dwell in very intimate locations in the psyche, emotions, and aesthetics.¹⁵

The *Sukajan Project* is also, in many ways, a project of disguise and camouflage, which goes to distant and other places in order to raise the Colonialism theme, internalized by its own victims. Here, similarly to other works, the soldiers' bulletproof vests, painted with the pictures from the artist's *Giborey Israel (Heroes of Israel)* series are decorated with Jewish art motifs from the past and from the local contemporary art and culture, all mixed with Japanese Manga images and practices. The *Sukajan* is a fashionable coat among Japanese youngsters, designed as a pilots' coat. The coat is decorated by various prints from local Japanese traditions; however, its manufacture had been inspired by US Military soldiers' coats, embroidered with the memories of those who wore them.

Neturei Karta (The City Guards)

As I have mentioned before, this exhibition's different poles (religion and militarism) converge in the *Shomer HaHomot* work (p. 17) in which the traditional ultra Orthodox outfit is replaced by a soldier's uniform. Correspondingly the figure's traditional *Shtreimel* hat is made out of leaves, as another double-edged camouflage component: actual camouflage – as a military practice; and a metaphorical one – as an artistic practice. Bokobza: "The Wall Guard guards the Jerusalem walls, those of the utopic and symbolic Jerusalem, which in this work is flooded with light, as if being watched through pink lenses. Not only the Old City walls appear in this work, but also the new Separation Wall, which is now one of the Jerusalem walls. Additionally, I have decided

to replace the Star of David in the Israeli flag with a blue 'eye' amulet, located across the soldier's heart as if marking a target."

Still, it seems that reading this work by comparing these two realms of value (the religious one and the military one) will not suffice. There is more to be read beyond that. This work seems to also produce a hybrid and complex perspective of these realms. Bokobza creates here iconographical and thematic hybrids, which generate an ambivalent and critical expression, re-evaluating basic themes of the Jewish culture in past and present, including the predominant Zionist culture, the military ethos and the Israeli soldier's image.

Similar to most of the artists' works, this picture's composition is characterized by *horror vacui*. A soldier-guard figure is seen at the center, against a geometrically-divided background of rectangular shapes, decorated with repeating ornamental patterns. The uniform's camouflage colors are echoed in the picture's background on the right-hand side. The round 'eye' amulets, which serve as the picture's background, are drawn from the Islamic tradition, while the Tower of David, appearing at the bottom of the picture, is a most typical Zionist symbol, appropriated by Bokobza repeatedly. This past symbol of grandeur is turned here into a childish-pink image, and the Separation Wall is seen behind it.

An ultra Orthodox Jew stands in the center of this picture, wearing a traditional Ashkenazi *Shtreimel* hat, *peys* (side locks), and wrapped in a prayer shawl, all attributes of the *Old Jew*. The prayer shawl's lines (and the prayer shawl image per se), which have been appropriated in modern and contemporary Jewish art before (for example: the American Barnett Newman, 1905-1970 and Joseph Semah, an Israeli working in the Netherlands, b. 1948), are echoed in the picture's background by horizontal lines, appearing in its right-hand side. Behind the figure's head is a sort of a red sun shape, containing small orange circles. In many traditions, the sun symbolizes the sublime and the lofty, and in the Christian and Jewish case, it represents God. The red sun alludes again to the Japanese context ("Land of the Rising Sun"), and thus typically Bokobza, he connects Japanese aesthetics (red sun), with Jewish iconography and Zionistic modes of expression (the rising sun was common in E. M. Lilien's Zionist works, for instance, and was prominent in an Ardon work from 1972). This very sun creates a halo around the figure's head, whose face is covered with a gas mask while a gun is held in his hand. Thus, this work can be viewed as an icon of a figure with attributes that normally are not related to each other. In fact, it is not clear who disguises, who is wearing the costume: has the soldier become an ultra Orthodox, or has the ultra Orthodox joined the army?

