

Finding Rothkowitz: The Jewish Rothko

I'm delighted to be able to give a lecture today on a theme which I'm sure Rothko would've...hated. While I think he would've cautiously condoned the discussions we'll have today about spirituality in his work, the idea that we'd devote the better part of an hour to discussing the 'Jewish Rothko' in particular would undoubtedly have earned a special vituperation from Rothko. But before we do just that, however, it's worth noting that Rothko—and one of the things I love about him is his irascibility—would've been suspicious not just of the subject of my talk, but about you, the audience. For one, of course, Rothko hated academics. When he accepted a position as a visiting professor at Berkeley in the summer of '67, Rothko decided he needed to drive several miles to go for a swim in order to avoid Berkeley's university pool. As he explained in a letter to a friend, "I find talking to academics [a] real labor, and not [one] of love..."¹ The English, likewise, were a species best avoided according to Rothko. After traveling to London to discuss arrangements for a gift to the Tate—discussions that would culminate in the acquisition of a group of the Seagram murals, the core of the present exhibition at Tate Modern—Rothko wrote a testy letter to Tate director Sir Norman Reid, whom he believed had snubbed him during his visit to England. "Your complete personal neglect of my presence in London," sniffed Rothko, "poses for me the following question: Was this

simply a typical demonstration of traditional English hospitality?" While Reid's delicate ministrations to Rothko's ego eventually saved the day—for all his curmudgeonly nature, Rothko had a soft spot for English flattery—Rothko still confided to a friend: "London has been rainy and my impression of the Tate dubious. It has become a junk yard."² So, with the caveat that we might not be Rothko's ideal audience, gathered in a place he found less than hospitable, and assembled to discuss an exhibition in an institution he viewed with suspicion, let's get on with the thorny task of finding the 'Jewish Rothko' which I've promised you in the title for this talk.

SLIDE 2: Works on Christian themes

The dominant approach to the issue of Rothko's spirituality has been to see Rothko as responding to a common Judaeo-Christian dilemma, brought on by a modern crisis of faith. Thus, in Robert Rosenblum's pioneering analysis, "Rothko's paintings seek the sacred in a modern world of the secular."³ Rothko's task—in Rosenblum's eyes—is not particularly Jewish, and if anything takes on a rather Christian tone. "Could it not be," Rosenblum asks, "that the work of Rothko and its fulfillment in the Houston Chapel [,] are only the most recent responses to the dilemma faced by [Caspar David] Friedrich and the Northern Romantics almost two centuries ago?"⁴ That Northern Romantic dilemma, as Rosenblum

formulates it, is how to fill an iconographic vacuum which arises when traditional Christian iconography can no longer provide a channel to the sacred. While some of Rothko's strategies for fostering religious experiences are certainly novel, it's in fact noteworthy how frequently Rothko utilizes what are supposedly outworn religious themes and symbols; both in his early work—he painted multiple entombments and crucifixions, as well as a baptism—and even within his late chapel paintings, with their conscious echoes of Christian altarpieces. Critically for our present purposes, Rosenblum leaves little room for any cultural specificity on Rothko's part. In his desire to establish a "Northern Romantic Tradition," Rosenblum doesn't take any account of what implications Rothko's complicated relationship to Christian iconography might say in light of Rothko's identity as a Jew.

SLIDE 3: Multi-form and classic works

Several critics—not always for the best—have stepped into this breach, offering interpretations which bring Rothko's Jewishness to the foreground. For Robert Pincus-Witten, Rothko's eschewal of figuration in his classic works is an expression of Jewish aniconism. The artist seeks to express the ineffable, that is, by following a rigid interpretation of the Second Commandment, the so-called prohibition against graven images. This

argument, which has at one time or another been foisted on nearly all the Jewish members of the New York School, as well as a bevy of other non-objective Jewish artists, doesn't do much to clarify our thinking. Not only does the trope of Jewish aniconism ring hollow—from the 3rd century murals of Dura-Europos onwards, countless Jewish artists and craftsman much more observant than Rothko have painted the human figure—it takes no account of why Rothko, if he found representational art such anathema, spent more than two decades painting figurative works. In fact, Rothko—by his own admission—gave up figuration rather reluctantly. In a statement for a 1945 exhibition, about two years before he scrubbed away most traces of figuration from his work, Rothko declared:

The Abstract artist has given material existence to many unseen worlds and tempi. But I repudiate his denial of the anecdote just as I repudiate the denial of the material existence of the whole of reality. For art to me is [an] anecdote of the spirit, and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness. Rather be prodigal than niggardly, I would sooner confer anthropomorphic attributes upon a stone, than dehumanize the slightest possibility of consciousness....⁵

These are hardly, I think we can agree, the words of an axe-wielding iconoclast.

