

Reflecting on the Jewish Condition in the Kaffeehaus

David N. Myers

2 With bravado, Kitaj opened the *Second Diasporist Manifesto* by announcing: “I’ve got Jew on the Brain.” R. B. Kitaj, *Second Diasporist Manifesto* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), Introduction. Not surprisingly, the epigram to the *First Diasporist Manifesto* was the line from Roth’s *The Counterlife*: “The poor bastard had Jew on the brain.” See the *First Diasporist Manifesto* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), p. 9.

1 Kitaj, “My Jewish Art,” Los Angeles Pictures (Venice, CA: LA Louver Publications, 2003).

“Clement Greenberg wrote: ‘I believe that a quality of Jewishness is present in every word I write, as it is in almost every word of every other contemporary American Jewish writer.’ That is the way I feel about my pictures.”¹

In the last ten years of his life—the L.A. Phase or, as he referred to it, the “Third Act”—Kitaj adhered to a carefully regimented daily ritual. He arose at 4:30 in the morning and set out for the Coffee Bean in Westwood Village at 5:30. Arriving at 6:00 when the café opened, he took his place at a table, where he wrote in his notebook, and often scribbled thoughts and drawings on Coffee Bean napkins, for the next four hours. At 10:00, he would leave the Coffee Bean to return home to his studio, where he would paint until lunchtime.

This phase of Kitaj’s life, following his four decades in London, was a period of contrasting vectors: clockwork fixity in his daily habits alongside a wild and unrestrained imagination; increasingly dark bouts of solitude together with regular and happy familial engagement; ever-growing disenchantment with the art world and deeper immersion into a self-created spiritual universe in which his beloved late wife, Sandra, was deified. This was also an intensely Jewish phase in Kitaj’s life: one in which he warmly embraced the condition described by his good friend Philip Roth as “Jew on the brain.”²

In this phase of his life, the café assumed particular significance. It was there that Kitaj wrote, at once refining a craft he cherished and had practiced since youth and, at the same time, engaging in a deliberate act of rebellion against the London art critics who attacked him for relying on the written word to explicate, and thereby prop up, his paintings. To the extent that Kitaj believed this criticism to be motivated by anti-Semitism—that is, by a rejection of the constitutive commentarial act of the Jew—he came to see the café as a site of Jewish refuge, a place to write beyond the harsh judgment of the critics. The café, we might even say, became his sacred space, a kind of *Beis Midrasch* (study hall) where he learned, read, and developed his peculiarly secular Jewish theology. It was also the space, along with his atelier, where his Jewish imagination was most nurtured, where he dwelt in the company of his long-lost Jewish friends. Indeed, it was there that he fostered his sense of Jewish self as a Diasporist, authoring not one but two “diasporist manifestos.” The café was *tout court* home.

Of course, Kitaj’s predilection for the café long preceded his L.A. Phase. He had been imagining, drafting, sketching, and of course cavorting with women in cafés from the time of his earliest travels and throughout his entire European exile. He once recorded to himself that “Café-life is in my blood.”³ During the 1980s, he painted *The Caféist*, | p. 114 modeled after his fictive Jewish friend, Joe Singer of *The Jew, etc. fame* | p. 136. In the accompanying text, he wrote:

I am a Caféist. So is Joe Singer, who is at least ten or twelve years older than I am. Here is Joe in 1987 in the café called Le Central at the east end of the Rue Blondel in Paris. A Caféist is one who prefers his own company, alone, in a café, with the life spinning around him, having nothing to do with him. The Caféist writes and sometimes furtively sketches in the café.”⁴

Of course, there is an historical genealogy to the Caféist. He has his roots in what was called, at the fin de siècle, “Kaffeehaus Judentum.”⁵ The phrase was not a term

3 Notebook, *Kitaj papers*, UCLA. I would like to express appreciation to Dr. Eckhart Gillen for calling my attention to this notebook entry.

4 Ibid.

5 Erich Burin, "Kaffehaus Judentum," *Jüdische Turnerzeitung* 5/6: XII (May–June 1910).

6 Julia Schäfer, *Vermessen—gezeichnet—Verlacht: Judenbilder in populären Zeitschriften*,

1918–1933 (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2005), p. 163. My thanks to Pablo Vivanco for calling this book to my attention.

7 R. B. Kitaj, *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, Introduction.

8 *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, Introduction and #10.

