

Choking on Modesty

Chana Goldberg's paintings challenge gender inequality in Orthodox Jewish society

Joseph R. Hoffman

THE FIRST IMPRESSION OF THE WHITE TABLE-cloth hanging in Chana Goldberg's small Jerusalem studio is that it is elegant enough to grace any Sabbath table. From the front, it appears devoid of design, except for the embroidery on the edges, but stand a little off-center and you see, through the semi-transparent surface, individual table settings consisting of black and white scenes, mounted on thin cardboard rectangles, of Orthodox boys and girls engaging in various activities.

The work is entitled "Shulhan Arukh" which means "set table" in Hebrew and is the name of the 16th-century code of Jewish law which has determined Orthodox Jewish practice ever since. Goldberg's images suggest that these table settings give the lion's share of privilege to the boys. For example, in one of the barely visible rectangles, a boy receives a blessing from his father while a girl stands to the side; in another, a group of male yeshiva students are deep in study under the kindly gaze of their teacher, and in a third girls are washing the floor and baking the challa.

"Nowhere does it say in the Shulhan Arukh that a girl cleans the floor," says Goldberg. "It's all in the subtext." Consequently, the scenes are partially obscured, a visual parallel to the subtexts, all placed behind what she calls a "veil of conformity."

"I chose children's book illustrations for my scenes of boys' and girls' activities because they look like playing cards. It is as if each child at birth is dealt a certain hand [of cards], which carries instructions on how to behave. And the boys, obviously, have the better cards," she says.

BORN INTO AN ULTRA-ORTHODOX HOUSEHOLD 49 years ago, Chana Goldberg has moved toward the religious center and has been struggling through her art for close to two decades to point out the inequalities of the sexes in her native milieu. Being a woman makes her task all the more of an uphill struggle. "When a woman sounds off about important issues, the reaction is usually, 'Just be pretty and shut up,'" she says. "We are not supposed to rock the boat."

One of her most daring paintings is a "Last Supper," a biting feminist parody of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece. Instead of the 12 apostles and Jesus seated behind the Passover table, Goldberg has substituted a single faceless figure with eight breasts, each of which is resting on the tabletop, either feeding an infant or lying inert. The red stripes on the tablecloth look like dripping blood. "It reflects how little control we have over our own bodies," she says. "We give birth until exhaustion."

Goldberg and her modern-Orthodox husband Shmuel Goldberg, a pediatric pulmonologist at Shaare Tzedek Hospital, live in the Katamonim, a mixed religious-secular Jerusalem neighborhood, with their four children. Her cramped studio in the Talpiot industrial area is choc-a-bloc with canvases, leaning against one another, side by side on narrow shelves or hanging on the walls. She receives visitors, comfortable in sweater and pants, with an uncovered head of brown hair parted in the middle and pulled back in a bun.

A lively woman, she sits down nimbly on the back of a chair and



ARTIST IN HER STUDIO: Chana Goldberg poses in front of one of her controversial paintings of 'Head Coverings,' which depicts a woman asphyxiated by a plastic bag

engages the visitor with a steady, friendly and trusting gaze. "I believe I am the only professional *frum*-from-birth female artist in the city," she says, using the Yiddish word for observant.

Born in 1959 in Kibbutz Shaalvim, an ultra-Orthodox religious kibbutz, near Latrun on the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway, Goldberg moved with her family to Jerusalem when she was 8, and received an ultra-Orthodox elementary and secondary education. Her art studies began with a private teacher in her teenage years. After graduation from high school and two years of national service, she enrolled at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where she eventually received an MA in Hebrew Literature.



Her mother had tried, to no avail, to steer Chana away from a secular university. Mindful of her daughter's artistic talent, she tried to enroll her in a graphic design course at a technical college, "where she thought I might learn something useful," says Goldberg with a smile, gesturing around her studio, filled to bursting with the "non-useful" works that she has produced ever since.

Goldberg completed her degree at age 27. During her studies, she married Shmuel, who was then a medical student at Hadassah Hospital and had the first two of their four children.

She continued painting while at university and, after graduating, she applied to Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, but was not accepted. "There were no religious women in Bezalel back then [1986]. They [the faculty who interviewed her] made fun of me, with my head covering, long skirts and children. It left a bitter taste," she remembers ruefully. Undaunted, she taught art at various Jerusalem-area high schools and raised her growing family.