When Rothko turned decisively to abstraction in 1947, producing what he called his 'multi-form' paintings, he spoke in revealingly anthropomorphic terms which make him appear almost wistful for figuration. "I think of my pictures as dramas," he wrote in an article describing his new works, "the shapes in the pictures are the performers. They have been created from the need for a group of actors who are able to move dramatically without embarrassment and execute gestures without shame...They are organisms with volition and a passion for self-assertion."⁶

While he takes a more creative tack than Pincus-Witten, the German art historian Werner Haftmann also tries to imbue all of Rothko's classic works with Jewish content. For Haftmann, the "swaying" quality of Rothko's floating rectangles conjures comparisons with the curtains which veiled the entry to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple.⁷ Rothko himself spoke of an "unfolding of veils" in his paintings in an unpublished note from the mid-fifties,⁸ and Haftmann's allegory does helpfully focus our attention on the symbolic pregnant which lurks behind Rothko's surfaces; the tension between revelation and "reveilation," to use the pithy terminology of Marc C. Taylor. By pressing his case beyond analogy to iconography, however, Haftmann ultimately, I think, trivializes the complexity of Rothko's major canvases, as well as the process by which Rothko arrived at his deceptively simple format. And just as Pincus-Witten's claim of aniconism is diluted by its applicability to nearly any Abstract Expressionist painter, so

too Haftmann's talk of Temple curtains might be liberally applied to any number of Rothko's colleagues. Compared—say—to the 'veil' paintings of Morris Louis, Rothko isn't even necessarily the most convincing candidate for Haftmann's argument.

Yet another attempt to pin Rothko's paintings to some sort of Jewish iconography is that of the French critic Michel Butor. For Butor, the horizontal bands of Rothko's classic compositions represent the rungs on an ever-evolving Jacob's ladder.⁹ If anything, Butor's identification is less convincing than Haftmann's. As Dore Ashton remarks dryly, Rothko's so-called Jacob's ladder "was never literal, as [indeed] the ladder of Jacob himself was not [either]."¹⁰ Both Butor and Haftmann's interpretations reveal a discomfort in the face of abstraction, akin to the early interpretations of Rothko which tried to label him as simply the latest in a long line of American landscapists; a tendency epitomized by a *Life Magazine* article which reproduced a smoldering Rothko alongside a photo taken of a sunset. Beyond the reductive tendencies which plague the analyses of Butor, Haftmann, and Pincus-Witten, all three, I'd suggest—and this is what's most important for our current inquiry—set off from flawed assumptions about Rothko's Jewishness. The idea that Rothko, who largely avoided Jewish subjects and symbols during his figurative phases, would suddenly gear his entire mature work around a dominant Jewish motif isn't really all that plausible. If nothing else, the connections which Anna Chave is able to sketch between Rothko's classic format and

his earlier entombment scenes, serve as a healthy corrective against attempts to claim there's anything *intrinsically* Jewish about Rothko's compositions.

SLIDE 4: The Irascibles

Rather than making Rothko a sort of cut-out Jew, with an identity made to order according to the aims of his commentators, we need to locate Rothko within a specific cultural context. As Katy Deepwell suggests, we might begin by viewing Rothko's Jewishness against the backdrop of secular Jewish life in mid-century New York City. After all, Rothko belonged to a Jewish milieu right from the start of his career as a painter. When he and eight other painters—including Adolph Gottlieb—banded together in 1936 to form a group they ironically called 'The Ten,' all nine members were Jewish. As Rothko's biographer James Breslin writes, this truncated minyan, "the first generation of Jewish painters in America, would bond against the boom, against the 1930s alliance between the aristocracy....[and] regionalist painting."¹¹ what Rothko and his friends spitefully christened "the Corn Belt Academy."¹² Later on, Rothko would form close friendships with Barnett Newman, Philip Guston, and the sculptor Herbert Ferber, all three of them Jewish, and it was chiefly through the attention of Jewish critics—namely Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg—that Rothko and his

