



**M I C R O C A L L I G R A P H Y**  
**A N D M Y S T I C I S M :**  
**T H E A R T I S T S**  
**O F T Z F A T , I S R A E L**



TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
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## IT TAKES THE JEWISH WORLD A WHOLE YEAR TO READ THE TORAH.

Containing the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—a Torah scroll, hand-lettered in Hebrew according to a strictly proscribed format—is about 250 feet long when unrolled. It is read in weekly portions, beginning with the creation of the universe and concluding with the Israelites' preparations to enter the Promised Land. The typical bound edition in Hebrew and English, with commentaries, is well over a thousand pages.

Now imagine the entire Torah rendered in a single 36-by-24-inch work of graphic art. All 79,976 words, in minuscule script, form an image of the surrounding roads and trees, the buildings, gated walls and bricks of the *Bet Hamikdash*, the Temple in Jerusalem that was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. With a magnifying glass every letter is clearly legible.

## THIS IS MICROCALLIGRAPHY: THE LETTERFORMS OF THE BIBLE AS ART.

The picture is the work of Moshe Dadoun, one of the microcalligraphers of Joseph Caro Street in Tzfat, Israel. Here, prints, posters and postcards of images formed from minute Hebrew calligraphy fill racks that extend the open-air shops and galleries into the narrow, cobblestone passageway. Few of the images are as complex as the *Bet Hamikdash*, nor are their texts as weighty. Most contain one book of the Bible—a tour de force itself. The Psalms become King David's harpstrings. *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes), with its "Time to be born, time to die," is rendered as an hourglass. *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs) coils itself into *Chassidim* (pious ones) dancing on *Simchat Torah*, the day when the year's cycle of Torah readings ends and begins anew with "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."

## TZFAT IS A CITY OF GRAPHIC ARTISTS, SILVERSMITHS, JEWELRY DESIGNERS, POTTERS, GLASS-BLOWERS.

It is also the epicenter of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, in which each letter of a sacred text takes on a symbolic spiritual significance. It is no accident that Kabbalah and the art form of microcalligraphy have converged here. In the Synagogue Quarter, or Old City, of which Joseph Caro Street is

the main thoroughfare, shop after shop display, in addition to works of microcalligraphy, handcrafted *mezzuzot* (holders for the Biblical verses to be affixed to the doorposts of one's house), *kippot* (skullcaps or yarmulkes), *tallitot* (prayer shawls), *kiddush* cups (for the blessings over the wine), *havdalah* sets (for the ceremony that marks the end of Shabbat), *chanukiyot* (Chanukah menorahs), and seder plates (for the ceremonial foods of Passover). There are also scarves, jewelry, pottery, candles, and the ubiquitous *hamsa*, the hand-shaped amulet of Arabic origin that is said to ward off the evil eye. The *hamsa* motif is incorporated into key chains, earrings, and every sort of *tchotchke* (knickknack).

Down a steep flight of steps is the Artists' Quarter, where, since World War II, a more secular group of painters, printmakers and sculptors have made their homes and studios. Their work bears the stamp of the Bauhaus, of post-Impressionist and Expressionist Europe, stylistically suspended in time as if in mid-brushstroke. It is here that many Jewish disciples of



Hand-colored lithograph by Chaim Yair of chassidim dancing with the Torah—rendered in the text of the Song of Songs—one of the microcalligraphers' most popular subjects.

Kandinsky, Klee, Chagall, et. al., who were forced to flee Germany, France, Czechoslovakia and Poland, resettled. Those who've survived into their 70s and 80s continue to exhibit in galleries filled with potted plants, sleeping cats, and stained glass trinkets. If anything, the artists of Tzfat are resourceful and versatile. Whatever subject matter and style you like, they



Detail from lithograph with grapes and wine bottle by Arkady Drasinin.

have painted, can paint, and will sell you. Do you favor street scenes? A romantic Tzfat (or Parisian) scene in the style of Utrillo hangs next to a Picasso-like collage. Interested in mother-and-child pictures? A Kathe Kollwitz-style portrait hangs next to a Matisse-like still life with fruit; a Chagall-like violinist of the *shtetl* (Eastern European ghetto); and a Kandinsky-esque abstraction. All done by the same artist.

