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Jerusalem — “The Heavens Tell” David Rakia — Paintings

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Dorot Ruth

(Tel Aviv)

**JERUSALEM — “THE HEAVENS TELL”
DAVID RAKIA — PAINTINGS**

Abstract

The purpose of the article is to present the unique way in which David Rakia portrays both the earthly and spiritual aspects of Jerusalem.

The issue is the variety of unique angles and techniques David Rakia uses to achieve his multi-faceted portrayal of the city.

This is done by detailed analysis of paintings from different periods of his work showing the ever-greater depth of his skill.

Keywords

light, air, music, Kabbalah, Hebrew letters, lower and upper spheres, elevation of soul, alleviation of pain, peace, perfection, spiritual, mythical, mysterious, unity, purity, earthly, ethereal

“The Heavens tell the glory of God, And the firmament (‘Rakia’ in Hebrew) showeth His handiwork”. (Psalms 19)

It seems that the well-known Jerusalem artist, David Rakia, née Sternfeld (‘field of stars’ in German), drew the inspiration for his Hebrew name from the above well-known verse from Psalms. A review of his works reveals that indeed the subject matter of the heavens and the firmament play a prominent role in his works.

Since the 1960s, the most prominent subject to be found in David Rakia’s paintings is Jerusalem, whose name and image have resonated in the hearts and minds of Jews everywhere. Through them one can sense the fragrance of its air and the purity of the light that is so characteristic of this city. Right through to the latest of his ever-evolving styles — abstract-expressive-lyrical, he has always found ways to capture the unique essence of the Holy City and express it both convincingly and movingly, as he celebrates its wholeness and spiritual beauty. Through the diversity of his approaches, through perspectives that create a mosaic conveying the city’s complexity and multiplicity, this gifted artist’s highly original works selected for this article illustrate the multiple facets of real and symbolic Jerusalem.

Born in 1928 in Vienna, David Rakia moved to Israel with his family in 1938. He grew up into the War of Independence, in which he fought, was wounded and lost his brother. While recovering from his wounds, he began to study painting with renowned artist Mordechai Ardon. Later, at the Bezalel School of Art David Rakia studied mainly with artists Yaakov Eisenscher and Isidore Aschheim and following graduation, he travelled to Paris to study at the Académie des Beaux Arts. It was there that he encountered avant-garde artists such as Osip Zadkin, Mané-Katz, Max Ernst, Marc Chagall and Samuel Bak.

Even before his arrival in Paris, Rakia had been influenced by both Realism¹ and Expressionism, an influence that was to grow with time. In the early 1950s his Jerusalem landscapes already incorporated distortion to create dramatic effects of mystery and his paintings of that period reveal the influence of Van Gogh’s Expressionism.

In Paris, having drawn ever closer to Van Gogh, Munch and German Expressionists, he also absorbed Surrealist influences. He drew scenes of city life such as buildings with ‘faces’ bathed in dramatic contrasts of light and shade,

¹Already in these early years, Rakia took an interest in ethereality and the link between nature and the heavens.

as well as coal-miners and agricultural workers². He tried his hand at a whole range of techniques including drawing, etching, linoleum cutting, lithography and sculpture. In 1957, Rakia's work was shown at the *Galerie des Beaux Arts* — an exhibition that earned him a great deal of interest and praise.

On his return to Israel in the early 1960s, Rakia underwent a personal revolution that led him to rediscover his own cultural roots and renew his ties with them. He began to paint the city of Jerusalem as the key motif throughout his works which now clearly reflected the return to his homeland and the change in his immediate surroundings. In his newly drawn landscapes appeared trees that were deeply rooted in the brown earth while aspiring and striving upwards towards immaterial heights. “To David Rakia, Jerusalem was much more than a family womb. It came quite naturally to him to return to Jerusalem (from Paris) rather than any other city. «I dig inwards; Tel Aviv turns outwards»”³.

