On October 21, 2007, I entered a taxi in the early morning darkness of Warsaw and was greeted by the dirge-like strains of Bob Dylan’s “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” playing on the stereo. Throughout the eighteen hours of travel back to Los Angeles, I could not get the song’s refrain or guitar chords out of my mind. Once home, I listened to the song over and over again.

The next day I heard that R. B. Kitaj had died. It was a few days later, in the midst of mourning, that my mind began to play tricks on me. Dylan’s song, I came to believe, had had a premonitory quality, portending the death of a dear friend and one of the great figures of Jewish culture in our times:

It’s getting dark, too dark for me to see
I feel like I’m knockin’ on heaven’s door.

Kitaj often romanticized the idea of old age—and death itself. He cultivated the image of himself as the “old artist” and believed that his recent explosion of artistic creativity signaled passage into this new stage (that all the while this burst of productivity warded off the sense of decrepitude that old age can bring).

That long black cloud is comin’ down
I feel like I’m knockin’ on heaven’s door.

In recent years, Kitaj not infrequently felt himself in a black cloud, living a reclusive life and battling physical illness and depression. But it wasn’t principally for these reasons that he was anxious to be “knockin’ on heaven’s door.” While not a believer in any traditional sense, he had developed over the past thirteen years a highly idiosyncratic version of Jewish mystical faith. It was anchored by the belief that the love of his life, his late wife Sandra Fisher, was the Shekhina, the embodiment of the female attributes of God, according to the Kabbalah. Kitaj often expressed the desire to join her, to “seek communion with her in pictures” and beyond, in what the Kabbalists call devekut. “This highest ideal of the mystical life, this Communion with God,” Kitaj wrote of devekut, “seems within my reach…” (Second Diasporist Manifesto, #20, #28).

Here we might say that Kitaj was not only suffering from “Jew on the Brain,” as he often diagnosed himself (quoting his friend Philip Roth). He was also afflicted with “Scholem on the Brain.” Kitaj had been reading the work of the great twentieth-century scholar of Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), for decades. He included Scholem in his canon of great Central European Jewish intellectuals from whom he drew inspiration, and even considered adding him, along with Walter Benjamin and Emmanuel Levinas, to his “personal gang of art guys.”
Article #17 in his recently published *Second Diasporist Manifesto* reads: "Always study Scholem's Kabbalism for my painting art because of his Kabbalism's aura of taboo, renewal, unreason and lots more."

"Scholem's Kabbalism" provided Kitaj with the tools to devise a personal theology of veneration for "Sandra-Shekhina" (Second Diasporist Manifesto, #21). To a great extent, this audaciously idiosyncratic faith, as adapted from Scholem, sustained him throughout his time in Los Angeles, after he left behind London and the city's venomous art critics in a rage in 1997.

"Scholem's Kabbalism" also gave Kitaj a theoretical vocabulary for the project that consumed him for the past quarter century, and with particular intensity during his Los Angeles period: "Jewish Art." For decades prior to his initial articulation of this project in the *First Diasporist Manifesto* (1989), he had been voraciously consuming the works of his favored Central European Jews. For example, in the exhibition catalogue R. B. Kitaj: A Retrospective, Richard Morphet notes that Kitaj discovered Walter Benjamin already in 1965. From that point forward, he engaged in an ongoing and intense program of reading Benjamin, along with his other heroes, Scholem, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig (with the French Jews Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida coming somewhat later).

What Kitaj intuited in the 1960s and would give more explicit expression to in the 1980s was that these thinkers understood and incarnated the vexing and age-old "Jewish Question"—the simultaneous *impossibility* of Jewish acceptance in Gentile society and *possibility* of great cultural genius issuing from the Jews' social marginality. Kitaj's growing preoccupation with the "Jewish Question," in both intellectual and personal terms, intersected with his long-standing practice of appending written commentaries to his pictures (present already at his first exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in London in 1963).
unreason and lots more" (Second Diasporist Manifesto, #17). He had no interest in conventional forms of ritually based Jewish Art. Nor could he countenance an art devoid of ideas—or in his case, a Jewish Art divorced from the Jewish Question.