9 *First Diasporist Manifesto*, p. 119.



of endearment, but rather a contemptuous designation by early twentieth-century Zionists such as Max Nordau who advocated a competing *Muskeljudentum* marked not by idle hours spent in animated conversation, but rather by a vitalist commitment to action—and by the repair of the Jewish body. For Zionists of this ilk, the matter was simple: “*Der neue Jude sollte den Kaffeehausjuden vergessen machen.*”⁶

And yet, the matter was not so simple. It turns out that Zionists also favored cafés. In the extraordinary cultural ferment of Weimar Berlin, Ostjuden met Germans, Hebrew speakers debated their Yiddish counterparts, and, yes, Zionists encountered their rivals, in sites like the Romanische Café. In the cacophonous din of the Berlin café, ideological differences were fiercely debated, rhetorical skills honed, and manifestos born. It was a culture in which ideas were not seen as inessential accoutrements, but rather necessary catalysts to action.

Kitaj knew that world and longed to be part of it. He loved its passion, intensity, and instinct for asking the big questions about art, politics, and life. I tend to think that he sought to reconstruct it in his own mind, drawing on his extraordinary imaginative powers. That is, as he sat in solitude in the Westwood Coffee Bean, he would engage in animated conversations about books and ideas with his Weimar-era friends and intellectual heroes. At the heart of their discussions stood the Jewish Question, which Kitaj called “my limit-experience, my Romance, my neurosis, my war, my pleasure principle, my death drive”⁷—in short, his obsession. Like the most sophisticated of his fellow caféists, and despite his own stubborn and doctrinaire tendencies, Kitaj understood that the resolution of that Question would not be achieved through simple, monistic formulae, as he indicated in his own self-prescription in the *Second Diasporist Manifesto*: “Assimilate and Don’t in painting! Admix lessons from Host Art with stubborn Jewish Questions.”⁸

His own admixture resulted from an utterly omnivorous nature, as he consumed books and ideas with the ferocity of a starving man and the unbridled joy of the autodidact. He was guided by his mythic Weimar-era café interlocutors, the first and most important of whom was Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the German-born immigrant to Palestine whose pioneering labors in the study of Jewish mysticism would make him the most influential Jewish-studies scholar of the twentieth century. Kitaj learned from Scholem at least three important lessons. First, Scholem modeled for him a form of Zionism that navigated between the poles of universalism and particularism. Scholem’s participation in the short-lived *Brit Schalom*, the group of largely Central European Jews who advocated a bi-national state in the 1920s and early 1930s, affirmed for him the possibility of asserting the Jewish right to a place under the sun without denying the Palestinians the same right. It was this prospect that must have accompanied him as, over the years, he painted his series of “Arabs and Jews” pictures | p. 218. Kitaj did not hold to the old *Brit Schalom* ideal. Of Arabs and Jews in Palestine, he wrote: “They both need separate homes. The idea of a bi-national secular state in Palestine can only happen in a month of Sundays, draped in blood. As humans go, it’s hopeless.”⁹ Second, Scholem’s seminal research into the Jewish mystical tradition imparted to Kitaj an appreciation for a kabbalistic hermeneutic that he made his own. Kitaj acknowledges Scholem’s influ-

10 *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, #28. Later in #553, Kitaj declared: “SANDRA—SHEKHINA in my paintings, and it is SHE to whom I pray every dawn.”

11 *First Diasporist Manifesto*, 29, pp. 77–78.



ence and then situates himself in the long tradition of Jewish commentarial dynamism in #15 of the *Second Diasporist Manifesto*: “Infinite interpretability, infinite lights shine in every word, says Scholem on Kabbalah. Fitful commentary waits patiently by some of my pictures as it does in thousands of years of Jewish Commentary.” Third, Scholem introduced to Kitaj not only the interpretive practices of the mystics, but the fundamentals of kabbalistic theosophy, one aspect of which Kitaj studied with particular interest: the idea of the feminine Godhead or *Shekhinah*. This was an idea that he had learned about early in his reading of Scholem (see *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*), but which assumed great significance and urgency in the L.A. Phase. And that is for the simple reason that Kitaj, the avowed secularist, fervently attempted in his last decade to effect communion, in the mode of the Kabbalah, with the *Shekhinah*, which he understood to be none other than his late wife: “I have been slowly withdrawing from the social world for many years anyway. Sandra is, therefore, not only made in the image of God, but, as Shekhina, she’s the aspect of what is called God, to which I cleave (DEVEKUT) in painting her.”¹⁰

Kitaj’s reading of and one-way conversations with Scholem continued throughout his adult life. They nourished his early intellectual and late theological reflections on the Jewish Question. He knew how deeply immersed his revered Weimar forebears and fellow caféists were in the theological dimensions of the Jewish question, including through the new mystical lens introduced by Scholem. But he also knew that the Berlin Jewish café culture was, if anything, polychromatic in complexion. It contained a wide range of colorful characters, not all of whom were German, not all of whom were interested in theology, but all of whom were passionately interested in the Jewish Question. A good example was the great Russian-Jewish historian, Simon Dubnow (1860–1940), who was a dominant figure in the Eastern European Jewish circles that assembled in Berlin after the First World War. Kitaj knew of Dubnow as “the great old theoretician of Diaspora” who argued, against the Zionists, that the logical home of the Jewish nation was where its largest population concentration was, in Eastern Europe. The responsible response to their plight, according to Dubnow, was to call not for sovereignty in the ancient homeland but for autonomy in their Diaspora homes—that is, state support for the preservation of Jewish cultural, educational, and linguistic practices. In this regard, Dubnow was tapping into a once prominent though now lost strain of nationalist thought: a form that separated “nation” from “state” in advocating recognition of the rights of a cultural nation (e.g. the Jews) under and by a sovereign state power (e.g. Tsarist Russia).