The painter's stylistic development takes us on an artistic journey from Realistic depiction through Expressionistic and Surrealistic influences to Symbolism and his current style of the early 2000s — Abstraction — which is a representation of the pure essence of form and color⁴.

A key turning point in David Rakia's perception of Jerusalem was the Six-Day War of 1967. He cultivated a new, unique style that offers a precise and profound definition of the city. The paintings of this period depicting King David's regal Jerusalem's architectural structures, vegetation and skies can be termed ‘classic’ for their balance, formal perfection and nobility. At this point in time, Rakia portrays Jerusalem as utterly Jewish and sacred despite the presence of Arab-style structures intended to make the connection to geographical space and to history. The use of quasi-gothic arches echoes the Christian culture, too, although he does not depict clearly religious buildings.

²This approach was already evident in Israel as an intentional part of a realist-socialist style. Rakia was drawn to proletarian humanism as opposed to the abstract of the New Horizons artists that had begun to dominate Israeli art.

³G. Ofrat, David Rakia — Signs, Jerusalem, 2009, p. 44.

⁴Ibidem, p. 68: “Rakia's dissociation from secular time and place can explain his utter indifference to updated artistic developments in Israel, and even in Jerusalem of the time... he was drawn into symbols and turned his back on avant-gardes of any kind... Rakia refused to accommodate the Anglo-American trends that attracted young Israelis at the time. He had always been «European», like many of Jerusalem's artistic old hands and their younger colleagues. In time, he also turned down the conceptual art of the seventies and everything that evolved from it. Rakia's withdrawal into a world of visionary symbolism was a source of his strength”.

The essence of Jerusalem, its character and sanctified spiritual and mysterious nature, its special light as well as its most unique feature — the multiplicity of its facets, are all captured accurately. It is a real city which at the same time is the symbol of the entire Land of Israel; a city of architecture and panorama, of Zion — the object of yearning for religious Jews while yet that of the three great monotheistic religions. It is a city of the concrete and abstract, of the mystical and the transcendental, the earthly and the heavenly.

Rakia is a highly visionary and versatile artist, one of whose most notable attributes is his constant evolution and innovation in style, theme and technique. Like many great artists before him, years after having consolidated an immediately recognizable style, he continues to surprise the observer with new revelations and inventions. For quite a lengthy period Rakia saw himself as an anthroposophist. In one of our encounters (R.D.) he spoke of the fact that he was a member of a club of anthroposophists in Jerusalem, where he learned the theories of Rudolph Steiner. The rupture in the temple of anthroposophy in Dornach, Switzerland occurred when his Jewish approach favoring Jewish symbolism rather than ‘personalities’ was not accepted⁵.

In the 1980s, following this rupture, Rakia increasingly drew inspiration from the Kabbalah and focused on cosmic symbolism and the attempt to penetrate the cosmic essence as he imagined it. Works of that period depicted scenes of the heavenly bodies and infinite spaces translated into geometrical, mystical canvases in which the concept of the transcendental not only linked Jerusalem to the universe, but also situated it as the center of the world and the source of fantastic revelations. Rakia distanced himself as far as he could from material reality in order to express personal, spiritual, cosmic visions and to seek out the center of the universe from which the forces of life originate.

Between 2000 and 2007, Rakia concentrated on his ‘letters’ style, (without any accompanying images) of which he created canvases of different sizes filled entirely with Hebrew letters in a variety of colors, density, size and intensity. These are paintings that give a dramatic sense of the infinite spatial depth of constellations of letters receding into unfathomable distances.

In recent years he has developed a more contemporary style: Abstract-Expressive-Lyrical, highly dynamic, with movement and energy. The eye of the observer is led from the surface of the painting into its depth as his canvases are

⁵Ibidem, p. 66.

replete with expressive musical colors on top of which he adds moving shapes, lines and forms by spurting white paint on the surface.

