REVELATION

Revelation is Just the Beginning

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Edited by

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Reflections by the artist-scholars of
Beit HaYotzer/the Creativity Braintrust

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from a conversation
for creative teachers and seekers
facilitated by
Miriam Heller Stern
in May of 2020

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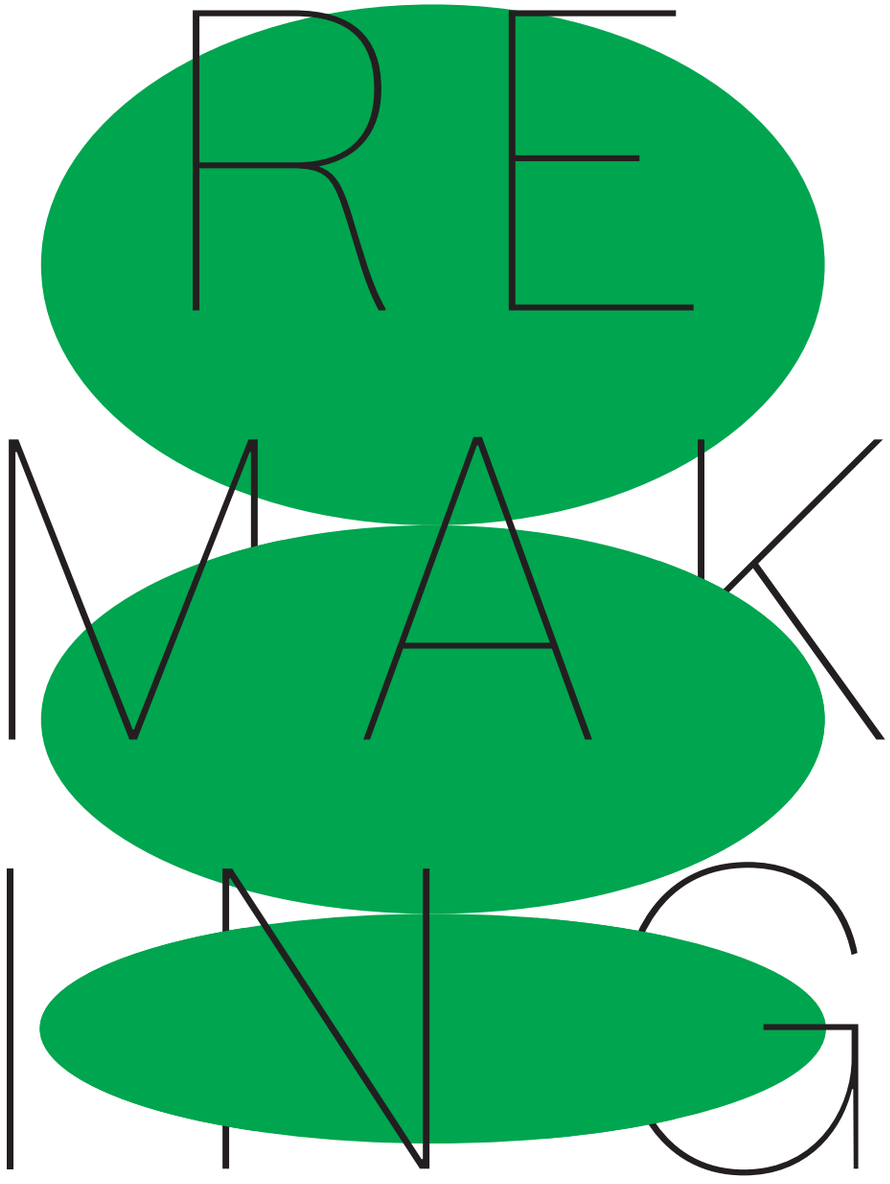


Making and Remaking Our World

Preface by Miriam Heller Stern

Beit HaYotzer/the Creativity Braintrust—the circle of artist-scholars whose voices are offered in these pages—draws its name from the Book of Jeremiah 18. Jeremiah is having trouble hearing God, and God tells him: "If you want to truly understand My prophecy, go down to the Beit HaYotzer—the artisan's studio, the potter's studio—and watch how the artisan plays with, crafts, and recrafts the clay." Inevitably, the clay will have imperfections; it may even become ruined. But the artisan will continue to perfect it, shaping the material into something new.

"Can I not be like the artisan?" asks God. "With an imperfect world in My hands—can I not reshape it, re-create it anew?"

What is special about the artisan's studio that we want to reclaim? The idea of making and remaking, with an openness to finding new meanings and forms; the humility and patience required to try again even after failure; and the optimism, even in the face of disruption, that something new can be discovered and created.

This publication is a curation of the ideas shared in the culminating episode of the web series "Reclaiming Time, Self, and Voice: Counting and Recounting the Omer." It features the contributions of the four artist-scholars affiliated with Beit HaYotzer/the Creativity Braintrust—a project of the School of Education at Hebrew Union College made possible by the generous support of the Covenant Foundation. Our web series took place during the traditional counting of 49 days from Passover to Shavuot, in April and May 2020, Nisan and Iyar 5780. During those trying weeks in the early surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, we explored themes of navigating the wilderness, owning vulnerability and privilege, finding revelation amidst uncertainty, and accessing creativity during challenging times. What emerged in the final conversation was a series of lessons about what it means to be human that continue to guide us as our experience unfolds.

The Braintrust aims to infuse more creative thinking into the enterprise of Jewish education, bringing diverse expressions of Jewish wisdom to a world that needs perspective and understanding to address the great dilemmas of our existence. It also debunks the common myth that true creativity is the domain of the lone genius. Many of the greatest compositions, works of art, and ideas have been influenced by other creatives or produced from iterative conversations. They are expressions of their artists' engagement with the world.

The discussion captured in these pages is a snapshot of artists thriving in one another's presence, even via a virtual platform. Each commentary comes from within the artist's own experience but builds on another's poetry, story, or perspective. The artist-scholars improvise and expand so that the total constellation of insights enlightens the audience in new and unexpected ways. Curiosity, wonder, humility, generosity of spirit, and abiding kindness define the conversation. This shared set of sensibilities provides an essential compass when considering the questions:
What revelation awaits us? How might we find it?
How will it find us? What will we learn?

Welcome to our virtual studio.

Ariel

There is an old custom of staying up all night on Shavuot to study and really connect with Torah—and eat cheesecake—during a kind of vigil in which we are waiting for the dawn. The dawn is the moment of revelation.