peers gained widespread recognition. In this context, Deepwell claims that "[Rothko's] development in the Fifties acted as a form of self-affirming ritual, 'a will to Jewish identity' for a modern secular second generation Jew, the negotiation of a synthesis both Jewish and American."¹³ While this analysis manages to set our understanding of Rothko's Jewishness on a better footing than the analyses we heard a few minutes ago, it doesn't really tell the whole story. In fact, Deepwell obscures a key element of Rothko's Jewish identity, and one which I think can guide us to new insights in our search for a 'Jewish Rothko.' As much as he shared with his New York School peers, Rothko was—in actuality—a *first* generation Jew, *not* a second generation Jew; a Russian immigrant who emphasized this national difference throughout his life. To get a full measure of the 'Jewish Rothko' we first need to understand his early life as Marcus Rothkowitz from Dvinsk, and the self-conception as a Russian Jew that, however problematic, stuck with him into adulthood.

SLIDE 5: Dvinsk

The youngest of four children, Marcus Rothkowitz (he changed his name in 1940)¹⁴ was born in Dvinsk—then part of Russia's Pale of Settlement—on September 25, 1903. Dvinsk at the time was a commercial hub in the region with three railroad stations and a strong military presence; not exactly a reassuring fact for

the Jews in the city, who constituted roughly half of the city's 75,000 people.¹⁵ Rothko's father, Joseph Rothkowitz, a pharmacist, was highly literate and the family spoke Russian at home, a mark of their assimilation. While Joseph was an avid Marxist and relatively liberal in his religious practice when Rothko was born, a spike in Jewish persecution in Russia catalyzed him into orthodox observance—mainly as a form of political defiance.¹⁶ While Dvinsk escaped the wave of pogroms which swept through the Pale in 1904, Dvinsk Jews who gathered to protest these atrocities were beaten by the police. Jews also became scapegoats for wider unrest, especially following the massacre of anti-Czarist protesters in St. Petersburg on January 9, 1905. When Dvinsk residents staged a protest the following week, the city was placed under martial law, giving the Cossacks free reign to terrorize its inhabitants, especially, of course, the Jews. According to his close friend Herbert Ferber, Rothko often repeated the story of "being carried in the arms of his mother or a nurse...when a Cossack rode by and slashed at them with a whip. And he had a scar on his nose which he claimed had been caused by the whip of a Cossack."¹⁷ In another story Rothko told frequently to his friends, Rothko himself had seen Cossacks dragging Jews into the woods outside the city and making them dig a mass grave before murdering them.¹⁸ While Breslin argues that there were no pogroms in Dvinsk—and that the mass grave was a later phenomenon of the Holocaust—even this clear embellishment springs from a real,

legitimate terror among the Jews of the Pale in this period¹⁹; especially children we might imagine.

Against this backdrop of persecution, Rothko's father invested his newfound religious energy in the education of his youngest son, who, alone out of his siblings—Sonia became a dentist and Rothko's other brothers became pharmacists like their father—was singled out for religious training.²⁰ A close colleague of Rothko's in the sixties writes,

Being brought up as the youngest child when his father was an Orthodox Jew, Mark during the first nine years of his life was [a] Hebrew infant prodigy. All the rules and rigor of the religion were never sufficiently observed by his mother, not sufficiently to Mark's rigid father [anyways]. And then a complete blank came into his life—oblivion of the Hebrew language and a complete break with temple rigor—after having gone 100 times to the temple during holidays [,] one day at the age of 9 [Rothko] came home and announced to his mother he would never set foot into a temple again.²¹

At the age of 10, three years after his father and brothers had emigrated to the United States—a reaction to the anti-Semitism in Russia as well as economic hardship—