Then in 1993, her husband secured a position at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Chana taught Midrash, Talmud and rabbinical literature at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in nearby Wyncote and discovered Temple University's Tyler School of Art. "I could only afford to enroll in one course. I never got a degree from there, but I did receive a great education." At the end of the family's three-year stay in Philadelphia, she was allowed to stage a solo exhibition there, entitled "Motherhood."

RETURNING TO JERUSALEM IN 1996, GOLDBERG began to expand on the themes nurtured at Tyler, including controversial scenes of motherhood, like her "Last Supper," which was first shown in a 1999 group exhibition for new members at the Jerusalem's Artists House. Her multimedia "Shulhan Arukh" installation was exhibited at Jerusalem's Elul Institute, a pluralistic Jewish learning center, in 2003.

Leonardo is not the only Old Master in the Artists House exhibition from whom Goldberg derives inspiration. Based on Rembrandt's "Flayed Ox" is "Cow Carcass," an image of a huge slab of meat hang-



TAKING CONTROL: In "Anatomy Lesson," based on a Rembrandt painting, a female cadaver is shown with an oversized birth control pill dispenser in her abdomen. The painting protests the Orthodox Jewish woman's role as a child-bearing machine.

ing in slaughterhouse style in the middle of a modern kitchen. "Just as this beef is imprisoned in the kitchen, so is the woman who must prepare it," Goldberg explains. To playfully remind the spectator that this is women's work, she inserts the image of a yellow human breast peeking out from the animal's ribcage.

A second reference to Rembrandt is a droll re-invention of "Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Jan Deijman." Instead of a male on the autopsy table, there is a female cadaver; and from the hole cut in her abdomen, babies pour out, as well as a circular birth-control pill dispenser. In the background, suspended in air and on a larger scale than the doctor and his corpse, is a necklace with eight little baby medallions, trophies attesting to the fecundity of the wearer.

Birth control pill dispensers fill the firmament of yet another Goldberg reference to the Renaissance, a parody of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus." The artist's Venus is deprived of her feminine beauty and is immediately assigned to child-bearing activities. Goldberg rescues the mythological deity from premature motherhood through the pills, which give her control of her own destiny.

"These [paintings] are protests against women being forced to be childbearing machines. Have kids regardless of the wear and tear on the human body," she says with unconcealed anger.

At the time of the 1999 exhibition, Goldberg was teaching art at a religious high school in Jerusalem. When a supervisor from the Ministry of Education for the religious schools saw her paintings at the Artists House, she gave Goldberg an ulti-



HOLOCAUST FOR SALE: The artist sees a macabre similarity between a bar code on a consumer item and rows of concentration camp prisoners and tattoo numbers

matum: either remove her works from the exhibit or lose her job. Goldberg chose the latter and quit. "There were many critics of the [Artists' House] show," she remembers vividly. "It was criticized as 'immodest,' 'pornographic' and even 'Christian,'" she says with a chuckle.

DEFENDING THE PROBITY OF HER ART, GOLDBERG created a solo exhibition at the Artists House in 2002, which met these challenges head on. Instead of trying to placate her critics, Goldberg ratcheted up the level one notch in a show sardonically entitled "Modesty."

"Look, no bellies, no legs. I even made a painting of my toes next to a shower drain. Toes! Is that modest enough for you?" she asks. In "Modesty," she also addressed the requirement that a married Orthodox woman cover her hair. In a series called "Head Covering," she wraps a woman's entire head, face and neck in a plastic bag to show her as a prisoner choking on her own modesty. "A plastic bag not only prevents the viewer from seeing within, it makes it almost impossible to see out." Her message is clear: covering the head is akin to suffocation.

Even more grisly is a severed head in a nylon sack, lying next to two garbage bags. Like a beheaded Catholic saint, Goldberg envisions herself as a martyr to her art.

Her strident opposition to specific tenets of Orthodox religious practice does not mean she objects to the entire way of life. She chooses to be observant and modest, but not submissive. In public, she wears a dress, not pants, but does not cover her head.

Goldberg's protests are not confined to Orthodox-style motherhood. She also has opinions about the undisciplined architectural practices of Jerusalem that at one time threatened to cover the city in tract apartments, analogous to the "projects" of the United States and Britain.

In a 2006 exhibition entitled "Celestial Jerusalem," at the city's

Mishkenot Sha'ananim, Goldberg takes a cynic's view of the capital's 1960s building boom that saw the construction of a large number of non-descript apartment blocks with a minimum of fuss, expense and concern for aesthetics. The southern neighborhood of Kiryat Hayovel is depicted with its rectangular, unadorned concrete structures, their flat roofs studded with solar heaters, tangles of electrical lines, TV cables, antennae and satellite dishes.