As a child I learned a simple reason for this custom: The Jewish people fell asleep at Mount Sinai, where they were supposed to receive the Torah. God tried to wake them with the loud noises of the shofar and thunder. Even thunder did not work; the people slept through the alarm clock. Eventually Moshe had to come wake them up. Now, we stay up all night on Shavuot as a way to try to fix that mistake.

But I was never satisfied with that explanation. I was always looking for other ways of understanding the custom. There are many amazing and deep teachings about the relationship between sleep, and waking up, and receiving the Torah. I started to wonder about where we find slumber itself in the Torah.

I think the first place where slumber appears is with the creation of Eve. God puts Adam to sleep so that God can surgically remove a rib and turn it into a partner and create a relationship. To me, that slumber and creation is a metaphor *from* Torah about *receiving* Torah. The Torah that we are learning, or the Torah that is revealed to us, actually comes from us somehow. It comes from our side; it is a part of us. As we allow ourselves to sleep, something from our essence can be externalized and then revealed to us.

In many ways, this also speaks to what I am trying to do as an artist—to take things that are very inchoate, and that I cannot yet fully articulate, and to pull them out and give them some sort of form that will show me what I mean. And, if I am lucky, it will show others what I mean as well. We are in a time when we need that kind of revelation: We need to reveal what is in our hearts so that the world can be softer and more open, deeper, and better.

Alicia

Last year I wrote a poem in the days leading up to Shavuot, and I feel that a lot of the thoughts behind the poem are in line with the beautiful words you just shared, Ariel. The poem is called "Revelation":

Once I believed
revelation was a sham,
a cheap magic trick
to make the failures of science
disappear. But then I thought,
What about the truth
we cannot see?

Then I believed
revelation meant peeling off
layers of illusion, sharp and painful
as an onion, until the buried
truth inside made people cry.
But then I thought,
What about kindness?

Then I believed revelation
must be a lightning bolt
that split the body in two,
planting wisdom at the base
of a person's spine,
a tiny fire taking root. But
then I watched as that fire
consumed my first love.
It ate him whole. I thought,
There must be a gentler way.

Now, I am making a new
catalogue of revelations.

Revelation of standing
at the kitchen counter
carefully rolling the shell
of a hard-boiled egg
beneath my palm
to crack it without breaking
the smooth white orb inside
for my daughter's lunch.

Revelation of the purple
and yellow lilies' slow
unfurling year after year
in late spring beside
the small green cottage
in my backyard
where I teach girls
to chant the Torah.

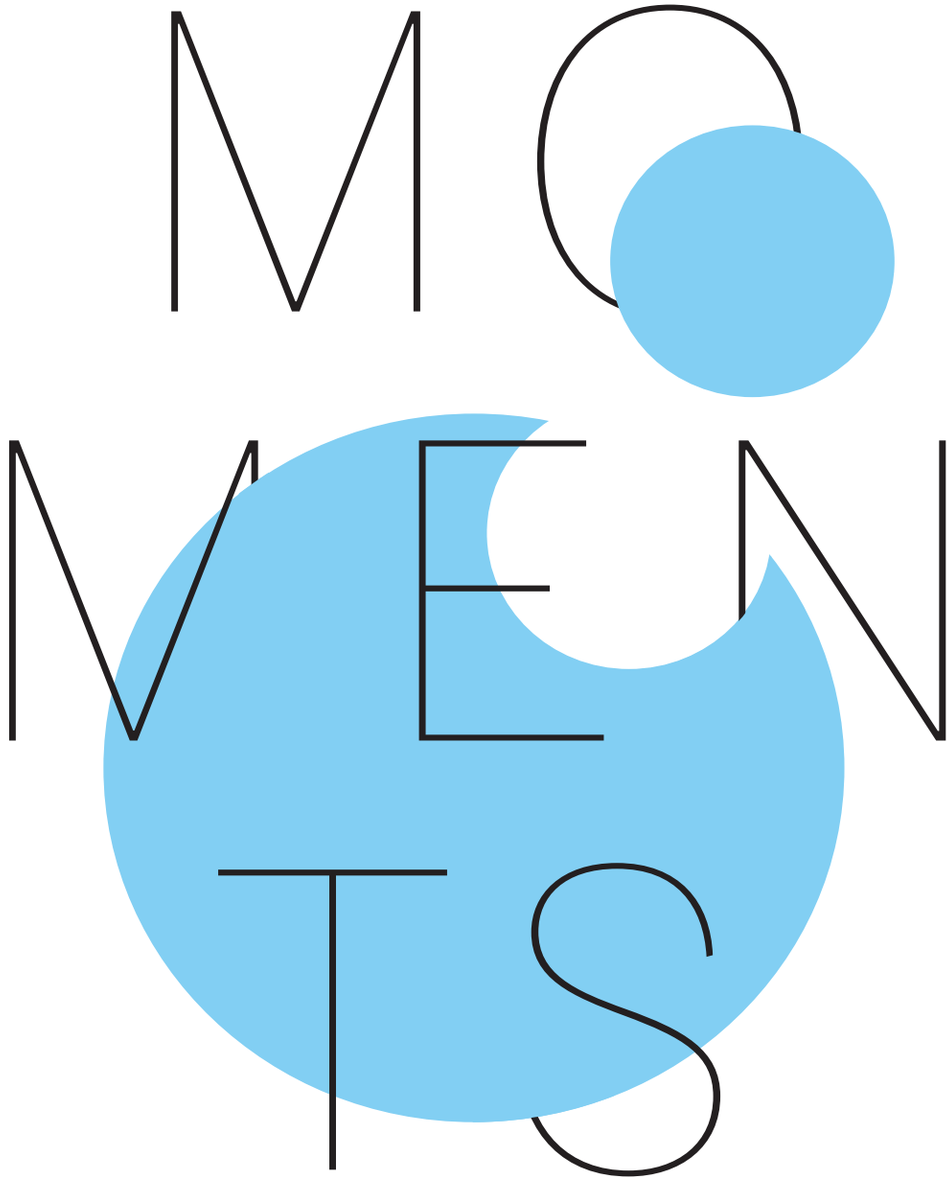
Revelation of
my students reading
those ancient stories,
bringing the words to life
in their sweet young
mouths, until the day when
each one says, in her
own time, actually,
I think it should go
this way, and then
writes her version.

Jon

That is beautiful, Alicia—that she will then "[write] her version." It leads into the metaphor that really speaks to me in this moment of revelation—the "seventy faces of Torah." There is the Jewish implication that you get to "write" your own version of the story. The metaphor also speaks to the time we're living through.