Rothko and his sister and mother followed the rest of the family to Portland, Oregon. Just months after they'd arrived, Rothko's father passed away from colon cancer. According to the account Rothko gave his daughter Kate—contradicting the story we just heard in which he claimed he'd rejected Judaism while still in Russia—for months after his father's death Rothko attended synagogue daily. Within the year, however, he told Kate, he stopped going and swore he'd never go to synagogue again.²² In both of these explanations, as Breslin notes, "Rothko suddenly, in the absence of his father, refuses a rigid religious regime, leading him to reject the Jewish religion itself."²³ And yet, for all the emotional force they have, these dramatic narratives of rejection are undercut by documentary evidence. In his adolescent years in Portland, Rothko continued to compose poems and stories in Hebrew on Jewish themes and marking Jewish holidays.²⁴ As a high school student, he wrote a poem which seems to testify to an enduring connection to Judaism, however much he resented it. He writes: "All the past seems to rush up over me— / All the sad past of the race / Those primitive barbarous people / They live again in my blood, / And I feel myself bound to the past / By invisible chains."²⁵ A key pattern emerges here which I want to trace in Rothko's later years, and specifically in his rare but illuminating comments about Judaism and art. Even despite his sometimes vociferous disavowals of Judaism, there persists what we might call a subterranean connection to the religion of his Russian-Jewish childhood. In his own

youthful words, Rothko remains—I want to suggest—"bound to the past."

SLIDE 6: Synagogue commissions by peers

It's in this context, I think, which we should read Rothko's curiously vehement reaction when several of his closest Jewish peers began to create art for synagogues, or—in the case of Newman—actually design a synagogue. When Herbert Ferber and Adolph Gottlieb accepted invitations to create a sculpture and an ark curtain for the B'nai Israel Synagogue in Millburn, New Jersey, Rothko was absolutely indignant.²⁶ Gottlieb recalls:

Mark used to be caustic about those of us who took commissions, did things for synagogues...

One day at a party at Bernard Reis's house, he said he'd never do a synagogue, if he did anything it would be for a Catholic church. So I said, 'So Mark, why are you beating your breast?'²⁷

In addition to the jealous note sounded by Rothko in this exchange—and Gottlieb clearly picked up on that element—Rothko, as several commentators have noted, reveals an anxiety that, as a Jew, if he were to take on a Jewish project it might start to constrict interpretations of his work.²⁸ Long before Butor, Haftmann, and Pincus-Witten, who

we heard from earlier, Rothko was taking evasive maneuvers against just these sort of interpretations. On the contrary, he *could* imagine doing a Catholic space—as indeed he would in his Houston chapel—without any fear of ambitious exegetes finding a chain of Catholic subtexts running through his paintings.

But this explanation only goes so far towards explaining the vehemence of Rothko's reaction to the idea of creating art for a synagogue. After all, his peers were similarly anxious about being marginalized as 'merely' Jewish artists, yet they still allowed themselves to be enthusiastic about accepting synagogue commissions.

Gottlieb, who in addition to his Millburn ark curtain designed a massive stained-glass window for the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City in 1954, commented: "The idea of being a so-called Jewish artist is like being a professional Jew. I think art is international and should transcend any racial, ethnic, religious, or national boundaries." Newman displayed a similar ambivalence. After participating in a symposium at the Jewish Museum in 1965 entitled "What About Jewish Art?" Newman—somehow feeling duped—wrote an indignant letter to the museum's director. "What the Jewish Museum has done," he fumed, "is to compromise me as an artist because I am Jewish. Please therefore notify all concerned not to ask me to cooperate ever with any of your shows since you have made it impossible for me to show my work in your Museum."²⁹ Yet Newman displayed none of this anxiety about being labeled a Jewish artist two years earlier, in 1963, when

he showed his synagogue model at the Jewish Museum. And following his outburst against being artistically compromised, he continued to give his works Kabbalistic and other Jewish-inspired titles. If Gottlieb and Newman were able to swallow their misgivings about creating works which were Jewish in subject or location, why is it that Rothko—who shared so many other ideological positions in common with these artists—was so intransigent on this point?