Rakia's attitude to the Holy City which has been a recurring motif in his works stems from the spiritual bond he feels with it. He truly believes it to be a sacred city, closer to heaven than to earth, and thereby meant to enjoy the rays of harmony and perfection emanating from the upper spheres. He sees it as a divine city, where the spirit of the Lord dwells and was revealed on Mt. Moriah. It is here that the supreme spiritual world allows its light to be 'unveiled' and influence the darker one below. Mythical, mystical, mysterious as well as realistic and symbolic Jerusalem becomes the core of the artist's creativity and the source of his inspiration for portraying the full glory of its grandeur. It is the key to his understanding of the world and of the entire universe. Rakia's Jerusalem uplifts the soul of the observer, precisely because the artist's is felt in every scene of the city.

How, indeed, can a painter depict Jerusalem's multifaceted splendor? How can one represent its metaphysical aspect faithfully? How can its mystery be deciphered and its sacredness portrayed in a work of art within the confines of lines, colors and space? How can the many dimensions of this city — history, reality, dream, legend and 'the beyond' be conveyed to the beholder of a painting? David Rakia has achieved all this and more mainly through two central elements: the use of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and a special celestial light. These two features enabled him to delve artistically into the city which is a mood, an overwhelming emotion, a spiritual haven and a testimony to eternal hope, and share it with the world.

In one of our conversations (R.D.) Rakia told me:

“The letter is the key to Divine Power; it is a symbol which is endowed with a magic value... The Hebrew word for 'letter' (אֵיט) is itself composed of 'Alef' (א) and 'Tav' (ת) with the connecting 'Vav' (ו) in between... The Torah itself commences with the letter 'Bet' (ב) the second letter in the alphabet (בְּרֵאשִׁית) implying that something had existed even before Genesis, before Creation”.

When speaking prior to his exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum in January 1961, Rakia explained that “The letter and the rock are the raw material I work with. From rocks one can build houses. From letters one can create psalms”⁶.

⁶D. Hashavua, “Colorful Vision” an interview with David Rakia, Jerusalem, February 1965.

Further on this issue, art critic Gideon Ofrat said: “A comparative scrutiny of Rakia’s works of the early sixties reveals an affinity with the mystical and visionary paintings of William Blake, but equally, a link with the Hassidic-Kabbalist works of Mordechai Ardon (who wove Hebrew letters into the metaphysical composition of his paintings) even if his nights contradict Rakia’s powerful mystic radiation. At the time, Rakia likewise cast an awe-stricken regard at the painted and cast (in basalt dust) letters of Moshe Castel, even though the latter adhered to the «New Horizons» school, and Rakia did not resort to archaic forms of Hebrew letters. No, his interest lay in the Jewish letter of sanctity”⁷.

When Rakia was seven years old, his grandfather, a scribe who penned the Old Testament texts onto sacred parchment with the painstaking attention to detail demanded by Jewish Law, gave him a ‘*Hannukah dreidl*’⁸ and told him to spin it. His grandfather explained that letters have magical power. Rakia was fascinated by his grandfather’s work and was deeply affected by his words which remained etched on his heart. It was the origin of his attraction to letters, their shape, meaning and symbolism.

According to art historian Marcel Mendelson, yet another source of inspiration was “The Book of Creation” of the Kabbalah “which claimed that the Torah preceded the Creation of the world and since the Torah is written in Hebrew letters, these letters were instruments, or «vessels», in the Creation, and constituted a basic part of its meaning. In other words, the intimate relation between natural phenomena and their essence — that is their inner connection with the Divine Spirit — can best be understood through the form and mystical significance of the Hebrew letters. Rakia became fascinated by these mystical interpretations and saw in them a key to his understanding of landscape and Jerusalem”⁹.