In the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all having this universal experience—and yet, everyone is having it differently. If you live in New York City, you're having a different experience than if you live in Topeka. If you are a first responder or a healthcare professional, you're having a different experience than if you're a teacher, and you're having a different experience if you're a parent.

It feels like what is being held above our heads is not Mount Sinai but the Sword of Damocles. But there are seventy faces to this experience. Acknowledging this allows us to feel both confident in our own perspective and humble in the recognition that there are so many others. That combination enriches Jewish life in terms of our perspectives on Torah and our inherited wisdoms. And, as an artist, acknowledging that there are so many faces to things fuels the work I want to be doing.



Moments of Conflict, Moments of Revelation

Aaron

I want to give thanks for the beautiful teachings of my colleagues. They are inspiring to hear.

As a dramatist, I work in theater, and theater—especially Western theater—lives in conflict. In moments of conflict, like our present moment, we often bemoan difference. We grieve about how divided we are. This grief is understandable. At the same time, when I think about Sinai, I think about the conflict that took place. I think about how the revelation came with great sacrifice. It came with the golden calf, with death, with our own people turning on each other for various reasons. It is a very challenging and difficult story, but I find inspiration in it: Nothing new or good comes without pain.

The difficulty we need to work through becomes a portal to something more. It leads to the journey, which leads to the Promised Land, which leads to, "There are people here. Now we have to war and battle? What does that mean?" In a story of ongoing struggle, revelation is the point at which we move from being a kind of mixed multitude to becoming a people that contains a mixed multitude.

When I find myself despairing about separation, about difference, about the ways in which people may not be hearing each other—or may be violent to each other, in words or action—I remember that conflict is often a precursor to something new being born. I find some hope in that.

Ariel

The threads I am hearing remind me that in Hasidic teaching, revelation doesn't just happen at Sinai—it happens in every moment. Our job is to become attuned to the revelation of the moment and to challenge our own assumptions. It requires precision and rigor. There are methodologies to make sure that we're not fooling ourselves, and that we can clarify things without thinking that they are static.

When I was a kid growing up in Orthodox Day School, my impression of Mount Sinai was that it was where we received Torah as a body of content, of material. We got the script to use for the next thousands of years of history. It wasn't until much later, when I was in Israel and encountering alternative traditional spiritual texts—particularly from the Hasidic movement—that I felt I discovered the real purpose of the revelation at Sinai.

The revelation at Sinai was not to give us content; it was to give us the *method*. The method—which has become a well-developed field of methodologies and pedagogies—includes particular ways of arguing, particular ways of questioning. It is one of our classic art forms, and it is empowering. Disagreement becomes a source of celebration as long as it is done well, with respect and with sensitivity. Then it can be a never-ending source of unfolding fruitfulness.

Finding Prisms

Aaron

I am thinking of the interpretation that the giving of the Torah was the giving of all of history—that every moment was contained in that moment.

If there were a giant flood of information—if everything you'd ever known, and everything you would know, were communicated—you might feel deeply uncomfortable. "How do I hold so much truth? How do I hold so much history? How do I hold so much possibility?" You would want to slip your skin; it would be too much.

And yet, in that interpretation of the giving of the Torah, there is a lesson about productive discomfort. Revelation isn't about, "Aha!" It is about curiosity in moments when you are uncomfortable. Revelation is not necessarily the lightning bolt itself. The lightning hits, and then I feel all the electricity through me—and my body is buzzing and it hurts. I have to get curious about that hurt and about finding out where it is from and what it means.

The text of the Torah came about because people got curious about the pain, about the discomfort, about everything they were taking in. This feels like an invitation, in our moment, to get curious about the discomfort we feel so that we do not have to repeat it. There will be new discomfort to deal with, but maybe not this exact kind.

Jon

I agree with you there, Aaron, but I do want to challenge the suggestion that we are daunted by having to hold everything. I don't know that I feel the responsibility to hold everything—all of the truth and history and possibility. I do feel the responsibility to be the prism that clarifies things into a rainbow.

This makes me think about the great appreciation I have for the poems you've been writing, Alicia, because you have been a prism for me. There is all this stuff that just feels so heavy, so daunting. I can't digest it or understand it, but then you . . . it comes through you into some clarity. With beauty and craft, with technique—I guess that is the role of the artist. It is to be the translator of the vastness that you were talking about, Aaron. I don't feel the pressure to hold that vastness; I feel the pressure to clarify it.

Alicia

Thank you so much for your words, Jon. You are describing what all of us, artists, teachers, spiritual leaders of any sort—I think we all kind of take turns, even parents and caretakers of various kinds. There are ways in which we serve as "prisms," conceptually, and ways in which we do it with physical care for each other, our partners, our roommates. It is like when someone is upset and you just hold that for them for a moment. In a way, making art is a highly specialized form of that holding.

I agree with Aaron about thinking beyond the lightning bolt. The poem I shared had that metaphor of lightning. Having lightning go through you is sort of held up as a metaphor of ascending to the heights—of becoming a spiritual lightning rod. But I have also seen it break people. I have personally experienced the edges of its danger, not just spiritually, but in terms of being a sensitive human.

I think this relates to what Jon was saying. I have a similar experience with texts that represent prescriptive wisdom—such as midrash, or Torah stories, or legends—which are often not seen as artistic, creative, or poetic. You are helping me understand something about my relationship to that form of Torah as well: It takes a very mysterious experience—the experience of being alive in a body—and then plots everything else going on in a given moment.