SLIDE 7: Guston

I think Rothko's Russian-Jewish background can provide us with a critical subtext here. At a fundamental level, Rothko couldn't identify with—or perhaps couldn't *allow* himself to identify with—the comfortable, assimilated image of Jewish-American life which his peers drew upon and projected in their synagogue creations. The Jewish experience represented by an upscale, suburban congregation like that of Millburn, New Jersey, for example, was a far cry from Rothko's own formative Jewish experiences in Dvinsk. Likewise, where Newman could imagine a perfect symbolic synthesis of Jewish-American identities—in Newman's synagogue worshippers sit in spaces designed like baseball dugouts and bleachers, and the *bimah* is formed into a sort of pitcher's mound³⁰—Rothko identified with a Jewish life at odds with, and most often threatened by, any sort of nationalism. The stories he told in later life of witnessing

Cossack atrocities locate persecution at the center of Rothko's sense of Jewish identity. More than that, these stories function—I think quite deliberately—to set this Jewishness over and against the comparatively easy Jewish life of his peers. In his own later years, Philip Guston took to retelling his biography in a way that connected him to the Russian Jewish world of his parents and his favourite writer, Isaac Babel. As one friend recalls, “[Guston] told the story of his having been conceived in Babel's native Odessa, a love child, with such conviction that it was a surprise to discover later that it could not possibly have been true.”³¹ But where Guston could only *imagine* himself riding like Babel with the Cossack red army—as in *To I.B.*, which you see here—Rothko could claim to bear the *actual* scar of a Cossack knout. However embellished Rothko's accounts of Cossack brutality might be, they lay claim to an ‘authentic’ Jewish experience, and one which has little to do with the affirmational image of postwar Jewish life which stirred the creativity of Rothko's colleagues.

If Rothko bristled at the prospect of ‘doing a synagogue,’ interestingly however, this didn't translate into a total rejection of the idea of creating work on a Jewish subject or for a Jewish space. While Rothko's background contributed to his disinterest in projects celebrating Jewish-American life, at the same time it also sensitized him to other, darker, Jewish resonances and possibilities for his paintings. “In some profound way,” Rothko confided in a friend, the image of the mass grave he claimed he'd witnessed as a child in Dvinsk “was locked into his

painting.”³² Rothko and his family emigrated from Russia on the eve of World War I, and it's doubtful whether they'd have survived the following decades if they'd stayed in Russia. Less than a quarter of the 50,000 Jews in Dvinsk survived the First World War alone, only to face near extermination twenty years later during the Second World War.³³ The decimation of the Jewish population in Rothko's hometown, and throughout Europe, weighed heavily on Rothko throughout his life, and it's significant that whatever event he saw as a child took on, in his later recollections, the imagery of the Holocaust, a mass grave; as if a part of Rothko had remained in the Pale to suffer the fate of its Jews. When Haftmann visited Rothko in 1959 to ask him to participate in *Documenta*, even offering him his own room for exhibiting his work—something Rothko always found hard to resist—Rothko declared that “as a Jew, he had no intention of exhibiting his works in Germany, a country that had committed so many crimes against Jewry.”³⁴ In a later conversation with Haftmann, after some consideration, Rothko changed his terms. He informed Haftmann that if he could “manage to have even a very small chapel of expiation erected in memory of Jewish victims, he would paint *this* without any fee—even in Germany.”³⁵ While such a project was left tantalizingly unfulfilled, its very suggestion by Rothko helps fill in our picture of the artist's Jewishness. If Rothko struggled to find a *positive* image of Jewish life which he could identify with, in the face of Jewish loss and persecution he still felt himself keenly tied to a wider Jewish

community. Had it ever been consummated, Rothko's Holocaust chapel might have even offered a measure of "expiation" not just for the Germans, but maybe even for the artist himself; assuaging a sense of guilt at having left Russia, and the Jewish world it represented for him. Gottlieb even seemed to detect something of this sort lurking behind Rothko's caustic remarks about synagogue art. To return to the question he posed to Rothko with some added context, we might ask: if you don't feel guilty, "Mark, why are you beating your breast?"

SLIDE 8: A Rothkowitz Synagogue?