One of my greatest crimes (Or Jewish DADAisms) is that I shatter that great glass in afloat. Many Jews in the Art Scheme are closed to the Jewish Question in art. They cleave to universalist ideals, which is OK by me too. To wish to be widely liked is not a bad thing. (Second Diasporist Manifesto, #12)

Perhaps so, but it was not Kitaj's way. He liked to thumb his nose at the critics, quoting with delight and approval Derrida's statement that "I always adopted a stance to provoke them and give them the greatest desire, always on the verge to expel me again" (Second Diasporist Manifesto, #90). He embraced that which the critics hated, a Jewish Art "littered with ideas," as a hostile viewer once described his work, an art suffused with commentary and the Jewish Question (First Diasporist Manifesto, #39).

Kitaj's project has had few peers in the history of modern Jewish culture. For the sake of argument (and in tribute to his own propinquity for ranking), let it be said that there has never been a figure of such prodigious artistic talent and intellectual acuity who devoted himself so self-consciously to Jewish Art. There were indeed previous attempts to create a Jewish Art, smack in the middle of the golden age of Jewish nationalism, as we notice in the pages of the European journals Ost und West and Rimon-Milgram. But no one involved in those efforts had the mix of talents of Kitaj. He was not only a brilliant figurative painter, possessed of an explosively colorful palette. He was also a great Jewish intellectual.

The art of being a great intellectual, it seems, is mostly lost in our age. There are many fine scholars in today's world. But there are precious few intellectuals akin to those European Jews who inhabited the cafés and salons of Berlin, Vienna, and Prague, who lived in and through ideas—indeed, for whom ideas were of the greatest existential urgency. Kitaj not only admired those early twentieth-century thinkers; he was their heir. To sit with him in conversation was to recall a world unbound by disciplinary specialization, of freeranging reflection on art, philosophy, and history. He was not a name-dropper, but he could summon up an article by Aby Warburg, an argument by Ernst Gombrich, or an aphorism by Ludwig Wittgenstein with great and natural ease. But more to the point, Kitaj's massive learning, wild in the ways of the autodidact, was not merely hitzo—a that is, for its own sake. Rather, he always applied it, poured it onto and around the margins of his canvases, yielding a unique artistic and intellectual creation, and a uniquely Jewish one at that.

Kitaj often called this project, as in his two manifestos, "Diasporist." Diasporism was about ceaseless agitation over ideas and open-ended "kabbalistic"
interpretation. It was not about the celebration of powerlessness. Kitaj, after all, was a tough-minded Jew who hated anti-Semites and admired much in the State of Israel. That said, from the time he left home at age seventeen for the merchant marine, he remained a “painter who feels out of place much of the time, even when he is lucky enough to stay at work in his room, unmolested through much of his days” (First Diasporist Manifesto, #21). This was the solitary setting requisite for the nurturing of Jewish genius—a condition with which Kitaj was not only obsessed, but which he possessed. It was in this Diasporist setting that a giant of Jewish culture—and the most imaginative purveyor of Jewish Art in modern times—lived and died.

My wife, Nomi, and I were privileged to get to know Kitaj soon after he delivered a lecture at UCLA in June 1999 on, of all subjects, “The ‘Jewish Question’ in Art.” We came to see not only his multiple brilliances, but also his incredible warmth, tenderness, and generosity. Sipping from the ubiquitous jug of diet cranberry juice at the appointed 4:30 p.m. hour, we talked and listened, cognizant of the fact that he was the rarest of breeds—a first-rate conversationalist, raconteur, intellectual, artist, and loyal friend all in one. We quickly grew to love him, and his loss leaves a huge void in our lives.

May his memory be a blessing to the family that he loved so, and his extraordinary example an inspiration to all!

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