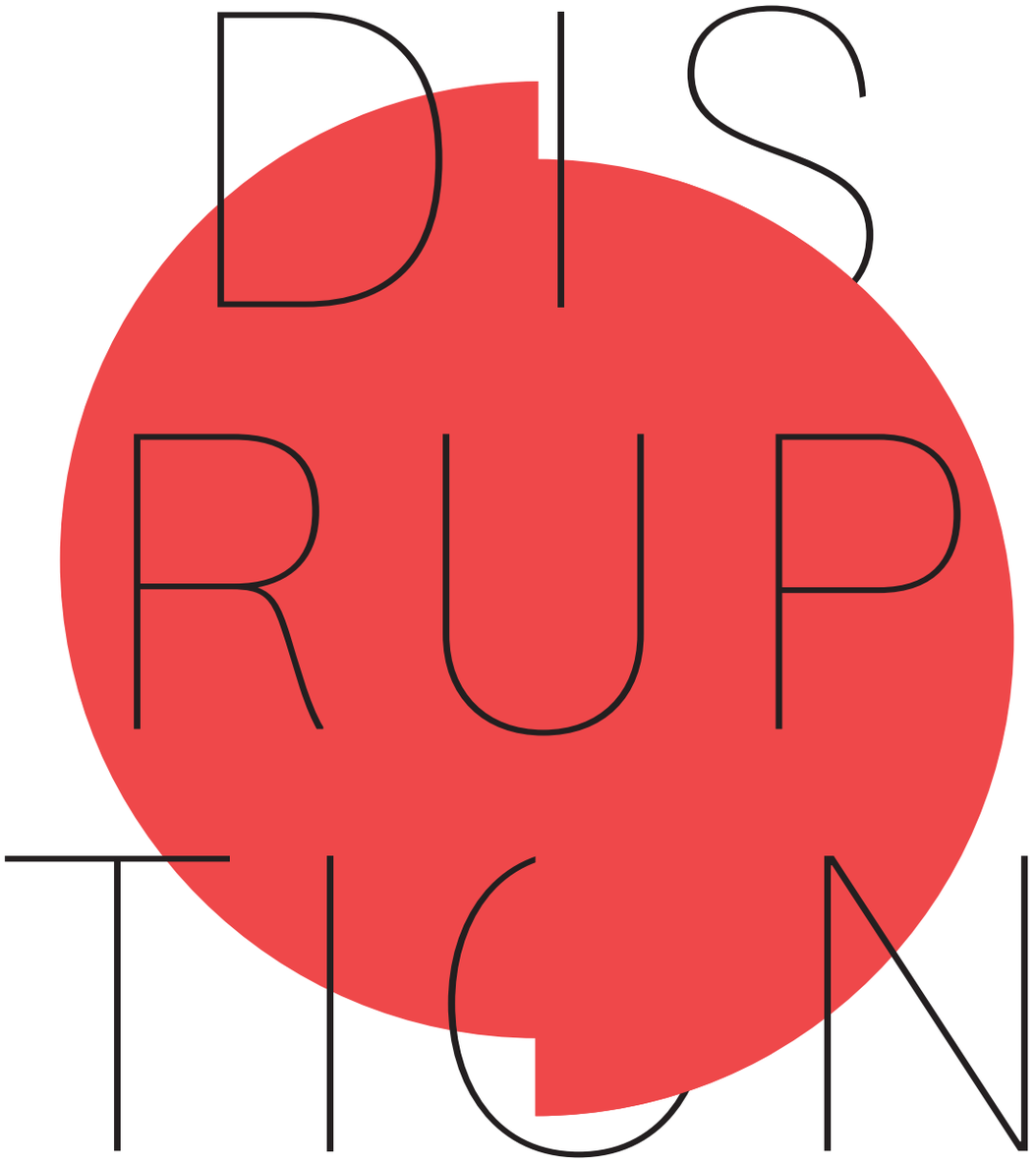
"Here is a little container, here is a distinction, here is a moment of pivot or of prism. Here's a moment in your day when I give you a little box to put things in."

You can go back and forth between a sort of overwhelm, and the presentation of a container for it, and then experiencing the overwhelm and then the container for it—whether you are creating that container or experiencing someone else's creation of it.

Aaron

Thinking of Torah as an artistic work that is channeling *all* of existence—which I feel it is—is very much aligned with what both of you are saying. How do our interpretations and ways of channeling help us to take in the great multitude and multiplicity of things?

The difficulty we need to work through becomes a portal to something more. Revelation is not the end of the story; it is the beginning of the story.



Disruption as Revelation

Miriam

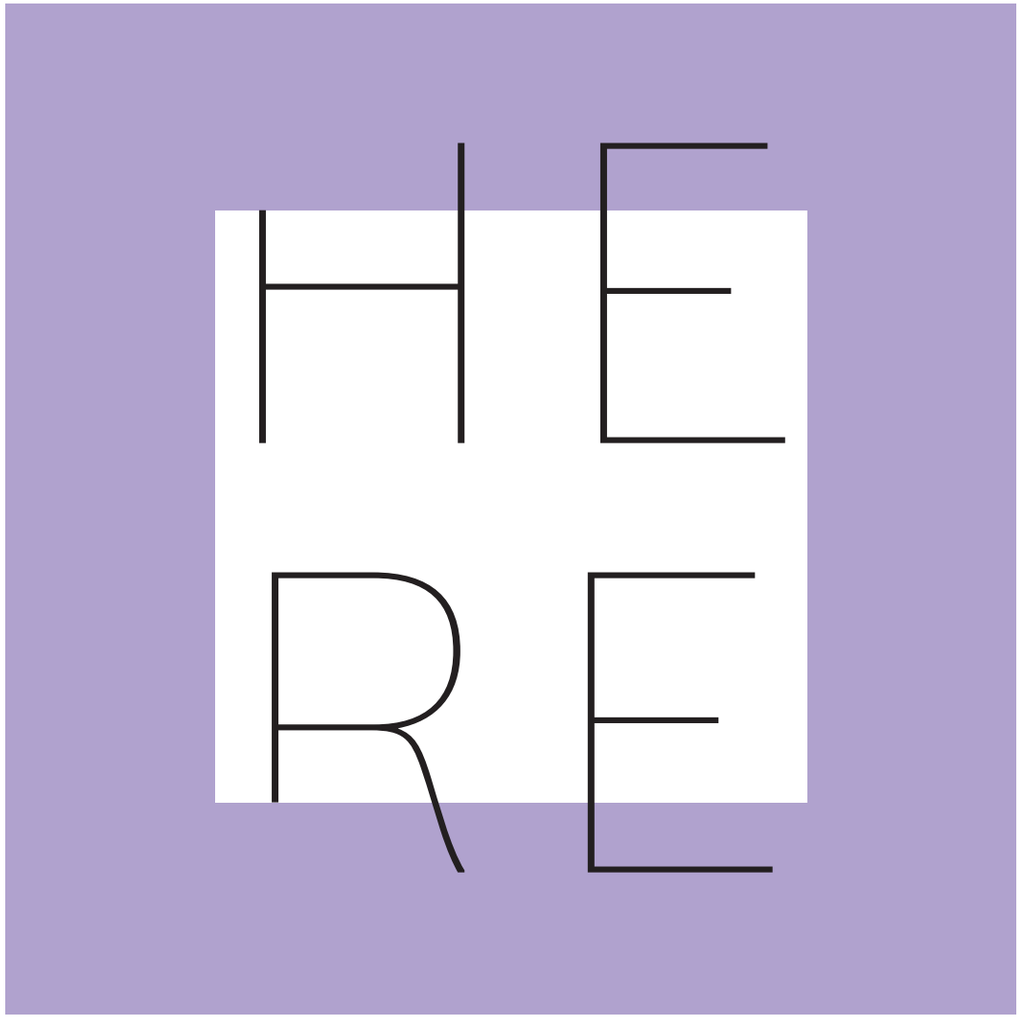
The common thread of “disruption” is weaving its way through this conversation. You have raised so many different kinds of disruption: rewriting the story and adding a voice and a new interpretation; deriving inspiration from conflict; being awakened from a slumber, literal or proverbial; remaining open to being challenged by the many faces, and many voices, around us.