This figure, then, does not lend itself easily to any known emblem: it combines religious elements with secular ones, militaristic elements with civil ones, local with foreign ones. Furthermore, the camouflage marks on the soldier's uniform are not typical of the IDF uniform, and belong in foreign armies' uniforms. In the Israeli flag held by the figure the Star of David is replaced by the blue 'eye' image, typical to Bokobza's unique own style: indeed it is drawn from Islamic "non-Western" tradition, but it also alludes to the round mark of disgrace Jews were obligated to wear on their clothes in medieval Ashkenaz (Germany and France).

The green *Shtreiml*, becoming here an artistic and military practice of deception and camouflage, connects what was formerly conceived as two complete contrasts that would never meet. In the past, the Yeshiva world and the natural and material world seemed like two parallel lines, as the traditional *Old Jew* was perceived as detached from nature. The Zionist poet Haim Nachman Bialik, for example, contrasted the outdoor world where "the stars shine... the grass whispers and the winds tell stories" to the Yeshiva dweller, "a human figure resembling a shade of a moving dead" (*HaMatmid, The Talmud student*).¹⁶

The name *Neturei Karta* (Aramaic: City Guards) is echoed in the works' title. This fundamentalist and anti-Zionistic Hassidic sect, mostly based in Jerusalem, is also referred to as The Walls Guards at times. On the one hand, and through the tourist-painter's eyes it is difficult not to see this painting as a sarcastic comment on the ultra Orthodox world in Israel and its exemption from what the Israeli mainstream views as a civil duty. On the other hand, the researcher-painter may notice that the untypical combination of the soldier's attributes with the ultra Orthodox figure produces an oxymoron. This oxymoron occurs here due to the rejection of Zionism by many ultra Orthodox groups, stemming not from Zionism being secular, but from its sovereignty element, which almost inevitably entailed institutional violence. The complete rejection of violence and the negation of sovereignty-related power were the values which most significantly shaped the ultra Orthodox anti-Zionist positions in the past.¹⁷

The act of re-appropriating of past values or "marginal groups" values and then mixing – or contrasting – them with the hegemonic Israeli values, as well as the act of drawing inspiration from distant places, allow us to read these works as a radical expression, untypical to the "drafted" common mainstream sociological perspective of the Jewish and Zionist reality in Israel. Therefore, one can see these works as a suggestion for a more hybrid reading of the reality, according to which the *Old Jew* does not necessarily contradict the *New Jew*; religiousness does not contradict "secularity"; and to elaborate on this, "Orient" is the not the opposite of "Western" or "Jew". This suggestion unravels the commonplace dichotomies as cultural constructions, incapable of experiencing reality at its fullness.

The religious Jew, or the *Old Yishuv Jew*, comes up repeatedly in Bokobza's works. In spite of the Zionist discourse's attempt to contradict the weak Jew image with the *New Jew* – in fact, this dichotomy was never clean-cut. One of the exceptional artists in this context was Reuven Rubin (1893-1974) in whose works the *Old Jew* image was oftentimes connected to the *New Jew's* attributes – the Jewish pioneer who has never deserted his ancestors' tradition. From this point of view, Bokobza presents here a more complex image than the widespread one, an image that has almost vanished, due to the predominant dichotomous Zionist discourse.

The traditional Jewish image or its attributes have appeared more than once in Israeli artists' works during recent decades. "The religious 'hump' has never ceased to haunt the secular Israeli artist," as Ofrat puts it. These images have appeared, for example, in the works of Raffi Lavie (figure 6), Yair Garbuz (figure 7), Boaz Arad (figure 8), Roe Rosen (figure 9), Zoya Cherkassky and Eran Shakine. In the artistic discourse, these images are often interpreted as corresponding with Antisemitic images; as surfacing the repressed Jew; as manifesting the concept of Judaism as the back yard of Israeli culture; or as the same culture's unconscious.¹⁸ In other cases, the Kippah or the head cover are used as attributes for religious people, and as a basis for a critical, political or gender-based discussion (for example in the works of Hava Raucher, Ziva Netanel and Nir Hod, figure 10). Additional views have appeared in the recent years among artists whose art is derived by a deeper connection to the religious world (for instance: Shira Zelwer, figure 11; Raya Bruckental, figure 12, and Lea Golda Holterman, figure 13).