Now, with the ever-present threat of suicide bombers, dollar-laden tourists are far between, and the artists seem somewhat desperate. Especially the younger, newer immigrants from the former Soviet Union. "Ninety shekels" (about \$20), they might cry as you walk by, rushing out to show you a small print or painting. If you ignore the invitation, "Eighty shekels," might be the next bid. As you turn the corner, you can hear, "Seventy-five, seventy-five."

Unless you are Julian Schnabel or Lucian Freud, it's not easy making your living as an artist anywhere these days. And Israeli artists are having a rougher time than most. Should you stop, however, and express interest, you will find yourself getting a studio tour, a glass of tea, a personal philosophy, a politi-

cal opinion or two, a résumé listing gallery shows around the world, and an invitation to his or her booth at the next Judaica fair in New York or Cleveland. And maybe a new friend.

### AT 3,000 FEET, TZFAT IS ISRAEL'S HIGHEST CITY. SOME SAY THAT ITS PROXIMITY TO HEAVEN MAKES IT ISRAEL'S HOLIEST CITY.

Built high on a hillside in the Galilee, Tzfat (also spelled Safed) is about four hours north of Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport, about 30 minutes south of the Lebanese border. During these days of the Palestinian Intifada, most travelers take the Ayalon highway along the Mediterranean. Although Tzfat is more than an hour from the coast, the direct route passes through the West Bank cities of Ramallah, Nablus and Jenin, and numerous Israeli checkpoints. Cutting east from the coast at the Akko Junction, it's a beautiful drive through lush hills and farmlands dotted with new, red-tile-roofed housing developments and with dusty Arab villages. Because hotel accommodations are scarce in Tzfat, especially during Jewish holidays and the summer klezmer music festival, many visitors make day trips from Tiberius, on the Sea of Galilee, less than an hour to the south. Popular with Christian pilgrims, Tiberius is a lakeside resort and the site of the Church of St. Peter and the Mount of Beatitudes, where Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

In Tzfat, as in Jerusalem, historians and archeologists have unearthed layers of conquest. First settled by Crusaders and Ottomans, after the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the city soon became home to poets, intellectuals, and notable rabbis like Joseph Caro, the 16th century author of the *Shulchan Aruch*—still an authoritative guide to Orthodox law and practice—who founded synagogues, schools and Kabbalah centers.



Solders with machine guns slung over their shoulders are a presence in every public place in Israel, including Joseph Caro Street in Tzfat, a virtual open-air art bazaar.

**HERE, TO GAIN ENLIGHTENMENT,  
TZADDIKS READ BETWEEN,  
BEHIND, AND ALL AROUND THE  
LINES OF SACRED BOOKS.**

The central text of Kabbalah is the *Zohar*, a 700-year-old Torah commentary written in the form of a mystical novel about a holy man who wanders through the Galilee discovering the secrets of the Torah, the ten *sefirot* or attributes of God. For example, the first *sefirah* is *Keter*, the crown, the ocean of unbounded being. The second and third are *Chochmah*, the father or beginning point, and *Binah*, the divine mother, a palace of understanding. It's a complex, difficult journey into a spiritual reality beyond normal consciousness.

But as readers of *People* magazine know, a more popular form of Kabbalah has emerged of late, and devotees include Madonna, other celebrities, and the thousands who attend spirituality workshops.

According to Vanessa Lampert, author of *Practical Kabbalah for Magic and Protection*, "Kabbalah is a simple and accurate method that defines our place in the universe and teaches us how to connect to our higher selves and protect ourselves from negative influences. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet can help one attain wholeness and shield oneself against misfortune." *Aleph*, the first letter, represents creativity, and *bet* represents peace. Both, writes Lampert, are symbols of divine protection against the *dybbuks* who cause mischief and the people who wish us harm. With meditations, intonations of various names for God, and pathways to healing energies, practical Kabbalah is much like a yogi's study of the chakras. And, like asrams in Mumbai for yogis, Tzfat is where one goes to study with the masters.

**FOR ALL ITS ARTY  
SPIRITUALITY, TZFAT ALSO  
EXHIBITS EVERY IRONY OF  
MODERN ISRAEL.**

There are bus fumes, traffic jams, and not enough parking places. A mobile phone is attached to every ear or belt loop. The streets are elbow-to-elbow with Chassidim (the men in black hats and long black gabardine coats, women and girls in long dresses); with large Modern Orthodox families (men in crocheted kippot, women and girls in ankle-length blue-jean skirts, many projecting the accents of their native Brooklyn); secular Israelis (men in T-shirts with American brand logos, women in tank tops and belly-button-baring capris); tourists (both sexes in khaki shorts with backpacks and water bottles); and groups of uniformed soldiers (the young men and women with M-16's over their shoulders who are present everywhere in Israel—here eating ice cream cones against the heat).