Jon, I am struck by the many faces looking at us from the wall behind you—your mask collection in your apartment—as an additional symbolic presence in this conversation. Perhaps those are the faces of the audience members watching from home.

I am wondering about how one receives a disruption that is actually a revelation. We tend to herald revelation as something that’s going to be this eye-opening, lovely, calm truth. But it is lightning. It’s conflict. It’s paradox. It’s the pain and discomfort of truth.

As artists, storytellers, and truth-tellers, you find profound ways to unlock and reflect those moments for yourselves and for us. I am hearing from you that perhaps disruption is a good thing. Perhaps being jarred from our slumber is a good thing.

When we awaken, what’s next?



Alicia

Ariel, I loved what you said earlier about sleeping and dreaming, and how slumber is part of the process of revelation. I think we can be hard on ourselves about those moments when we just need to check out, or crash, or whatever it is for you. For me, right now, it is watching *Game of Thrones*. I am late to that party.

In moments when we do enter a form of slumber, or we do whatever it takes to tune out, I think we have to be gentle with ourselves. Moments when we are at one extreme can be challenging—and even more so if we are judging ourselves for it. Taking a step back and seeing it all as part of a sort of "infinity sign" is helpful for me as an artist-and-human.

Ariel

One of the teachings from the Mei HaShiloach, the Izhbitzer Rebbe, is that usually, when we are trying to receive a new revelation of any sort, the first thing we do is build a vessel for it. The Izhbitzer Rebbe says that nowadays, we have the Torah, so we can build a vessel out of Torah. But when we first arrived to Sinai, we hadn't yet received the Torah. We were freed slaves; we were traumatized. All we had to build vessels from was our own broken selves. If we had tried, those vessels would have been limited and defined by our trauma. So instead, we slept. We *overslept*, and we didn't have any time to build vessels. When we woke up, we received the Torah without any preparation—and that is the way it needed to be.

I was thinking about this because, over the last month or so, I've been trying to capture in art some of my response to this moment. In my attempts, I felt a lot of pressure to distill what I've been experiencing—all of the confusion, the uncertainty and anxiety, the living-in-doubt, and the new information coming out and challenging what we thought made sense about staying safe.

Finally, I decided, I'm going to try to let go of that pressure. And I created a painting—my worst painting. In an awesome way, it is the worst painting I have ever made. But I am keeping it up on the wall in my studio because it is a reminder to take off that pressure, let go of control, and not to think that I can always build vessels to receive the revelation. Sometimes new things come without my preparation or control.

Jon

I have been trying to dwell in our present moment. It is always a struggle for me to be here, now. Like many of us, in the "old normal," I was on the road and traveling nonstop. Being here, now, takes effort. The only time it is easier for me is in artistic practice. If I really let myself drop into my artistic practice, the other stuff fades.

It happens to be that my artistic practice fundamentally necessitates collaborative interaction. "Bereft" is maybe the wrong word, but I do feel the lack of the collaborative artistic process that I am used to. The lack has made it harder for me to be here, now, in this moment when the only thing to do is be here, now. I can't know when my state and city will open up—or when I will be able to see my family or get on an airplane again—but I can try to be more present in the moment, both inside and outside of artistic practice.

Aaron

I want to echo the sense in which there is a conversation between the communal and the individual. If this moment is about, "I am here, now"—and about all of us having to be here, now, in a way that is unusual—maybe we have a shot at actually building a better world. Whole religious traditions are attempts to be here, now. Clearly, being present is an ongoing, forever problem. Hopefully a group of individuals trying to do it can create something larger and better.

It is easy to grieve about seeing people who, in single pockets, may not have our current communal need at the top of their minds. But I find great solace and comfort in going out on the street and seeing most people in masks. That is communal: They are doing it for me, and I am doing it for them. In a strange way, we are seeing a growing sense of community. People's understanding that, "I am here. And I am not just for myself," is showing up in new and surprising ways.