In his book “The Vision of the Letters”, Eliahu Lippiner refers to the Lurian Kabbalah which deemed the infinite vacuum to be first ‘clothed’ in fabric spun from letters of the Torah “which were hidden inside like very thin strands of light of Divine intensity which later peeked out and were revealed as a result of the vibrations... in other words: from the «amusement» process”¹⁰. ‘Amusement’

⁷G. Ofrat, op. cit., p. 45.

⁸A spinning top with four sides each of which has a letter drawn on it — ט, ה, ל, י, standing for: “a significant miracle occurred here” (in Hebrew).

⁹M.L. Mendelson, David Rakia, Tel Aviv, 1978, p. 9.

¹⁰E. Lippiner, The Vision of the Letters, Jerusalem, 1989, p. 2.

refers to God playing around with the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet while sitting on his throne thousands of years before the creation of the world — a story that appears in a legend in the preface to the “Book of the Zohar”.

Rabbi Avraham Abulafia, the medieval scholar ‘*mekubal*’ described the process of Creation as “Divine writing spread across the infinite cosmic parchment which is always ready to receive new letters written in God’s special ink... the letters of the alphabet are symbols and riddles which contain all the wisdom of the world”¹¹.

In the ensemble of Rakia’s works, letters are an integral part of the landscape creating a synthesis in which each one constitutes a basic component, though not a material particle, in the composition of the universe as it has its own formal and spiritual character.

This approach stands in contrast to the Western assumption that language has no significance or powers of its own. In the West, words and letters are viewed merely as signs which work as such only by the grace of social convention: any word only means something because people use it in their interactions to communicate thoughts about it. If the human use of the word were different, its meaning and entire role in the world would be different as well. The traditional Jewish view is that Hebrew is divinely instituted, not humanly evolved and that accordingly, its language and letters have a unique reality and holiness in a universe glowing with sacredness. Letters of the Hebrew alphabet, “behind whose forms «a superior light» illuminates the whole picture”¹² populate Rakia’s canvases as they float, fly, soar, hover or are planted in the ground.

One can approach letters in different ways: philologically or linguistically — seeing them as signs of written or spoken language; mystically, as the Kabbalists and the Occultists do — seeing them as possessing exceptional powers derived from the upper spheres. The letters are composed of lines and markings which according to the mystics are lines of light. Rakia’s increasing closeness to the mystical world of Kabbalah naturally brought him closer to the Hebrew letters, which constitute a recurring motif in almost all phases of his art and style. Rakia uses them as elements of form:

“He turns them into processions, gates, woods, towers, figures — but they are always visible or at least the central one, with great clarity... and the letters

¹¹Ibidem, p. 34.

¹²M. Tal, Haboker, 17.02.1961.

turn into candelabra, sources of light and so forth. The forms are fragmented, but only moderately. They have grace, but a resolute one”¹³.

The entire alphabet forms a whole and a harmony — with subtle relations developing between them, creating infinite combinations¹⁴.

“The letters are considered to be higher powers, like angels of God, emissaries sent to reveal and fulfill His will. Since the revelation of God’s will is also its fulfillment, there is no difference between what is desired and what exists. God’s Word is revealed through letters and the world is created by them. Both the Word and the world are reciprocally linked through the letters and their various representations”¹⁵.

It is worth noting that the artist does not use letters for illustration nor does he use them to create a two-dimensional calligraphic decoration, but rather as elements of shape from which he builds fantastic, hallucinatory landscapes. Their objective actuality is created because they are part of a landscape that has depth, space and spirituality.

“The fact that these «objects» are essentially purely theoretical symbols lacking any physical character gives Rakia’s letter landscapes a very strange ambience... they are integrated into a visual concept system of space and light that is completely independent of the significant values of letters and writing”¹⁶.

This approach is similar to that of painter Mordechai Ardon, Rakia’s teacher, for whom the letters had deep significance. According to him “the Hebrew letters are magic forms... maybe something holy”¹⁷.

Light constitutes another central element in Rakia’s work, particularly when it comes to the expression of spirituality and the heavenly mystery of Jerusalem.