The book of Jonah by Malka BenShimon.

A whole book, an encyclopedia, could be written about the fine points of wardrobing in Israel and what each style of hat, kippah, stocking, sandal, skirt length, etc., says about one's degree of religious observance and group affiliation. Suffice it to say that all creeds—born into families of the deepest faith, or recently enlightened (and perhaps also awaiting the coming of the Messiah, whom they believe will alight here), or just looking around and taking it all in—brush elbows in Tzfat. As the *Let's Go* guidebook points out, for every genuine devotee there are a dozen students at the Lubavitch-run Ascent Institute who just yesterday were Agnostic real-estate agents or Buddhist backpackers.

## EVEN SOME OF THE ARTISTS MIGHT BE BA'ALEI T'SHUVA (BORN AGAIN).

The first shop on Joseph Caro Street, packed with brass vessels and dangling bead jewelry, is run by Chaim Yair, 65, who displays a series of pictures of joyful Chassidim singing and dancing with the Torah, formed from beautifully legible, sixteenth-of-an-inch-high letterforms. Describing himself as an elder of the seventh generation of an old family of microcalligraphers, Yair surprises a visitor by warning: "Don't listen to any of the others! The guy next door, he used to be a bartender."

Next door, indeed, is the gallery and studio of Morris Dahan, 42, a self-taught artist. In addition to microcalligraphy, Dahan exhibits his semi-abstract, color-block oil paintings and watercolors, collages and limited-edition prints. "Kabbalah means 'to receive,'" he explains. "Not all of us can receive. First you have to search." Yes, Dahan admits, he was formerly a bartender. And he ran a restaurant. And worked for the Jewish National Forest. And was a set designer for films. "But it's not like one day I woke up and said, I'm going to be a microcalligrapher," he says. "I'm a jumpy soul. This art is coming from my soul. One day I saw something that changed my perspective. I was able to read the subject, to feel the texts as they are coming from the Bible."

Across the street is the studio of Moshe Dadoun, 60, who emigrated from Casablanca, Morocco, in 1962. In addition to his *Bet Hamikdash*, Dadoun has created a composition of each of the five books of Moses, each of which took ten months to two years to complete. "My uncle was a rabbi and a *sofer* (scribe) who wrote Torahs and mezzuzot. I started learning from him when I was 17, 18 years old," he says. "First I was a policeman, an investigator, but I began painting to give expression to my strong feelings about Judaism."

The shop of Moshe Yair, 43, son of Chaim, is right next door to Dadoun's. "I am the eighth generation of our family here," he says. "After I got out of the Air Force, *baruch Hashem* (thank God), I began by learning to write very small letters for mezzuzot. My grandfather was the originator of all of this," he claims, with a wave of the hand that seems to encompass his family's art and dismiss all the others.