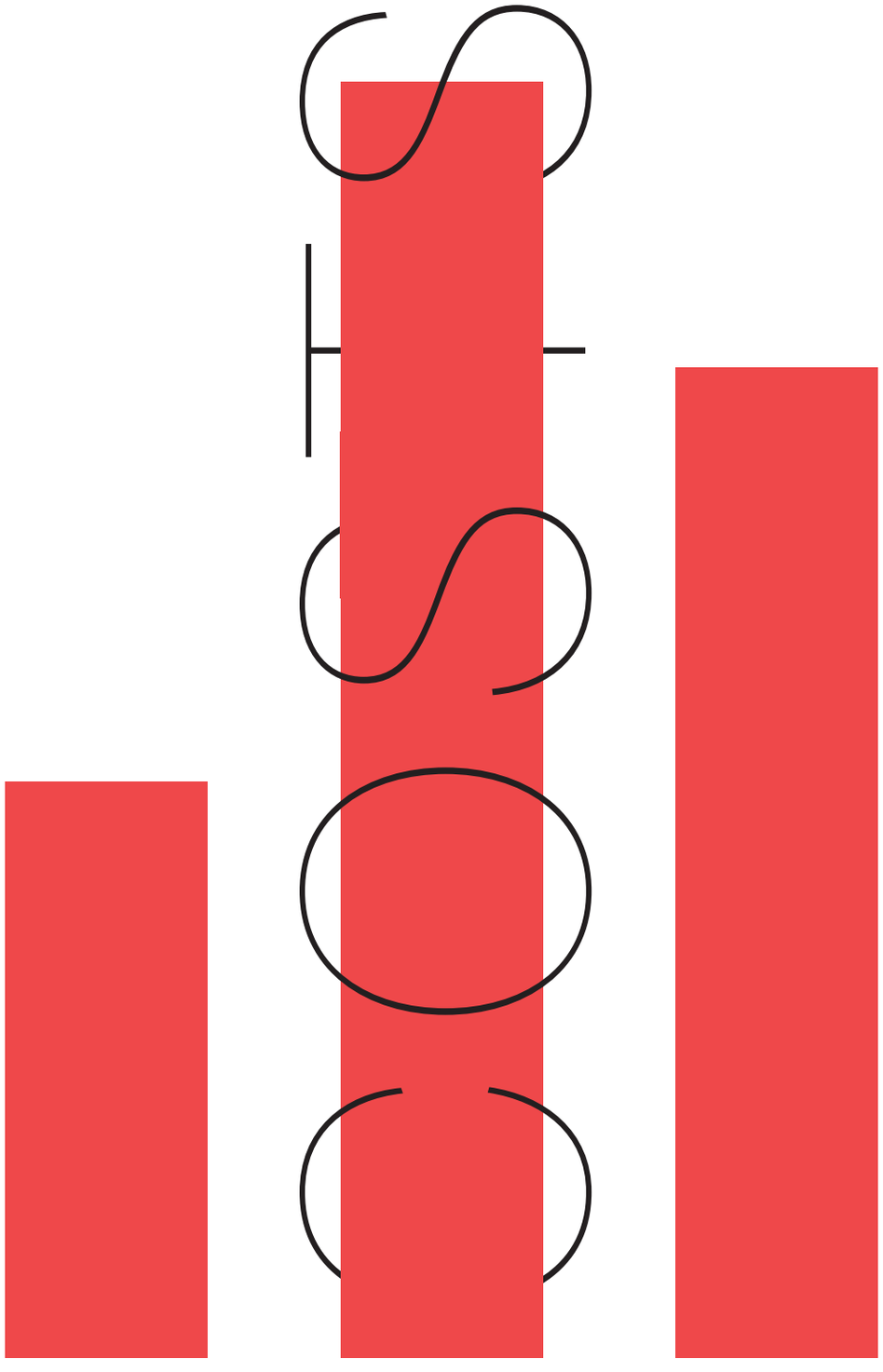
As an artist, I am trying to think about what this moment means. We do physical, live theater work. There are a lot of questions on my mind about this time and the time to come. Our conversation today makes me wonder—how can we leverage this communal moment, when we are showing up for each other? How can we create art that speaks to learning from that and trying to increase it exponentially?

Ariel

There is a story about Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel. He traveled to Switzerland for a conference, and I think World War One broke out, and he was trapped there for several years. He was really brokenhearted about it, but when he was there, he wrote one of his masterworks. He wrote a book called *Lights—Orot*—and it is all about the Torah of Israel.

Someone asked him, "How did you write something about Israel and you were so far away from Israel?" He said, "I dug tunnels to Israel from far away."

So I am wondering—how do we dig tunnels to the collective Torah while we are in isolation? That is a revelation I would love to receive—how to really live communally while we're in quarantine. How do we dig tunnels toward each other and learn from that old Israelite tradition of holding together across differences and distances?



The Costs of Revelation

Alicia

A major challenge for me right now is how to truly imagine experiences outside of my own when I am seeing only myself and my family. In Portland, there is a large homeless population and a lot of tent cities. When I'm out and about in Portland, I see homelessness and I think about its presence. Now that I am just in my house all the time, I am kind of insulated from the reality of other people's need. It's something I am increasingly concerned about—in part because, when it comes to the specifics of my own life, I oddly feel more connected now.

I am a parent of young children, and I moved across the country when my daughter was born. I am far from so many people I love—but now, suddenly, I can connect with them regularly. With all of the apps that we use, it's like we have lost in-person closeness. But geography has lost its power over us, to separate us. Now I can say, "Oh, I can pop out and attend something only for an hour and be as present as anyone else." Having young kids, connecting online is a lot easier, actually.

When we think of the normal ways of interacting as a community—whom do those ways serve? How can our present moment actually point to greater possibilities of connection? At the same time, what kinds of dire need—hunger, housing and domestic issues—am I not seeing right now, in my silo? Beyond those of us who are sort of doing okay, and who can find each other on Zoom, I am concerned.

At this point in the online conversation, an audience member wrote a question in the "chat" that inspired the artist-scholars to deepen their conversation about differences in experience. Beth Huppin shared:

A question I have been struggling with is related to the reality that we are not all experiencing this moment in the same way, in huge ways. We are seeing, more and more, how systemic inequalities in our society are magnified now. Some communities are paying a much higher price than others. It feels like some of us are receiving revelation at the expense of others. What does that mean for us?

Jon

A friend of mine, Michael R. Jackson, is a playwright and musical theater writer. He recently gave an interview about art in the time of the coronavirus and what the virus is revealing about artistic practice in the theater industry and performing arts industry. He described it as the moment when the lights come on in the kitchen and the roaches are running around everywhere, and the roaches freeze and look up at the light.

When we think about inequity and the disparate impact of this crisis on people with fewer economic opportunities, with less money in the bank, less secure employment, preexisting conditions, any of the marginalities that would exacerbate the trauma of this experience—the system is broken. And the lights just came on in the kitchen, and the roaches were caught unaware.

Art is seen as a commodity. Through the lens of capitalism, art is no different than cotton, and it doesn't need systemic saving—money can just be made off of it when we open back up. But the fact is that art transcends divisions and separations. It is essential to the survival of society in a time like this.

In moments of emotional pain and empathy, I have found solace in art—in the way that music can transcend culture, and poetry can transcend language barriers. Art isn't the full antidote, but it's got to be part of the vaccine. If there were a way for us to equip our artists, and to trust them, and empower, fund, and support them so they could be useful in this time, we might be able do some of the reparative and restorative work that can only happen when we turn on the lights in the kitchen at night.

Alicia

I love that, Jon. And there is an artist in every community. That is important—the revelation of the seventy faces. I think hearing from the artists in different communities right now is part of the way that we can see into each other's lives and share our realities and move forward together.

Aaron

We can have debates about what's commodified and what's not; there are questions about what is available, what is a commodity, what's art, and who makes those choices? But right now, people from all walks of life are turning to art.

There are opportunities here. One is to recognize that people are turning to art not only for comfort, but also for productive disruption, and for ways to see themselves and others in this moment. Those ways are open to most, but not all. We have to get curious about identifying the barriers to entry. Even as some barriers are being broken, others persist or are even more present in this moment.

Many of us are accessing art very easily right now, online. We might take for granted the inspiring proliferation of things available. But even as we are hopefully funding and supporting art, how do we also fund internet access? How do we help the people whose access is limited because of their geography, economic situation, and systematic factors? Their access is limited, so their choices are limited; their ability to be with the larger global community—which many of us are fortunate to be a part of—is limited. While we are asking questions of art, we have to ask intersecting questions of accessibility.