One of the first acts of Creation was: “Let there be light”. The cosmos was suddenly illuminated in all its glory as an interpretation of the distinction between good and evil. Jerusalem is known for the gentle light that descends upon the city, caressing it and its environs, enveloping it in brightness. Rakia is aware of and relates to changes in atmospheric conditions, hours of the day, seasons

¹³M. Tal, Haboker, 2.10.1962.

¹⁴M.L. Mendelson, op. cit., p. 10: “Rakia stresses the ultimate unity and harmony of the letters, yet assigns each one its individual role in the upper or lower spheres according to its shape and mystical meaning”.

¹⁵S.Z. Cahana, *The Letters and their Secrets*, Jerusalem, 1984, p. 35. Regarding his approach to the world of letters, Rakia was highly influenced by the book which he illustrated.

¹⁶A. Ronen, Ha’aretz, 21.09.62.

¹⁷A. Schwartz, Mordechai Ardon: *The Colors of Time*, Jerusalem–Tel Aviv, 2003, p. 38.

of the year, all of which create different effects that impact the ambience of his paintings. Using white radiance and an almost transparent, Genesis-like purity, the artist conveys that Divine light that spreads across the whole of Jerusalem. The human domain is exhibited through the various shades of yellow that radiate their golden glow towards the upper spheres resulting in one form of light from one realm penetrating the other, thereby linking heaven and earth. For the most part, one may say that the light in Rakia's works is both natural and supernatural external and internal.

Rakia may be considered one of a very distinguished group of artists from Caravaggio, who discovered the dramatic use of light, through Velasquez communicating it with his sharp and precise perception and the mystical El Greco, ending with Rembrandt and Vermeer, who turned the use of light into an art of its own. Rakia is carried away to the vistas of the horizon through the light. For him, it exposes what is hidden and is the source and symbol of the mystery beyond nature. Like Rembrandt, he uses it to seek out what is concealed. We can learn more about the significance of the special light in art in general and in the works of Rakia in particular from the late Rabbi Itzhak Hacohen Kook's attitude towards the 'hidden light' (האור הגנוז) in the works of Rembrandt. In an interview with the "Jewish Chronicle" on September 9, 1935, on this topic he called the artist righteous a 'tzaddik', saying he believed that Rembrandt was one of those who had been privileged to see the 'hidden light', that which was created during the seven days of Creation, transparent, infinite of extreme intensity which was to be revealed to absolute 'tzaddikim' or upon the arrival of the Messiah. The search for (האור הגנוז) possessed by the Holy City, has accompanied Rakia throughout the years in his paintings of Jerusalem.

The realistic-architectural, spiritual, mystical and cosmic aspects of Jerusalem, as well as its standing as the city of peace and of heavenly vision, will be treated through a juxtaposition of the following works that will present David Rakia's perspective of the holy city's central theme and essential quality of oneness, from various viewpoints. The works will individually reflect Jerusalem as the one and only point of encounter between matter and spirit, the material and the Divine, between the earthly and the sublime.

THE SPLENDOR OF JERUSALEM

Anyone looking at this painting cannot help but be amazed by the celebration of the vibrant colors, and the radiant light the painting emits. The vitality



Fig. 1. The splendor of Jerusalem (1980). Oil on Canvas, 80×60cm

and optimism abound in a *joie de vivre*, an elation reflected and inspired by the various hues of purples and pink. What we see is, on the one hand, close to reality and yet at the same time imaginary. The lower part of the painting is filled with structures that blend in with the rich vegetation suggested by the abstract decorative shapes. On one side Jerusalem is introduced by the variation of arches repeated several times. Likewise, there are the walls, which represent the past. To the right, a building rises, suggestive of a transparent modern tower, representing contemporary Jerusalem. Although this painting emphasizes the earthly-architectural aspects of the city, Rakia includes in it the two elements that render Jerusalem spiritual for him: letters and light.