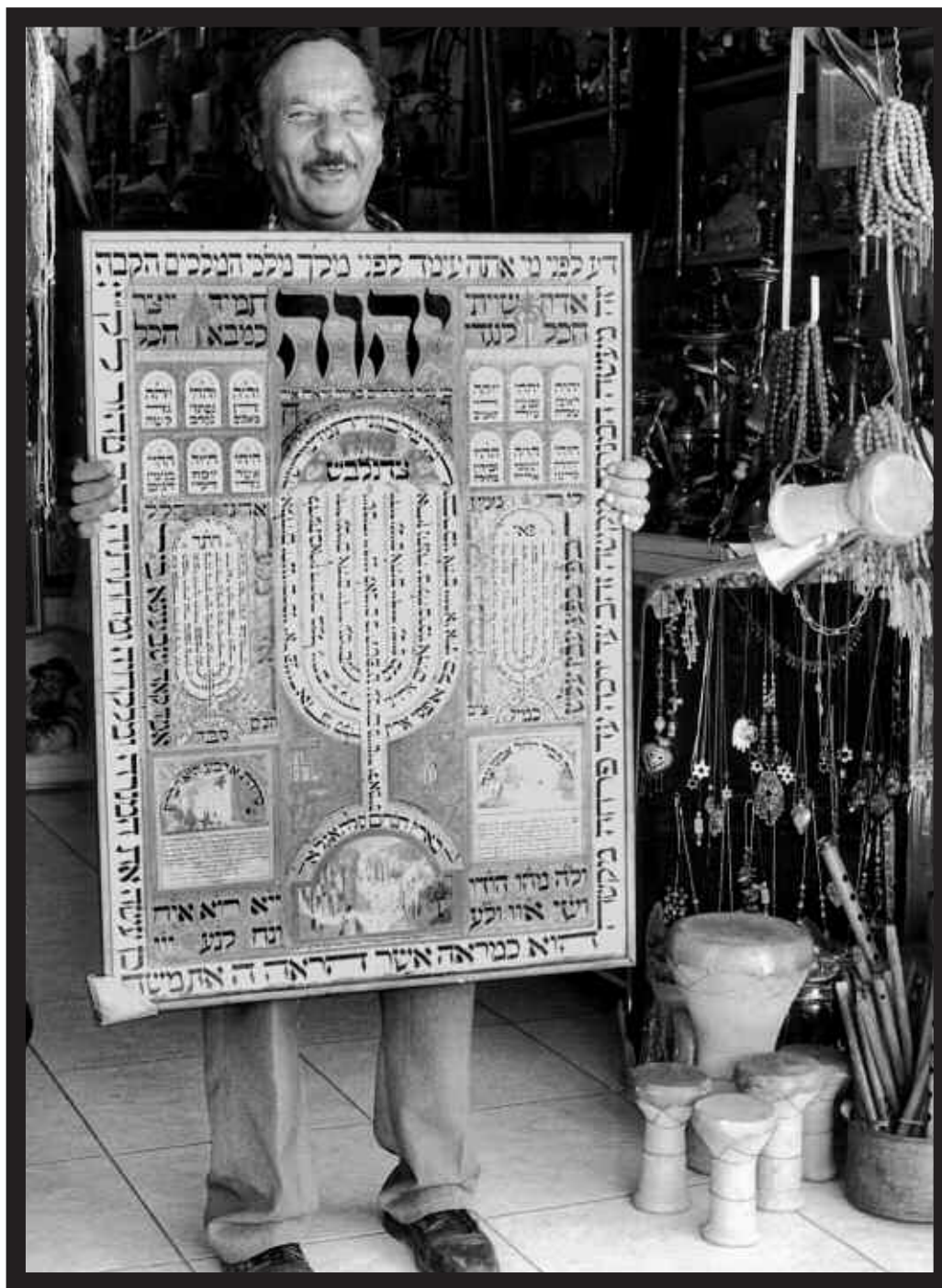
"He learned everything from the mystics."

## AND IN TZFAT, ONE CAN FIND A MYSTIC ON JUST ABOUT EVERY CORNER.

As a case in point, on the steps of the bright blue-painted shop on the next corner—blue being the color of *el*, the highest level of godliness and sort of the theme color of Tzfat—stands a man with a long white beard, in black fur hat, gleaming black brocade coat, knickers, white stockings. In a friendly French accent he introduces himself as Yaacov Kaszemacher, photographer, painter of mystical compositions, and computer artist. It is *Succot* (the week-long commemoration of the booths in which the Israelites lived for 40 years in the desert), and Kaszemacher, in the *yom tov* (holiday) garb of the Chassidim, takes visitors inside to see his geometric compositions based on Kabbalistic numerology—for example, a ring of 18 cubes represents *chai*, or life—and to demonstrate the video editing capabilities of his computer. "I have all the software," he says, clicking on a slide show of images of a *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) celebration that few would gain access to photograph. Has he always done this? No. He formerly ran light shows at the Open Light Circus in Paris and at the Fillmore East in New York's East Village. Did he wear the same outfit then? No. But after his spiritual awakening in 1971 he emigrated to Tzfat and made the transition from hippie to Torah-observant Chasid.