Ariel

In the months since the onset of the pandemic, I've found myself falling into two traps. One is to be really optimistic and look for the opportunities in this moment—and then I wake up and remember, "Yes, but people are suffering tremendously." The other trap, though, has been to fall into feelings of despair. Then I have to remind myself, "Yes, but there is movement and there are sparks of light here, too." Something that is a practice of life—and very much of Jewish life, across history—is to hold realism while choosing to move toward hope. If you lose either realism or hope, you run into trouble.

The most disturbing Jewish source I have come across is a midrash, a legend, about the splitting of the sea. The Jewish people have been pursued by the Egyptians, and now they are facing the water, and they're trapped. In heaven, there is an outcry; the angels know that God is going to split the sea. The angels say, "You are going to drown the Egyptians, who are idol worshipers, but you're going to save the Jews, who are currently idol worshipers, too? There's no real difference between them."

In the midrash I mentioned, God says to the angels, "Look over there," and he distracts them with Job. Job is this righteous man who suffers suddenly and inexplicably—in what is presented in the Book of Job as a wager between God and Satan. It is terribly disturbing. In this midrash, Job becomes the sufferer instead of the Jewish people. While he is suffering and distracting the angels, the Jewish people can quickly cross the sea.

For a long time, that midrash blew my mind. I think it is *supposed* to be incredibly disturbing. I think the rabbis are reminding us that every miracle might have a cost. And you must ask, "What is the cost?"

What is the cost of revelation? Who is paying the cost and supporting the system that allows me the privilege of studying Torah or making art? Asking this question is an essential spiritual practice. To fail to ask it is to betray the Covenant and the experience at Sinai.

DREAMS

Our Dreams for Revelation

Miriam

This is a moment of awakening, revelation, and hope for change. What are you dreaming about? What dreams are in your mind that you want to share with us?

Alicia

I think I want to respond with a poem—
a metaphorical answer. This is one I wrote a couple of nights ago called “In the Eleventh Week of the Pandemic”:

The mask feels at home on my face
Like a worn key in a front door’s lock
I make cinnamon rolls without a recipe
And it works, like a miracle
We wipe the counters twenty times a day
Pour the children glasses of milk over and over
When we open the refrigerator
To grab the jug’s thick plastic handle
A brightness inside stands sentry
Holding us in its light for a moment

I used to imagine the refrigerator bulb
Stayed on all the time
Like the Everlasting Light
That hangs before the Holy Ark
In every synagogue

But now that I am older and have seen
How everything can be lost in a moment
I understand two things:
One, the refrigerator is dark
When closed

And two, in every synagogue,
Someone changes that lightbulb
Some custodian or rabbi
Or teacher or congregant or volunteer—
And though this sounds like the start

Of a joke, it is the opposite.
In the face of all that would extinguish us
We pour milk, we bake, we take turns, wear
Masks, we keep the light burning,
We keep each other alive.

Jon

That was stunning.

I dream, or pray for—I hope we don’t forget the things we are learning right now. My dream is that we don’t just go back to what was normal. I crave that normal; I crave what we had. But I will be extremely sad if we go back to it without any retention of what we’re learning now.

Aaron

Yes. I hope, wish, and dream that we continue our curiosity. I think we are in a moment right now when people are asking big personal and communal questions. We’re asking questions of our system; we’re asking questions of our own purpose in the world; we’re asking questions about who we are and who we actually want to be, both individually and as societies. And if we can live in a state of ongoing curiosity—if we can be as interested in the questions as we are in the answers—maybe we have a better chance of enacting policies and doing things that actually serve people in ways that are true.

In this moment, art has been a primary vehicle for human curiosity and connection. It is a valuable container for curiosity and connection. We are seeing, feeling, and hearing that now, and let’s continue to, even as time evolves.

Ariel

My hope, my wish, is that we deepen ourselves and we expand and broaden the bandwidth of tools, modes, languages, tones, and colors with which we are approaching life and addressing life. In making room for the kinds of marginal beauty of the arts—and other forms of holy, beautiful madness—we will not just rebuild our world, but also reimagine it. For me, that is connected with a great reconciliation that, at moments, I can imagine.

In its simplest form, my dream is that we make friends again—with our hearts, and with our earth, and with each other.

Miriam

There is something powerful about listening to the prophetic voices of artists, who see things from multiple perspectives, and who dream in slumber and when awake.

REFLECTION

A Guide for Further Reflection and Conversation

We hope that the artist-scholars' conversation about revelation sparks curiosity, wonder, and reflection. As your contemplation continues, you may wish to engage with the following questions and prompts—whether independently, in journal writing, with a *chavruta* (study partner) or book club, or in discussion during gatherings and retreats, Shabbat meals, staff or team meetings, or communal learning.

1

What does revelation mean to you? Consider the metaphors for revelation suggested by the artist-scholars:

- Awakening from slumber
- A lightning bolt
- Peeling an onion
- Cracking the shell of a hard-boiled egg
- Lilies blooming
- The seventy faces of Torah
- Students rereading and rewriting tradition
- The beginning of a new journey
- A giant flood of information
- A disruption
- When the kitchen lights suddenly come on, and the roaches freeze and look up at the light.

Which of these metaphors resonate with your experience, and why? Can you think of another metaphor that captures what revelation is for you, personally?

2

What are the major sources of revelation in your life? To answer this, you may consider:

Who are the people who offer you prisms and perspectives?

What are the ideas and texts that inspire and challenge you?

Where do you look for guidance as you navigate discomfort in a productive way?

3

The artist-scholars suggest several habits of mind that we might need to cultivate in order to engage with revelation:

- Seeing a new face of Torah
- Recognizing another face of the human experience
- Facing struggle
- Discovering a new methodology
- Asking hard questions
- Receiving and processing truth
- Learning from productive discomfort
- Getting curious about our own experiences
- Staying attuned to ongoing revelation
- Being a prism to clarify revelation, history, or truth for others.

Which of the above would you like to embrace or deepen? What, if anything, is standing in your way?

4

Aaron said: “Conflict is often a precursor to something new being born. I find some hope in that.”

Re-examine a conflict or struggle that you face. Where might it lead? What promise or potential new outcome might you pursue?

5

Ariel said: “How do we dig tunnels toward each other and learn from that old Israelite tradition of holding together across differences and distances?”

What are some of the steps you can take to reduce your isolation and deepen your connections to others?

6

Jon said: “I do feel the responsibility to be the prism that clarifies things into a rainbow.”

Is there an idea, teaching, or action that you feel responsible for clarifying for others? How do you teach or model it?