The attempt to interpret some of these images as part of the discussion about contents rejected by the secular culture, has arisen, for example, in the case of the bearded head image and its symbolism, originating in the Jewish repertoire of shapes, as they were brought up in Raffi Lavie's work.¹⁹ As a matter of fact, if we insist on reading an ideological facet within these works, it seems to lead to a demystification of the symbols, and not their affirmation. In this context and in general, the words of Tami Katz- Freiman are still true today: "In the Israeli art of the 1990s, there is no nostalgia for the tradition, let alone a lament for it. If, from time to time, a symbol originating in the Bible or the Jewish tradition does appear, it always stems from a critical perspective, and never from a nostalgic or a glorifying position towards it."²⁰

To be accurate, the usage of images taken from the Jewish repertoire of symbols – including the religious person image – in the local art world's secular mainstream, produces more often than not works which void these symbols of meaning. Many artists use Jewish cultural materials alongside contemporary Israeli culture, and in a typical postmodern act, they devoid both of them any meaning. The Jewish symbolism

and texts are being consciously flattened out and shallowed by the artists. The objects' and shapes' "Jewishness" becomes just one component in the various cultures influencing these artists, and the meta-stories are deconstructed into empty shells of directed texts.

Bokobza states his alienation towards values and terms such as religion, army and the Holocaust (see his quote later on) explicitly, however, a thorough reading of his works unravel an underlying grain of humor to a point of clownishness. In practice, his works create ambivalent, indecisive images, moving between validation of the existing dichotomies and their undermining. A sort of "post-secular" perspective is surfacing here, which doesn't necessarily view religiousness and secularity as opposites, in a positive way. This way, religiousness could be conceived as a valid way of existence in this world, very much like its secular counterpart, however the secular world (in this context, the military world) is presented here as no less violent and policed than religious fundamentalism.

Shomer Israel (Guard of Israel): The Existential Anxiety

Another prominent fantastic image in the *Ayin LeTzion* series, brings the anxiety theme, the heart and soul of this exhibition, to the foreground. In many works the typical Bokobzan "eye" appears as an open eye, supervising (in the sense of providence too) watching and guarding the city (see for example: *Hashgaha: Yom VeLayla [Supervision/Providence: Night and Day]*, figure 32) The exhibition title, *Ayin LeTzion* (Eye [looking towards] Zion) quoted from the national Israeli anthem is turned here into a horrifying image – or alternatively, when it watches the Separation Wall – into an anxious eye (p. 26).

In the *Chemical Jerusalem* series (p. 30), Bokobza, being a chemist by training, concocts a medicine: the watchful heavenly eyes are the "country's (or state's) eyes", (a take on Michal Na'aman's iconic installation, *The Country's/State's Eyes* from 1974), however here they seem displaced, removed. At first sight, the eyes in the skies seem to allude to the zodiac signs, but they are arranged in molecular structures of drugs: Alprazolam for anxiety, the hallucinatory drug Mescaline, Ritalin for ADD, and Viagra for erections. All these converge here into one theme, captured by the somewhat-neurotic verse: "Behold, he that keepeth Israel neither slumber nor sleep." (Psalms 121:4). As Bokobza puts it: "The need for protection/supervision comes from anxiety. The term 'existential anxiety' is one of these terms in which we, as Israelis, are requested to believe."