In his mythic café conversations with Dubnow, Kitaj was clearly drawn to the older historian’s views and, in particular, the belief that “his dispersed and despised people would find peace in the various places where they settled among enlightenment hosts.” The cultural exercise of engaging with a wide range of hosts was the very source of creativity of the Diaspora Jew that Kitaj so valued. He expressed the hope that “Dubnow’s dream for Diaspora will come true.” For, he averred, “Diasporism is my mode. It is the way I do my pictures.” But he was also fully cognizant that the end to Dubnow’s Diasporist vision was brutal; “the Germans shot him,” he reports, in the liquidation of the Riga Ghetto in December 1941.¹¹

In debating with Dubnow over Diasporism, Kitaj would have been joined by a fellow

12 See the discussion by Shulamit Volkov, "The Dynamics of Dissimilation: Ostjuden and German Jews," Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg, eds. *The Jewish Response to German Culture from the Enlightenment to the Second World War* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1985), pp. 192–211.

13 See David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 105.

14 This appreciation for Achad Ha-am—and his agnosticism—was more pronounced in the Late London Phase, in which the Jewish Question was front and center, than in the L.A. Phase, when Kitaj's theological and mystical obsession with Sandra began to take hold.

15 *First Diasporist Manifesto*, p. 115.

traveler in the byways of the Jewish Question of whom he was quite fond: Achad Ha-am (1856–1927). Achad Ha-am was Dubnow's fellow Eastern European Jew, good friend, and ideological foil; his efforts to create an elite center of Jewish culture in Palestine were opposed to Dubnow's emphasis on Diasporism, as was made clear in an engrossing correspondence between the two in the first decade of the twentieth century. In fact, Dubnow and Achad Ha-am agreed that, in an ideal world, there should be both a robust Jewish life in the Diaspora and a robust Jewish center in Palestine. They disagreed vigorously on where the prime emphasis should be. For Dubnow, an historian who periodized the Jewish past according to its successive centers of influence, the present-day center that was worthy of attention and investment was the Eastern European concentration. For Achad Ha-am, by contrast, Erets Yisra'el was and always would be the center that radiated out rays of vitality to the periphery. These rays of vitality would revive a long-dormant Hebrew culture the world over and would lead to a rebirth in language, music, theater, and art.

Achad Ha-am's vision resonated deeply for a generation of early twentieth-century German-speaking Jews caught in the throes of "dissimilation"—that is, a movement of retreat from the deeply held ideal of their parents that they overcome the remaining hurdles in German society and effect a complete assimilation.¹² This circle, which included Hugo Bergmann, Hans Kohn, Ernst Simon, and Gershom Scholem, saw in his program of cultural revival for the Jewish nation a highly desirable path between the extreme routes of assimilation and a more hard-edged statist form of political Zionism. Scholem, for example, characterized himself as a "radical follower of Achad Ha-am."¹³

Kitaj, for his part, resonated deeply with Achad Ha-am's project of cultural revival, all the more so given its decidedly agnostic stance toward traditional religious faith.¹⁴ He placed Achad Ha-am in exalted company, comparing him to Cézanne, one of his favorite painters. "They are both lighthouses, even bridges for me in 1987," he wrote in the *First Diasporist Manifesto*. What Achad Ha-am lent to Kitaj was a healthy measure of unapologetic Jewish pride that "proved to be a precious escape from the Dark Age in which many Jews were still buried." This, in turn, inspired Kitaj to attempt a Jewish art, "an affirmative painting art" that avoided the "contraction of the (Jewish) national 'ego'."¹⁵

One could imagine Kitaj sitting at a table in a Berlin café next to Dubnow and Achad Ha-am, listening to the two thinkers debate the fine points of a strain of Jewish nationalism in which culture was the shared and most precious property of the Jewish nation. Kitaj greatly appreciated the common emphasis on culture in this vision, as well as its deep commitment to affirming a strong form of Jewish ethnic identity. At the same time, he would have appreciated the differences between the two early twentieth-century thinkers, internalizing the strongest points of their respective Diasporism and Palestinocentrism, and discarding the weakest. His own thinking accomplished what they could not: a dynamically fluid swing between the poles of Diasporism and Zionism, reflecting his unabashedly dual loyalties to cosmopolitanism and particularism. Navigating between those poles, one could argue, has been the leitmotiv of the Jewish project of modernity, engaging a long and noble lineage of Jews from Moses Mendelssohn to the Kaffeehausjuden of Weimar Berlin to Kitaj, and beyond. Kitaj was

16 Ibid., p. 109.

17 Ibid., p. 95.

18 Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken 2007), pp. 21–23.