In the center, a bright patch of sky opens up between the constructed shapes. In this area we see three hovering receding triangles. Their opaque yellow is the color of earthly light in Rakia's language. Their vertices point downwards but beside them is a hint of a more diaphanous triangle pointing upwards, while its base stretches across the crenellation of the wall. These yellow triangles symbolize the light descending upon the city, infusing one with exhilaration. The upward and downward directions signify the connection between earthly Jerusalem which

aspires to reach the ‘above and beyond’ and the celestial light which embraces the entire city, focusing especially on the transparency of the modern structure on the right. Brightness is also found between the pink arches on the left, while its full intensity is felt in the pale pink structure in the lower center. An additional triangle is formed in the center, within the brown walls, — this time transparent, pointing upwards, partially overlapped by the largest of the three yellow ones, together creating the mental association of a Star of David — evocative of the Supreme Light. It is in this juxtaposition that the two types of light converge.

The walls of the city appear several times. The Wailing Wall, a remnant of the Holy Temple, on the right, is visible, too, as the background for the letter ‘*Alef*’ (א). With the destruction of the Temple, the glorious past was lost, and the Wall, a lone reminder of the ruins became a place for mourning and lamentation alongside the supplications for the Temple to be resurrected and the splendor of bygone days restored. In contrast, the painting abounds in colorful vegetation that surrounds the more earthly part symbolizing the revival of Zion, the rebuilding, resurgence, flourishing and prosperity. David Rakia goes one step further by writing the word (סוכה) ‘*Sukkah*’ across the fronds on its roof in the top left-hand corner, thereby adding the religious element and the association of prayer appealing to the Lord to build David’s ‘Falling Sukkah’ and the ‘Sukkah of Peace’. Jerusalem is celebrating the harvest festival — one of the three holidays requiring pilgrimage until the time of the destruction of the second Temple. One can just sense the ‘freshness’ of the fragrance of nature and the holiday.

Hebrew letters are scattered throughout the scene. In the upper middle section the letter ‘*Shin*’ (ש) appears twice: in blue and in gold indicating two of God’s names: ‘*Shechina*’ — the pure spiritual Presence and ‘*Shaddai*’ — the power of God. There is an abundance of the initial and final forms of the letter ‘*Tzadi*’ (צ) and (ץ) suggesting the concept of justice. (צדיק — צדק). Beside the modern structure, towers a ‘tree of justice’ composed of the ‘*Tzadi*’ letters as if seeking to create a balance between earthly and Divine justice: a tree planted in the soil attempting to reach the sky. The letter ‘*Alef*’ appears majestically against the backdrop of the Wailing Wall as if representing Creation — being the first letter of the alphabet as well as evoking yet another of God’s names — (אלהים) — ‘*Elohim*’ — the Divine Presence which is masculine in form in Hebrew indicating the Degree of Justice (מדת הדין). The ‘*Shechina*’¹⁸ (שכינה) represented

¹⁸All poems of H.N. Bialik, *Take me under your wing*, Tel Aviv 1997, p. 178. An interesting example can be found in the poem by Haim Nachman Bialik “Take Me Under Your Wing”,

by the (ש) — the Divine Spirit, is feminine in form in Hebrew indicating the Degree of Mercy (מדת הרהמים). The essence of God according to the Kabbalah and the Talmud is both masculine and feminine, as it appears in Genesis: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). The two aspects of the Supreme Deity the Degree of Justice (מדת הדין) associated with the masculine power and the Degree of Mercy (מדת הרהמים) associated with the feminine power, both reign in the city of Jerusalem.

JERUSALEM AT PRAYER

Rakia captures the city at a special moment — just before dawn for it is an enchanted hour — the night is over but it is not yet quite day. The air is pure. It is a time when light and shade — white and darker blue-purple — are dominant and blend into each other.