From this perspective, the closing work of this exhibition, *Evil* (p. 48), takes the theme of existential anxiety to the edge. *Evil* is based on a photograph from the Yad Vashem archives, in which a Nazi soldier shoots a mother and child (figure 14). Bokobza's version presents a skinless and uniform-less soldier, who could be any soldier in any army, and brings to mind different depictions of executions in art history (such as Francisco Goya's [1746-1828] *May 3, 1808*, dating 1814-15).²¹ This soldier, whose figure is comprised of monsters and demons with horns and piercings (a combination of Gothic motifs with motifs from the art of India), shoots the figure of the artist, depicted as a child in his mother's arms.²² The floral environment camouflages the horror. Bokobza: "The IDF and the ethos of providence are to me mechanisms that were meant to allow us to deal with our 'existential anxiety' as a society, after the Holocaust. In fact, as a Mizrahi citizen²³, the religion, the army and the Holocaust are elements to which I don't feel connected personally, but they do have a crucial effect on my life here as an Israeli."

On the one hand, Bokobza picked the victim position for himself. On the other hand, one could view the figure of the child as a detached beholder, who became a part of an arena to which he has no connection. In many ways, he shares that existential anxiety mentioned by him beforehand with the ultimate "other" of the Zionist society in Israel: the Palestinian mother. The figure of the mother, who looks away in the original picture, was transformed by Bokobza to a figure who seems to be "veiled in black".²⁴ When the artist puts himself in the arms of a Palestinian mother as a victim of a militaristic, oppressive and predatory system, this artist's journey becomes a battle (see also Yossi Yona's essay in this catalogue).

As a final word to conclude this paper, I would like to return to the *Shomer HaHomot* (*The Wall Guard*), as a key work in this exhibition, connecting between the series presented within it. The untypical hybrid of a "Jewish" figure and a warrior has already appeared in ancient Jewish art. Following the verse "the children of Israel went up harnessed out of the Land of Egypt (Exodus 13:18), and the sages' *Midrashim*, (traditional commentaries), which absolutely clarified that the abovementioned verse meant they were armed (Exodus Rabbah, 20:19), the mural of the ancient synagogue of Dura Europus (On the Syria-Iraqi border) from 245 AD showed the People of Israel passing through the Dead Sea's dry land armed with shields and spears (figure 15).

The Biblical Exodus, the establishing ethos of the Hebrew nation's construction, is accompanied by existential anxiety. The Bible calls this nation "stiff-necked" (Deuteronomy 9:6); God complains that they "have tempted me now ten times" (Numbers 14:22). Moses, who got sick and tired of the People of Israel's grumbles, asks God "kill me, I pray thee, out of hand..." (Numbers 11: 15), and even God suggests killing and destroying them (Deuteronomy 9:14). One may judge Bokobza as

"stiffnecked" too, however the unequivocal anti-militaristic position he takes on, even in the face of the Biblical "harnessed" tradition, is undoubtedly a clear position of *Tikkun Olam* (literally meaning: "repairing the world", this Kabbalistic concept suggests humanity's shared responsibility to heal, repair and transform the world) – one of the typical characteristics of contemporary Jewish art.²⁵

About the author:

David Speber is an independent art scholar, critic and curator. In the past he has published and curated as part of his work for the Leiber Center for Jewish art at Bar Ilan University. Speber's papers have been published in academic publications as well as in museums' catalogues and popular web-based and printed publications. Speber writes for *ErevRav* website's art column and other websites, and in January 2012 he curated (with the Judaica curator Devora Liss) an international exhibition of Feminist Jewish art in the Ein Harod Museum of art.

¹ The word *Massah* מסה in this Biblical text means *a trial* or *a challenge*. In modern Hebrew it means *an essay*. More importantly, it sounds like the word מסע, which means *a journey*.
The word *Meribah* means *a quarrel, a fight, a conflict*. The author, who has entitled the Hebrew version of this work "Massah and Meribah" refers to all these meanings.

² See *Breshit Rabbah* 55:1. It is also interesting to note that the Hebrew word *Ness*, נס used by the author here, means both *a flag* and *a miracle*, and is also related to the words ניסוי *Nissayon*, or *Massah*, meaning *a trial, a challenge*. This elevation is no less than miraculous, perhaps due to all the challenges that occurred on the journey that lead to it.

³ All the artist's quotations in this article are from email correspondence and live conversations I held with him in early 2013.