19 *First Diasporist Manifesto*, p. 59.

especially drawn to those, like himself, who dwelt between the poles, in the rich if unsettled terrain in the center—in that space where distance from the poles of certainty encouraged creative innovation. It was in that space where many of his greatest Jewish inspirations and conversation partners could be found: first and foremost Kafka, whose sense of alienation from the world—and from himself—Kitaj apprehended as distinctly Jewish. The unique perspective that alienation afforded Kafka helped craft what Clement Greenberg called "an integrally Jewish literary art."¹⁶ It also may have granted him, Kitaj suggested, special powers of clairvoyance into the darkness that would descend upon Jewish life in the Shoah. Although Kafka died before the "terrible Jewish passion," his work led Kitaj to believe that "[m]aybe he could it smell it coming."¹⁷

Kitaj's reverence for Kafka reminds us of one of the painter's rare gifts: his boundless intellectual openness. Kitaj was as receptive to and interested in the clearly formulated ideological agendas for Jewish national renewal of Achad Ha-am and Dubnow as he was taken by Kafka's remarkable literary articulation of the anomie of modern (Jewish) life. Many of us tend to favor one form of writing or thought at the expense of another, but Kitaj was perfectly capable of embracing both. In this regard, his Jewish obsession was decidedly catholic.

That said, he felt a particular affinity for the mix of alienation and yearning that Kafka embodied in his life's work. Kitaj came to intuit that the quest for a measure of Jewish holism was constant and yet unattainable, just as the Kabbalists believed that perfect comprehension of the Torah was a necessary, if ultimately unrealizable, aim. Accordingly, one had to accept living in a fragmentary world, while also seeing—again like the Kabbalists—the potential for redemption inhering in the fragment itself.

Few understood the redemptive potential of the fragment better than another of Kitaj's favorite "conversation partners": Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). Benjamin was almost recruited by his dear friend Scholem to immigrate to Jerusalem to teach at the newly created Hebrew University. For all of his attraction to this redemptive prospect, finally he could not bring himself to move to Palestine, nor for that matter, to acquire Hebrew and thereby gain access to a richer form of Jewish holism. Rather, he was conditioned to wander in his fragmentary Diaspora state—and, of course, to observe with a constantly probing eye. Incidentally, among those topics upon which Benjamin cast his gaze were the cafés of Berlin, including the Romanische. He understood the café as a site to which the parvenu (we might read "the Jew") came to see and be seen, only to be displaced by the next round of newcomers.¹⁸

Kitaj appreciated and emulated Benjamin's participation/observation of cafés—and, moreover, his keen eye, honed in and from the café. In fact, he sought to express in his paintings what his Weimar friend articulated with pen. He particularly admired Benjamin's penchant for seizing on and unpacking the "fragment," a decidedly ethical, as well as aesthetic, act of recovery. Even before he knew of Benjamin, he had done a painting entitled *His Cult of the Fragment*. After learning of him, he came to identify and engage in one-way conversations with Benjamin, who stood for him as "the exemplary and perhaps ultimate Diasporist."¹⁹ There was in Benjamin, and even more in "the angel of history" whom he famously described in the ninth of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, a poignant reflection of the heroic but losing struggle to

20 *Second Diasporist Manifesto*, #553. It is important to add that Gershom Scholem's essay, "Walter Benjamin and his Angels," was one of the last texts—perhaps the last—that Kitaj read in October 2007. The text is included in Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1976).

restore voice, agency, and justice to the forgotten among us. Kitaj's own homage to the figure of the angel in Benjamin—and to Klee's *Angelus Novus*, upon which the "angel of history" was based—came in the form of more than two dozen paintings assembled under the title "Los Angeles."²⁰ (IMAGE: Painting from Los Angeles series.) Benjamin and his angel gestured toward the alluring possibility of redemptive belonging, but both were ultimately consigned to Exile, in all its creative and tragic forms. To be sure, Kitaj gave frequent expression to a proud and defiant Jewish tribalism, particularly in the face of anti-Semitism. But at the end of the day, he chose, like Benjamin, to wander in exile. To bring our conversation full circle, we might say, in evocation of Heine and Steiner, that the café was his "portable homeland" in Exile. It was there, and especially in the Westwood Coffee Bean, that he engaged in the animating and defining oscillations of his life, between picture and word, Diasporism and Zionism, Jew and man.