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Next to the buildings is pristine nature: a clear turquoise sky and stately trees in sharp contrast to the human-made gloom. "But nature always seem to be the loser," she says, referring to a painting of a street sign flanked by trees. "The trees have been cut down," she sighs, "but the sign is still there."

Sometimes she even struggles with the raw material of art itself. In a series of landscape paintings in progress, she uses two-meter square sheets of sandpaper as her "canvas." It is especially rough because it is the recycled type, used to smooth out wooden floors and beams. The result is a cityscape scarred from its inception.

Goldberg agrees that she finds conflict in the innocuous. In her most recent painting "Tide," a wave inundates the sand on a beach. The composition is divided strictly into left and right. On the left is the smooth sand; on the right are the rough, agitated waves. "You see," she says with a combination of resignation and humor "I cannot even make a simple beach scene without one half confronting the other."

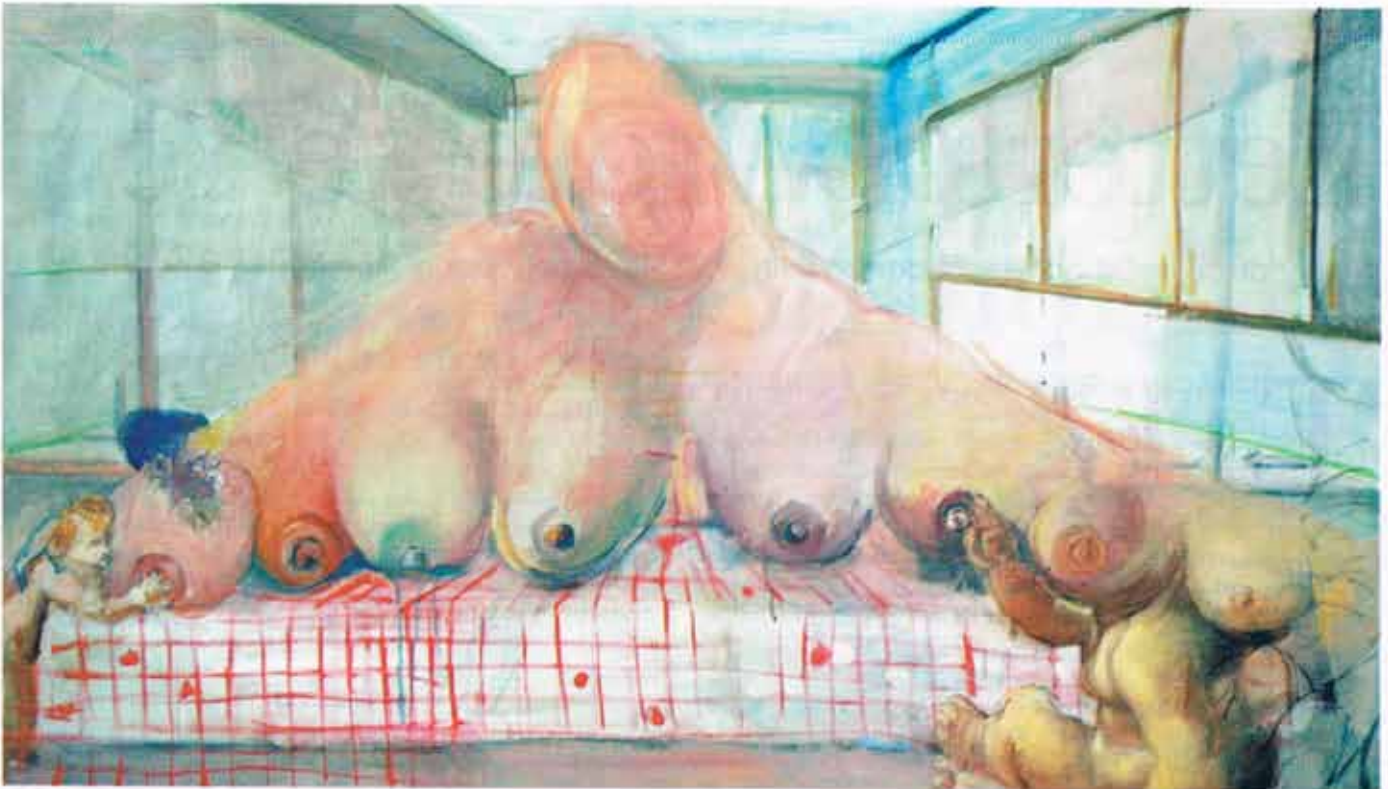
Her proclivities for combativeness have led her to seek professional help. "I went to a psychologist, because I felt myself fighting all the time – against religion, the municipality, myself, you name it." The psychologist asked her, "If there was a deal where you could achieve quiet, would you take it?"