⁴ The Separation Wall is a recurring theme and motif in the leftist political art in Israel in the recent years. In Bokobza's work it arises while using practices of deception (which will be explored later in the article), the same way it appears in Michal Helfman's works.

⁵ During his military service, Nes had shared his room with a bulky-looking religious guy, and another guy, a body builder. Nes wrote to me in early 2013: "Being early to bed, most nights, when I closed my eyes, I heard the two boys having long conversations in the room, while the body builder was lifting his weights. Every night, in an ongoing conversation, the body builder described to the religious guy, in a fascinating and detailed graphic story, how to conquer a girl from the moment you fancy her until you get her to the bedroom and beyond. In this photograph I sought to show the weakness of the physical body: the way the turbid shadow is in contrast with the tight body; the way the worship of sheer physical strength does not lead anywhere, because it is not real strength with which one can beat the enemy, but grotesque and twisted, the same way this disproportional body is. The soldier wears American uniform as an ironic statement about Hollywood victories. I placed the soldier's neck exactly where the tent's rope line seems to cut or cross his head while connecting the strong arm to the small head."

⁶ Naomi Aviv, "Eliahou Eric Bokobza: Hertzel veHaPelitim, (Eliahou Eric Bokobza: Hertzel and the Refugees)" in *Zion's Fiction*. Tel Aviv: Nelly Aman Gallery, Autumn 2003, Internet. (catalogue exhibition, in Hebrew.

⁷ This is how Japanese art was presented in the *Yapan ze Kan (Japan is Here, 2005*, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, curated by Mira Lapidot) exhibition, as well as in a collection of works about escapism, which brought Japanese aesthetics into the foreground by the curator Dorit LeVite - Herman in the *The New Hebrews: One Hundred Years of Art in Israel* at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, 2005.

⁸ Shalom Sabar has noted the influence of Ashkenazi art on the work of Moshe Mizrahi (an early artist in Eretz Israel), even prior to the opening of the Bezalel Art Academy and the political connection between his paintings and events in Eretz Israel at the time; see Shalom Sabar "The Binding of Isaac in the Works of Moshe Mizrahi, Pioneer of Popular Art in Eretz Israel" [Hebrew], in *Tribute to Menahem: Essays in Honour of Rabbi Menahem Hacohen*, ed. Hana Amit, Aviad Hacohen, and Haim Be'er, Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007, p. 20.

⁹ Gideon Friedlander Ofrat, "Eifo Hayered? (Where is the Child?)" in *Tzayar-Tayar: Tziyurim, Eliahou Eric Bokobza (Tourist-Artist: Paintings Eliahou Eric Bokobza)*. Tel Aviv: Nelly Aman Gallery, 2002. No page numbers (an exhibition catalogue, in Hebrew).

See also:

Tami Katz-Freiman, "A Matter of Distance," in *Desert Cliché: Israel Now – Local Images*, the Israeli Forum of Art Museums and the Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, Florida, 1996, p. 9. (in English and Hebrew).

¹⁰ Ibid., Katz-Freiman, p. 10.

¹¹ Do not confuse the usage of the term *minor* as it is discussed here, with another usage of the same term meaning weak or weakened. In fact, the term *minor art* has appeared recently in the local discourse in other contexts bearing different significances. An intuitive review by the artist and poet Roy Chicky Arad, in the art magazine *HaHadash VeHara* (Summer 2009, pp. 32-27) suggests this term as a broad thesis related to current Israeli artistic work. This thesis was embraced by the curator Yigal Zalmona in his book *100 Years of Israeli Art* (In Hebrew, Israel Museum, 2010. p. 415). Gideon Ofrat has used this term in this significance, while explaining other kinds of works in his book *Minor art: Art in Israel at the dawn of the 2000s* (in

Hebrew, Jerusalem, 2010, pp. 61-73). These writers point out, in different modes, a return to the weakened, the temporary, the melting, the dim, the loose and the minor in local artists' work which represents them seeking to shut themselves in their own private world, and more often than not, wrap themselves in vulnerability and sensitivity using humble media and pale visual presentations.