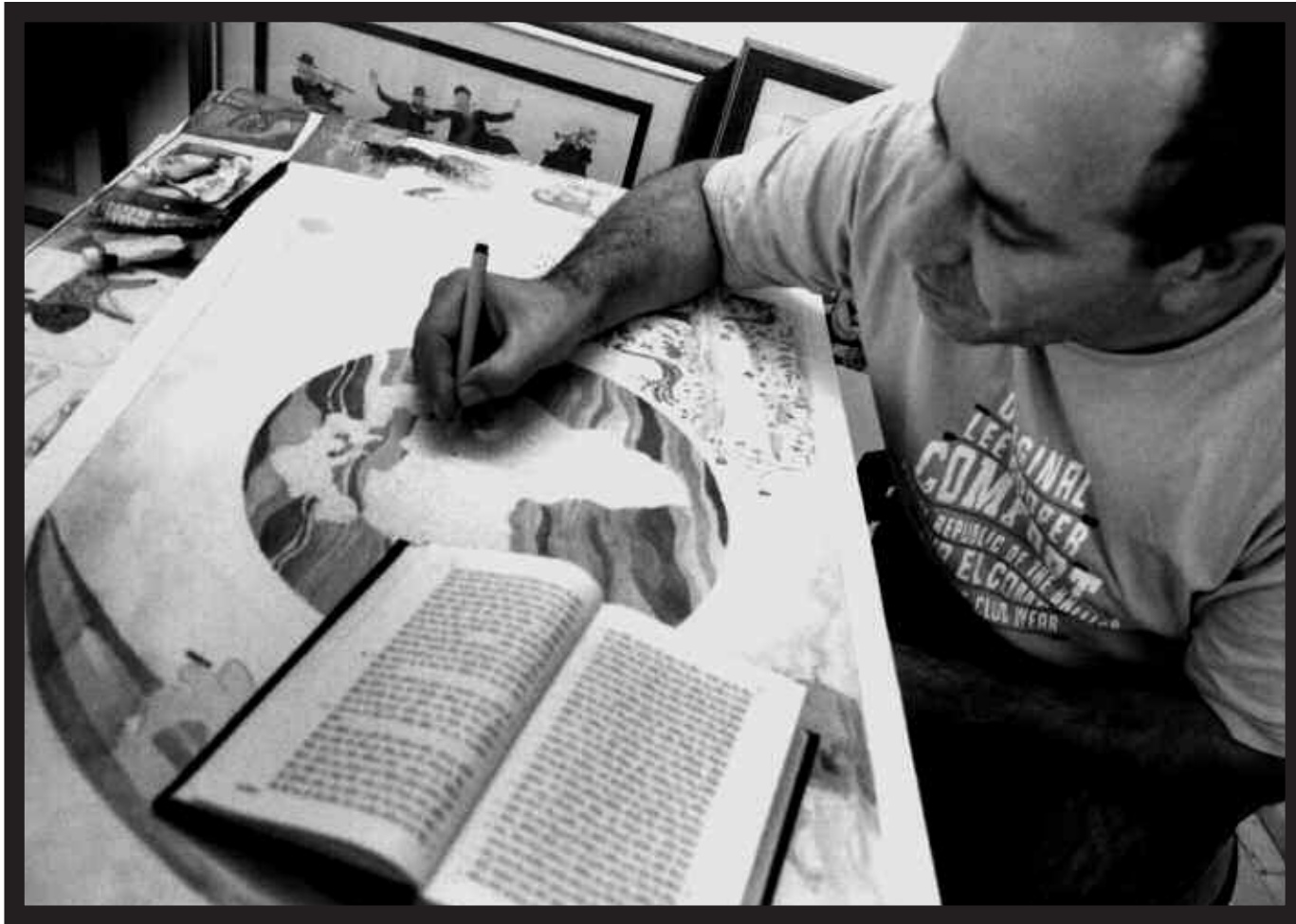


Actual-size  
microcalligraphy  
by Morris Dahan.



The Microcalligraphers  
of Joseph Caro Street:

**CHAIM YAIR**,  
the seventh in an  
eight-generation Tzfat  
family of microcalligra-  
phers, in the doorway  
of his shop. He holds  
a poster of Hebrew  
calligraphy taken from  
the Yom Kippur prayer:  
"Know whom you  
stand before. You  
are standing before  
the King of Kings."



