

# Kabbalah, Jewish Mysticism and The Divine Chariot

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Surf Santa Monica

July 28, 2009 – While Bruria Finkel is known in the local political arena as a tireless activist who ran for City Council 15 years ago, in artistic circles she's known as a prominent artist whose symbolic works delve into the mysteries of the Kabbala.

A translator of the works of the 13th Century Spanish Kabbalist poet Abraham Abulafia, Finkel's works were recently exhibited at Track 16 in Santa Monica, and she is currently looking for a permanent home for her bronze sculpture series, "The Divine Chariot," in the appropriate space in her native Israel.



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*"When the Holocaust occurred, I couldn't believe in God."*

*Monica Artist Bruria Finkel)*

The journey that took Finkel from the Holy Land to Santa Monica and her lifelong fascination with Jewish mysticism seems to trace the full circle that has become a major symbol in her art.

Along the way, Finkel was driven out of her 1,500-square-foot studio in a Santa Monica Airport hangar by Michael Jackson, whose rehearsals next door created an unbearable racket, and she saw her dream of finding a resting place for her artwork in Jerusalem vanish with the Bernie Madoff scandal.

Finkel's journey began in Tel Aviv on the day she discovered that art could preserve a reality that would vanish in space and time.



*Table with small sacks containing earth from Dachau*

“I knew I was an artist when I was six years old,” Finkel said during an interview in the studio behind her Sunset Park home. “My neighbor grew roses in Israel. The roses were so beautiful, I wanted to paint the rose.

“I couldn't just enjoy the rose. The rose was going to die, so I had to paint it. We create art of the moment and in the moment to sort of preserve the moment.”

Born in Jerusalem, Finkel grew up in Tel Aviv, where her father built one of the early high-rises.

Although her maternal grandfather was a Kabbalist and Finkel had studied the Bible in school, she decided to attend agriculture school to help build the new State of Israel carved out by the United Nations in November 1947.

“I studied animal husbandry and bees, but neither bees nor animals were available,” recalled Finkel, who lived in a Kibbutz. Once lush, the land had been razed by the Romans to build ships two Millennia ago.

The stint, however, didn't last. A Civil War had broken out in Mandatory Palestine, and Israel had declared its independence on May 14, 1948. The next day, the five Arab states attacked, and Finkel joined the “people's army.”

The young agriculture student was now a “sea commando.”

After the war, Finkel attended a Marxist-oriented college, where she studied the Bible as “an historical and literary document.”

“When the Holocaust occurred, I couldn’t believe in God,” she said. “How could God let that happen?”

At school, Finkel would study Hassidism, a Jewish mystic movement founded in Eastern Europe in the 18th century as a reaction to traditional Talmudic learning. Members of the movement maintained that God's presence was all around us, and that God should be served in every deed and word and celebrated in song and dance.

For Finkel, it struck a deep chord. It was something she could believe in. But “getting involved in mystical ideas was not encouraged for women,” she said.



*Paintings displayed at Track 16 Gallery*

Her interest in the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism that would inform her latest works would be piqued decades later in California, when San Francisco poet laureate Jack Hirschman asked his friend Finkel to translate a work of Abulafia, the Kabbalist poet.

“Abulafia practiced a prophetic Kabbala,” Finkel said. “They were very connected with the prophets.”

Abulafia used the Kabbalist method that assigns numbers to letters and finds connections between words, syllables or passages that contain the same numerical value.



*On a walk through, Bruria Finkel in front of "permutations on the letter Aleph and A"*

"You start seeing connections," Finkel said. "He changes the programming in your brain. Suddenly, you feel there are connections you never saw before. I don't know if it opens up the world, but it opens up the synapses in the brain."

Abulafia's writings were difficult to translate, but Finkel had read and studied 12th Century Hebrew in her homeland.

The discovery of the writings of the Spanish poet changed Finkel's art. The ceramics she had been creating gave way to bronze sculptures inspired by the Divine Chariot in Ezekiel and the Great Wheel and Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

"In 1983, I was pushed to begin to think about this material," Finkel said. "I stopped doing ceramics. I began to look at things differently. I wanted to do something different."

Finkel began studying the drawings of the English mystic poet William Blake, especially his rendering of Ezekiel's vision, a swirling wheel of energy.

"The whole idea of the chariot began to brew in my mind," Finkel said.

Finkel, who was involved in the feminist movement in Los Angeles, was drawn to the spirit in Ezekiel, which in the original Hebrew text is female, “the mover and the spirit and the power.”

Finkel called the director of the Skirball Museum and secured an exhibit before she had even begun work on the paintings, bronzes and mixed media works that would occupy her for the next 25 years.

Finkel would exhibit the completed works – the final bronze sculpture in the Divine Chariot series was completed in 2004 – at the Track 16 Gallery at Bergamot Station.

Now, the challenge is to find a permanent home for the work. A plan to take them to Jerusalem unraveled when the funding was found to be tied to convicted financier Bernie Madoff.

But Finkel hasn't given up. “The bronze has to go to its permanent place,” she said.