¹² Amy Capellazo, "The Story of the Foreign Eye," in *Desert Cliché*, p. 24.

In fact, even earlier, in the *Routes of Wandering* exhibition, the curator Sarit Shapira connected the minority thesis to the local art. See: *Routes of Wandering: Nomadism, Journeys and Transitions in Contemporary Israeli Art* (cat.), Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1991 (in Hebrew and English).

¹³ Gideon Ofrat, "Omanut Minorit Aheret (A Different Minor Art)," in *Hamchsan shel Gideon Ofrat – Archion Textim (Gideon Ofrat's Storehouse – a Text Archives)*. Internet, July 7, 2012. (In Hebrew).

¹⁴ The usage of an expression quoted from *Song of Solomon* is intended, and alludes to the way some Zionist artists used the *Song of Solomon* as a reference for depictions of Jewish renewal in the Land of Israel. They did it from an Orientalist point of view, and Bokobza corresponds with them.

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, New York: Grove Press, 1967.

¹⁶ Haim Nachman Bialik, Avner Holtzman Ed., HaShirim (*The Poems*). Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2004, pp. 115-132. (In Hebrew).

This theme has appeared previously in the works of several artists, most predominantly in Ruth Kestenbaum Ben Dov's and Barry Friedlander's art.

¹⁷ See: Naftali Rothenberg, "Petah Davar, (Preface)" in *Zehuyot: Ktav Et LeTarbut veLeZehut Yehudit (Identities: a Periodical for Jewish Identity and Culture)*, vol. 2, 2012, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Raffi Lavie: Works from 1950 to 2003* (cat.), Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2003, p. 343 (Hebrew and English)

¹⁹ See: Shva Salhuv, "Daf mitoch Tziurey HaTanach LeRaffi, (a Page from Raffi's Bible Illustrations)" in *Iyurey HaTanach shel Gustav Doré VeOmanut Israelit Achshavit: Raffi Lavie, Michal Heman, Eti Yacobi. Yossef Krispel (Gustav Doré's Bible Illustrations and Contemporary Israeli Art: Raffi Lavie, Michal Heman, Eti Yacobi. Yossef Krispel)*. Tel Aviv University: The Genia Schreiber University Art Gallery, 2010, p. 12. (exhibition catalogue, in Hebrew).

²⁰ Katz-Freiman, *ibid.*, p. 13.

²¹ The first work of this style was *Lea* (oil in canvas, 2010), a commissioned work, an exception in Bokobza's oeuvre. *Lea's* commissioner was a Zionist and Jewish Dutch collector, who found a connection between the photograph from the Yad Vashem archives and the way his grandfather died in the Holocaust. His aim was to have a picture in his study that will serve as a trigger for a conversation with his guests about his grandfather who died in the Holocaust. In order to establish a biographical connection between Yad Vashem's photograph to the collector's story, Bokobza painted the collector's mother's baby sister, who also died in the Holocaust as the child hidden in the photograph. The girl's painting was done according to a single photograph of her that was preserved from that time, which also featured the collector's mother, Lea and another brother who died in the Holocaust, The painting was never presented in a public place.

²² The skinless figure is a reference to the Écorché tradition. In the past, the skinless body was normally excluded from the art world. See: Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992. In contemporary art, skinless figures are widespread, and even more so in the local context, as in, for instance, Sigalit Landau's sculptures.

²³ In modern Israeli usage, the term Mizrahi (literally, Eastern) Jews refers to all Jews descended from North African, Middle Eastern and West Asian countries, many of them Arabic-speaking Muslim-majority countries. Despite their heterogeneous origins, Mizrahi Jews generally practice rites identical or similar to traditional Sephardic Judaism.

²⁴ The reversal of the Israeli and the Nazi soldier is very common in the local art field, as well as in the Arab and Palestinian one.

²⁵ Mathew Baigell, "Social Concern and Tikkun Olam in Jewish American Art", *Ars Judaica*, vol. 8, 2012, pp. 55-80.