An attempt to answer that provocative question was expressed in "Peak of My Blossoms," a 2007 exhibit at Jerusalem's Beit Shmuel. A series of floral paintings show cut flowers in a morbid fashion. They are not pleasantly arranged in a vase, but are withered, either lying on a table or unceremoniously stuck into an empty water glass. "They are all dying, cut, dried up with no soil." She adds, "These were my attempts at 'quiet' paintings, but I came to the conclusion that the opposite of struggle is death."

Even though she is never at a loss to rail at some injustice, it would be too facile to write her off as a troublemaker, seeking confrontation for its own sake. She too is concerned that some may see her hard-hitting art as "gimmicky" and lacking in substance.



MODESTY: Goldberg shows her own toes in the bath, an ironic statement on what constitutes a modest representation of the female form



BLOODED MOM: Based on Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper, Goldberg's painting represents an eight-breasted woman who feeds her children despite the wear and tear on her own body

HER CONCEPT OF ONGOING STRUGGLE, HOWEVER, has a darker genesis than just plain contrariness. Goldberg's parents are Holocaust survivors. Her father Baruch, who lived in Hamburg, Germany, was sent to Bergen-Belsen at the age of 16. "Bergen-Belsen was a work camp, not a death camp," Goldberg states. "My father saw his mother, sister and three brothers worked to death in front of his eyes."

My father never talked about the Holocaust. He claims he does not remember. But how can you not remember the death of your family?" asks Chana, who is the firstborn of five children.

She believes that the repressed memories of her father, at a time when he was not only an eyewitness to his loved ones' daily fight for survival, but underwent unrelenting forced labor himself, helped form her own sense of struggle without end.

Her father came to Israel in 1950, joined the newly founded Kibbutz Shaalvim and married Chana's mother, Shifra, who had survived the war in hiding in her native Netherlands and arrived here in 1955.

"Because of his style of coping, we [children] never heard stories about our parents' or grandparents' lives. We were cut off from our family's roots." She readily admits that the truncated flowers from the "Peak of My Blossoms" exhibition mirrors her own feelings of rootlessness. Furthermore, Chana's father reacted to his own deprivation in the camps by rebuking his children whenever they complained about being cold or hungry. "You have no idea what cold [or hunger] is," she remembers him saying. To toughen them up, the children were forbidden to wear hats or long stockings even in the winter, she says.

In May, Goldberg recounted anecdotes like these to an audience in Hamburg ("not far from my father's house") as one of the artists who participated in an exhibition devoted to Israel's 60th anniversary. The only Israeli in the exhibit, she departed from her planned speech and began to reminisce about her father. "About halfway through, I broke down."

Her contribution to this recent exhibit was a stark black-and-white

etching of elongated and highly stylized concentration camp prisoners standing at attention. Underneath them are a series of numbers, which refer to the numbers tattooed on prisoners' forearms.

The composition, however, bears an intentional similarity to the bar codes found on practically every consumer object that passes through a checkout counter. She admits without flippancy that the idea came to her when she was absent-mindedly staring at the bar code on her breakfast cereal box. "It is my protest against the Holocaust's commercialization," she says. The same Hamburg gallery, Galerie le Cocon, has invited her back for a December exhibition about second-generation sons and daughters of Holocaust survivors.

GOLDBERG ADMITS THAT SHE HAS HAD LITTLE commercial success. "My art may be good, but it doesn't sell. There is not much chance of people wanting to hang my toes on their mantelpiece," she says with endearing self-deprecation.

Popular response to her controversial works has varied. In Philadelphia, after the "Motherhood" exhibition, in which she questioned the traditional roles of women in Orthodoxy, one of the visitors wrote in the official guest book, "I feel sorry for your poor children. You must be a shitty mother," Goldberg remembers painfully.

"On the other hand, when I was a guest speaker at the Knesset's "Women's Day" in 2005, I brought up the subjects of birth control pills and the amount of control we have – or don't have – over our own bodies. Afterwards, women came to me, cried, hugged me and said that finally someone was willing to speak out."

"In order to succeed as a female painter, you really have to have a strong sense that your art can stand up to the time-consuming demands of motherhood," says Goldberg, presently an art and drama teacher at Jerusalem's Emuna College for religious women. "It's easy for me to think of my own work as nothing more than scribbling." It is this self-doubt that keeps her motor churning. ●