As we've seen so far in this talk, attempts to pin down a Jewish Rothko don't yield any easily exportable answers. Efforts to spy some sort of strict aniconism in his works, or deliberate references to the Temple of Jerusalem, say, or to Jacob's ladder, remain unconvincing at best, and at worst misleading about Rothko's works as well as his biography. We found a more fruitful approach to Rothko's Jewishness when we set him alongside his Abstract Expressionist peers, looking first at what he shared with his Jewish colleagues in New York City, and then of course what set him apart: namely, his upbringing in Dvinsk, and his continued Russian self-identification. Unpacking Rothko's complex relation to this heritage allowed us to develop a nuanced picture of Rothko that cast him neither as a traditional Jew, in

Pincus-Witten's model, nor quite the apostate which Rothko sometimes enjoyed playing for the benefit of an audience. For all the vehemence with which he rejected the idea of creating works for a synagogue, or his small iconoclasm—Guston's daughter recalls Rothko serving prawns at a Yom Kippur break fast—Rothko felt himself ineluctably bound to other Jews, and in an even more closely-guarded way to the Judaism he professed to have rejected as an adolescent. When asked in 1997 whether Rothko had ever discussed Greenberg's formalist aesthetics with him, the Jewish sculptor George Segal responded: "No, instead he referred to his Jewish roots. What he said to me was, 'Studying Jewish history will give you the opportunity to deal with spiritual states.'"³⁶ In a rare moment, and one which I'm sure he didn't intend for public consumption, Rothko—who spoke frequently about the experience with the "transcendent" he hoped viewers would have before his paintings³⁷—opens the door to meanings in his work which might resonate not only with religion in general, but Judaism in particular. Taken together with other intimations which we've picked up on over the past half hour or so, maybe we can't locate a specific Jewish content in Rothko's paintings, but we can do something else: at least in an imaginative sense, we can put Rothko in a Jewish place. Simply put, there already exists a Rothko Chapel, but is it possible to conceive of a Rothko Synagogue, a Rothkowitz Synagogue, as it were?

By now, I think we can all predict what Rothko's reaction would be to this

kind of proposal, but I think it's well worth seeing what we might be able to gain from reading him against the grain. In our effort to sketch out a vision of a Rothko synagogue, we can take our first cues from the Rothko Chapel. Rothko accepted the commission for the chapel paintings in the spring of '64, at the invitation of John and Dominique de Menil, devout Catholics who'd been deeply influenced by the arts patronage of Father Couturier in France. At the project's inception, the Houston chapel was intended to serve as the culminating monument at the end of the mall of the University of St. Thomas, a Catholic institution administered by members of the Basilian order. While the chapel would eventually be dedicated as a nondenominational site, separate from the university, it's important to emphasize that Rothko willingly accepted the doctrinal context of the chapel as it was initially conceived, even consenting at one point to priests' requests to place the numbers 1 to 14 along the outside of the chapel, which would've connected Rothko's fourteen canvases to the stations of the cross.³⁸ Beyond that, it was Rothko who lobbied heavily for the implementation of the chapel's octagonal plan, with its precedent in Italian and Russian Orthodox church design,³⁹ instead of the initial square layout envisioned by the chapel's main architect, Philip Johnson. In thinking through the installation scheme for the chapel, which was left completely under his own control, Rothko explicitly chose to evoke Christian iconography for his viewers. On the east, west, and north walls of the chapel, Rothko

organized his canvases into triptychs, and on the southern entrance wall—where he placed a single panel composed of a black rectangle set in maroon—he intentionally echoed the placement of the Last Judgment mosaic in the basilica of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello, Italy; a tremendous influence for him in later years. For Robert Rosenblum—who I mentioned at the start of this lecture—the Rothko Chapel marks the apotheosis of a Romantic quest to articulate spiritual experience without recourse to traditional religious iconography. Thus, for Rosenblum all the iconographic parallels we just noted—right down to the crucial triptych layout—are merely “allusion[s] to essentially moribund religious traditions.”⁴⁰ For my own part, I'd actually draw the opposite conclusion. What's impressive about the chapel is how much a project which at first appears to depart radically from the religious past, in fact engages with—and actually even depends upon—traditional iconography. The religious encounter which Rothko hopes to achieve in his work can only reach its highest expression, Rothko makes clear in the Chapel, when the viewer approaches it with the kind of visual and spiritual expectations which are schooled by religious tradition.