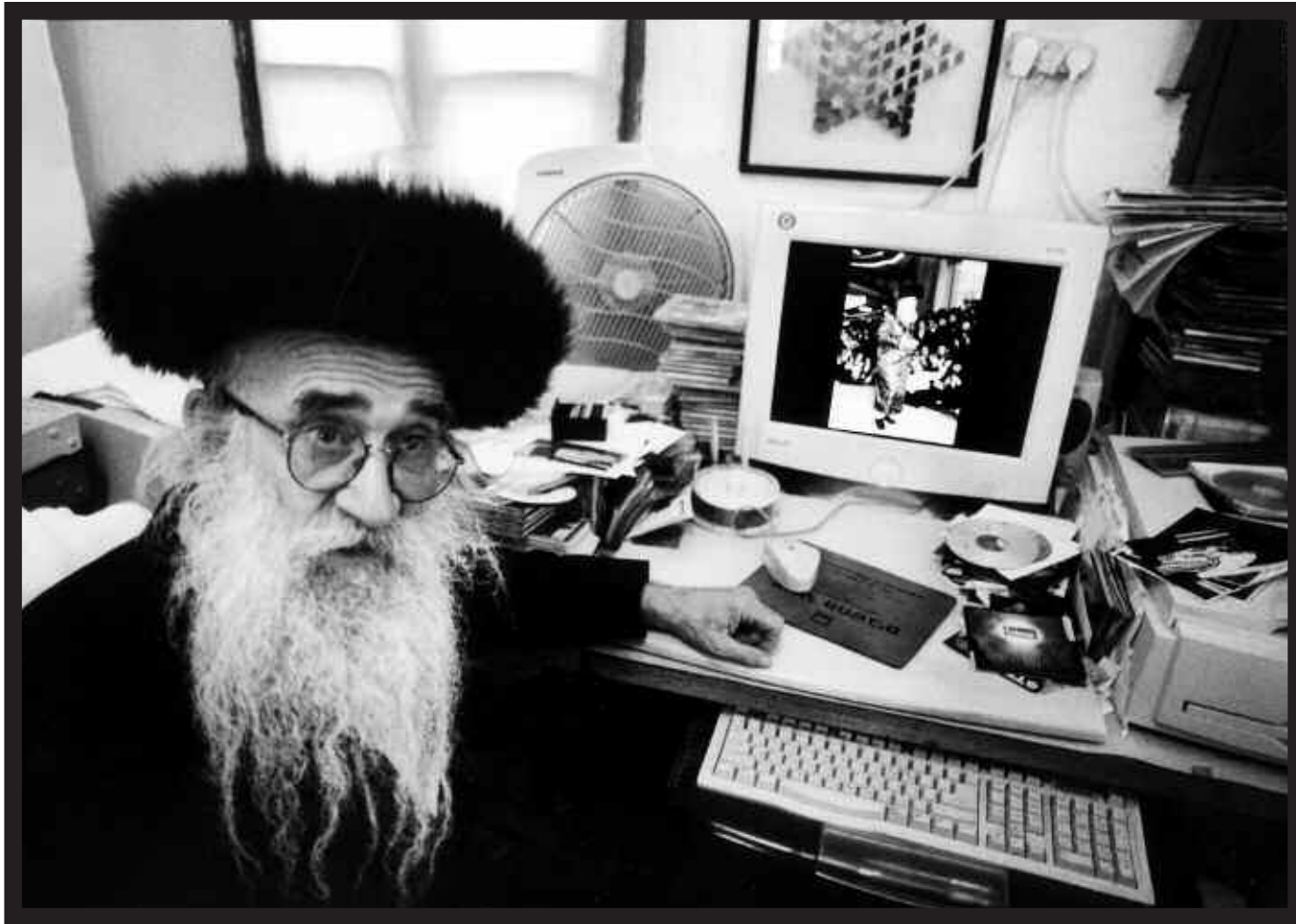
**MORRIS DAHAN**, whose gallery is next door to Chaim Yair's, letters a composition representing the creation of the world from the text of Genesis. As he writes in tiny script, he refers to the *Chumash*, the Hebrew Bible in book form. Each picture takes up to two years to complete. Reproductions made for sale are hand-colored. Dahan, a Tzfat-born, self-described "jumpy soul," says that he came to feel the texts of the Bible after experimenting with several other careers.