7

Alicia said: “In moments when we do enter a form of slumber, or we do whatever it takes to tune out, I think we have to be gentle with ourselves. Moments when we are at one extreme can be challenging—and even more so if we are judging ourselves for it. Taking a step back and seeing it all as part of a sort of ‘infinity sign’ is helpful for me as an artist-and-human.”

How do you step back from being extremely “awake” so that you can rest and nourish yourself for the next “awakening?” In what ways do you need to be gentler with yourself?

8

Choose a phrase or question from the conversation that sparkles for you. What meaning or challenge does it offer?

9

This is a moment of awakening, revelation, and hope for change. What are you dreaming about? What dreams are in your mind that you want to share?

Acknowledgments

Beit HaYotzer/the Creativity Braintrust is made possible by the generous support of the Covenant Foundation. In the era of COVID-19, we are especially grateful for the Foundation's unflinching encouragement to rise to the challenges of our time and create programming that reflects the power and potential of creative thinking in Jewish education.

The Covenant Foundation

Beit Hayotzer/the Creativity Braintrust functions as a laboratory for teaching creativity within the graduate programs in Jewish education and teaching at Hebrew Union College (HUC). For engaging as learners and thought partners in the experimental teaching of Beit HaYotzer—and for building a body of experience from which new approaches to creative teaching and learning can be launched—we are grateful to the students and faculty in DeLeT (Day School Leadership through Teaching), the Executive MA in Jewish Education for midcareer leaders, and the Master of Educational Leadership program for emerging career leaders.

The web series "Reclaiming Time, Self, and Voice: Counting and Recounting the Omer" was produced as an additional, public-facing labor of love by the Project Director Miriam Heller Stern and the Beit HaYotzer artist-scholars. A special thank you to Samantha Tananbaum at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion for her technical assistance with video, web, and social media. Thank you to those who joined us as audience members, including the HUC students and faculty who participated.

The poem "Revelation" by Alicia Jo Rabins was originally published in the *Jewish Journal* (May 16, 2018: https://jewishjournal.com/spiritual/poetry/234173/revelation). It included the epigraph: *"Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the LORD had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder." (Exodus 19:16-20)*

Meet the Artist-Scholars

RABBI ARIEL BURGER, PHD is the author of the Publisher's Lunch Club book, Indie Buzz Book selection, and National Jewish Book Award winner, *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). He is the founding director and senior scholar of The Witness Institute (www.witnessinstitute.org), whose mission is to empower emerging leaders, inspired by the life and legacy of Elie Wiesel. He is an author, teacher, and artist whose work integrates spirituality, the arts, and strategies for social change. An Orthodox-trained rabbi, Ariel received his PhD in Jewish Studies and Conflict Resolution under Elie Wiesel. A lifelong student of Professor Wiesel, Ariel served as his Teaching Fellow from 2003–2008, after which he directed education initiatives at Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston. As a Covenant Foundation grantee, Ariel develops cutting-edge arts and educational programming for adults, facilitates workshops for educators, consults to nonprofits, and serves as scholar/artist-in-residence for institutions around the U.S. In 2019 Ariel was chosen as one of the *Algemeiner's* Top 100 people positively influencing Jewish life today. When Ariel is not learning or teaching, he is creating music, art, and poetry.

AARON HENNE is the Artistic Director of theatre dybbuk, an arts and education organization whose work illuminates universal human experience from a Jewish perspective. In addition to his work with theatre dybbuk, Aaron teaches storytelling throughout the country and has presented workshops at Lucasfilm, Pixar, and Dreamworks. With Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, he has been faculty for the EMA program and was the Diane Luboff Scholar at the Cutter Colloquium. Aaron has also served as a professional mentor at Otis College of Art and Design and as faculty for the Wexner Heritage Program, as well as for Georgetown University. He has worked as an educator and facilitator for a wide variety of organizations, including The Hive at Leichtag Commons, Jewish Federation of North America's Young Leadership Cabinet, and The Bronfman Fellowship. Aaron is a Pilot Wexner Field Fellow, a member of the ROI community, and the recipient of LA Weekly and SF Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle Awards for Playwriting.

ALICIA JO RABINS is an award-winning writer, composer, performer, and Torah teacher. She is the author of two poetry books, *Divinity School* (winner of the American Poetry Review/Honickman First Book Prize) and *Fruit Geode* (finalist for the Jewish Book Award), and is the recipient of grants and fellowships from Bread Loaf, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, and Oregon Literary Arts. An internationally touring musician, Rabins is the creator and performer of *Girls in Trouble*, an indie-folk song cycle about women in Torah, and the independent mystical-musical feature film, *A Kaddish for Bernie Madoff*. www.aliciajo.com

JON ADAM ROSS is a founding artist of The In[HEIR]itance Project, a national arts organization that creates space for communities to navigate challenging civic conversations through collaborative theater projects inspired by inherited texts, cultures, histories, traditions, customs, and beliefs. Jon has spent nearly 20 years making art with communities around the country as an actor, playwright, and teaching artist. Jon has served as an artist-in-residence at Union Theological Seminary, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and many other religious and educational institutions. He was a Spielberg Fellow in Jewish Theater Education with the Foundation for Jewish Camp and received a Fellowship from the Covenant Foundation to create The In[HEIR]itance Project in 2015. As an actor, Jon has performed in over 90 cities around the globe. His stage credits include: a dog, a 2,000-year-old bird, an elderly orthodox Jew, a spurned housewife, a horse, a British naval officer in 1700s Jamaica, a goat, Jesus Christ, a lawyer, a wrestler, a hapless police chief, and a cyclops. Jon holds a BFA in Acting from NYU/Tisch.

MIRIAM HELLER STERN, PHD is National Director of the School of Education and Associate Professor at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, based on the Skirball Campus in Los Angeles. She is passionate about empowering Jewish educational leaders and teachers to engage in their work intentionally, skillfully, and creatively. Her current research and writing focuses on designing Jewish education as a tool for building a creative society. She founded and directs Beit HaYotzer/the Creativity Braintrust, an initiative based at HUC-JIR and funded by the Covenant Foundation that engages artist-scholars in thinking and teaching about creative practice in Jewish education. A frequent presenter at professional and academic conferences, Dr. Stern serves as a consultant, mentor, and advisor to Jewish educational leaders, institutions, and initiatives across the United States and Israel. She serves on the boards of theatre dybbuk and Shalhevet High School. She earned her MA in history and PhD in educational policy and practice at Stanford University as a Wexner Graduate Fellow.

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