For the myriad reasons which we've discussed, Rothko hesitated to extend this insight to Judaism. And yet the liturgical rhythms and ritual features of a synagogue have an intriguing potential to structure new ways of looking at some of Rothko's classic works; providing just the sort of focused attention and spiritual associations he felt free to draw on from a Christian

setting. While we dismissed the idea that Rothko intended to evoke the curtains of the Holy of Holies in his work, if we allow ourselves to imagine certain paintings set alongside an ark in a synagogue, maybe a classic Rothko might actually be coaxed into speaking with a Jewish voice after all. In the velvety sheen of so many of Rothko's late canvases, we might sense a parallel with the *parokhet*, the curtain which veils the scrolls of the Torah in the synagogue's ark. Perhaps even more acutely, I'd argue, the architectural analogies which Rothko pursues in his Harvard and Seagram murals can enter into dialogue with the structure and function of the Torah ark itself, the *aron kodesh*. In the Seagram Murals, Rothko responded to the doors and windows of the Four Seasons restaurant where his works were intended to hang; as Breslin puts it, Rothko's paintings attempted to "deepen the architecture" of that space.⁴¹ If Rothko's paintings were intended to draw metaphorical sustenance from the mundane acts of coming and going and opening and closing in the context of a crowded dining room, how much more so can these works respond to the ritualization of such acts before the ark in a synagogue? The ark, drawn open and shut through the course of the liturgy, physically embodies the 'dis/closure' of meaning, as it were, which Rothko hoped to conjure in his canvases. And just as thinking of Rothko's hazy portals alongside the ark can heighten our desire to enter these paintings, to delve into their misty centers, so too Rothko's murals might find a reciprocal capacity to stimulate Jewish worship; the repetition of their

rectangular frames returning the eye back again to the ark, to the promise of what it shelters inside.

If this imaginary shul seems too much a flight of fancy, it's worth recalling that the Seagram murals—never installed in their intended location, and subsequently dispersed throughout the world—were in a sense always *destined* for an imaginary place. In the recognition and articulation of such spaces, perhaps theologians—who've long stood rapt before Rothko's canvases—find a special vocation, one which flirts with roles traditionally reserved for critics and curators. For scholars of Jewish art—that nebulous and fantastically troubling term—this can be a useful lesson. Sometimes, in the best possible way, 'Jewish art' is something we need to make up, to imagine.... We only have to hope that Rothko is willing to forgive us....

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- ¹ Rothko, Writings, 154.
 - ² Rothko, Writings, 151.
 - ³ Rosenblum, 218.
 - ⁴ Rosenblum, 218.
 - ⁵ Rothko, Writings, 45.
 - ⁶ Rothko, Writings, 58-59.
 - ⁷ Ashton, 178.
 - ⁸ Rothko, Writings, 112.
 - ⁹ Ashton, 189.
 - ¹⁰ Ashton, 189.
 - ¹¹ Breslin, 100.
 - ¹² Rothko, Writings, 36.
 - ¹³ Deepwell, 7.
 - ¹⁴ Breslin, 125.
 - ¹⁵ Breslin, 10.
 - ¹⁶ Breslin, 18.
 - ¹⁷ Breslin, 13.

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- ¹⁸ Breslin, 17.
¹⁹ Breslin, 18.
²⁰ Breslin, 15.
²¹ Breslin, 19.
²² Breslin, 27.
²³ Breslin, 27.
²⁴ Breslin, 19.
²⁵ Breslin, 44.
²⁶ Breslin, 627, n. 21.
²⁷ Breslin, 377.
²⁸ Nodelman, 306.
²⁹ Godfrey, 53.
³⁰ Thomas Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971) 110.
³¹ Corbett, 45.
³² Breslin, 17.
³³ Breslin, 41.
³⁴ Ashton, 177.
³⁵ Ashton, 177-78.
³⁶ Weiss, 373.
³⁷ Rothko, *Writings*, 59.
³⁸ Nodelman, 307.
³⁹ Taylor, 94.
⁴⁰ Rosenblum, 216.
⁴¹ Breslin, 403.

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