**MOSHE DADOUN**, whose studio is across the street from Morris Dahan's, shows my husband, Julius Rabinowitz, an accomplished *ba'al korei* (Torah reader), his microcalligraphy picture of the *Bet Hamikdash* (Temple in Jerusalem), which incorporates all 79,796 words of the Torah. Customers for this genre of art are often familiar with the minutiae of sacred texts. When examined under a magnifying glass (see cover photo), every word must be correct. A former policeman, Casablanca-born Dadoun learned calligraphy at age 17 from his uncle, a Torah scribe.



**MOSHE YAIR**, whose shop is next door to Moshe Dadoun's (and down the street from his father Chaim's), spent three months lettering the Song of Songs on an ostrich egg. The eighth in the Yair dynasty of microcalligraphers, Yair says that he learned from his grandfather, an originator of the current microcalligraphy renaissance.



**YAAKOV KASZEMACHER**, owner of the last—and most colorful—shop on the street, is a French-born former hippie and light show impresario at the Fillmore East. In his *yom tov* garb—it's a day on which work is permitted—Mr. Kaszemacher demonstrates the video editing software on his computer, on which he also creates geometric compositions based on Kabbalistic numerology. For example, the two nestled stars in the framed picture above the monitor form 13 windows, designed to represent marital and spiritual unity. "According to Kabbalah," he explains, "the number 13 is the value for the word *ahava* (love) and for *echad* (one)."

How did this competition in arts and commerce get started? Yaakov Kaszemacher credits the revival of microcalligraphy, not to the Yair family or to Moshe Dadoun's grandfather, but to Nechama Weiss, a Chassidic woman who, he says, rarely leaves the house. "She has done all the classics for forty years. She did not make any money," he asserts. "Everybody copied her." Some denizens of Tzfat claim that the first on the block was really Arkady Drasnin, a Russian who died in 2002, but whose graceful compositions with grapes and wine bottles are displayed everywhere. Others give the most credit to Malka BenShimon, wife of the caretaker of the Joseph Caro Synagogue, where prints for sale bear her charming black-and-white depictions of the Psalms in the form of an old-world water carrier and of the words of Jonah as an undersea composition.

**ACCORDING TO ART HISTORIANS,  
MICROCALLIGRAPHY HAS BEEN  
PRACTICED SINCE THE MIDDLE AGES.**

Inspired by the Islamic tradition in which the written word was transformed into elaborate decorative patterns, Jews around the world have used minuscule script to render abstract or figurative designs for more than a thousand years. Scholars at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York have identified works from Egypt and Israel that date from the tenth century. A JTS exhibition entitled "Micrography: Hebrew Word as Art" featured pieces from Italy, Germany, France, Spain, England, and Israel that included a 1204 *machzor* (High Holy Day prayerbook), an 1824 calendar for counting the *omer* (days between Passover and *Shavuot*, the holiday that commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai), and portraits of early rabbinic, political and literary personalities rendered in the words of their own writings.

Rivalries aside, today's artists employ techniques used for generations, with slightly more modern tools. Morris Dahan hand-letters with an .05 Rapidograph and India ink after sketching his composition in pencil. And all agree that microcalligraphy cannot be done for more than two or three hours a day. "It's too hard on your health. It's not good for the eyes," explains Dahan. "You have to be very concentrated. Doing this is not as exacting as being a sofer, but every letter has to be correct," he points out.

Dahan says he starts with a basic idea, say, Genesis or Creation, and begins working with the shapes of a globe, creatures, Eden, Noah. For Exodus he goes beyond the obvious storytelling of Moses parting the Sea of Reeds, and uses the metaphors of darkness to light, slavery to freedom. He works with one eye on composition, using a magnifying glass to see the tiny letters, one eye on the *Tanach*, the Biblical text.

"I could teach you in five seconds to write so small," he says. "So small you can hardly believe it. But that is not art. Art is inspiration. I am inspired by Tzfat, by the mysticism. I work on a microcalligraphy picture a few hours every day. At the same time I am working on two or three paintings, landscapes or abstractions, which are really about self-expression.

"People think art is easy," he continues, as customers come in his shop to look, to bargain, to complete transactions, to commission new works. I am lucky I can combine my art and my spirituality with making a living this way. But behind each picture is a small story. And many decisions. What am I going to say? What color? What perspective? And it is work, work, work, work. You have to really love it to do this." -



Water carrier in the shtetl  
(Eastern European ghetto) by Malka  
BenShimon. Text is the Psalms.

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