The painter’s use of a predominantly single color — a wide range of lyrical blues — to communicate the Jerusalem experience — lends the painting a spiritual demeanor since blue is the color of the heavens thereby connecting the lower and upper domains. Theoretician and abstract painter, Vassily Kandinsky, to whom Rakia feels particularly close and has been influenced by¹⁹, relates to this use of blue, saying:

“The deeper the blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man towards the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure and, finally, for the supernatural... the brighter the blue becomes, the more it loses its sound, until it turns into silent stillness and becomes white... When [blue] sinks almost to black, it echoes a grief that is hardly human. When it rises towards white... its appeal to men grows weaker and more distant”²⁰.

where the addressee might be the ‘*Shechina*’ — the name for God which stresses its feminine qualities, the motherliness of a compassionate and protective deity. The speaker’s wish is that the ‘*Shechina*’ protect him and hear his prayers. We may thus conclude that the speaker beseeches the addressee to provide him with motherly or sisterly love from which he can take comfort and seek shelter.

¹⁹In Rakia’s studio, on his “favorite” bookshelf, there is a book about Kandinsky which the artist reads frequently.

²⁰V. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Jerusalem, 1999, p. 69.



Fig. 2. Jerusalem at Prayer (1977). Oil on Canvas, 92×50cm

Past, present and future come together in this painting: the past lies in the ancient architecture that so typifies the city; the present — in the lighter abstract shapes in the sky, echoing the ancient past, and the future — in the pure white flash in the center of the skies. This light emits a sense of slow-moving time, almost suspended and depth that makes Jerusalem the ‘eternal city’ the meditative religious aspect of which is felt in the ultimate gesture and serenity of prayer communicated by the painting. Thus, by intensifying the light and the shades of blue, by varying the nuances of hues and tone, and through the use of letters, earthly and ethereal Jerusalem are bonded in a subtle, delicate fusion.

There are architectural shapes seen as if from above, a fact that lessens the gravity of the earthliness: domes, ancient buildings, high rising arches and hints of walls and gates of the Old City and some forms of vegetation. The sky abounds with letters and letter-like shapes. An atmosphere of holiness predominates as the spirit of stillness and silence pervades the place. The letters ‘*Shin*’, ‘*Tzadi*’ and ‘*Lamed*’ (ל) are visible, facing upwards, linking earth and sky. Besides their aesthetic, graphic expression, they manifest hidden symbolic meanings. The ‘*Shin*’, the central symbol, mediating between the upper and lower spheres is associated with words such as ‘*shamaim*’ (sky), ‘*shlemut*’ (perfection), ‘*shalom*’ (peace), ‘*shechina*’ (Divine Spirit) and ‘*shaddai*’ (God’s name signifying power). The prom-

inent ‘*Shin*’ to the right, suggestive of a ‘*menorah*’ has its prongs or ‘arms’ raised up perhaps in prayer, supplication, giving thanks or the offering of a blessing. The ‘*Tzadi*’ resembles a plant or a tree and makes one think of justice in the two domains. Might the name ‘David’ at the top left suggest the name of the City of David? Might this be a reference to the artist’s first name, emphasizing his strong sense of identification with his city? The three ‘*Lamed*’s that communicate gaiety and festivity grow together out of the buildings on the right and stretch skyward seemingly celebrating in dance and song their praise of the Creator. The ‘*Lamed*’ arouses the association of the word ‘*halleluyah*’: “Praise him (*hallelu*) with harp and violin, Praise him with drum and dance” (Psalms 150:3–4).

The ‘*Yod*’ (י) next to ‘David’ and the crenellation of the wall with the upper part of the final ‘*Tzadi*’ above the three-arched structure — all these along with the flag-like shapes in the sky are reminiscent of musical notes. Through this musical element, the painting creates synesthesia — a mingling of the senses — the sights, the voices of prayer and the sounds of music that intensify the experience. This is similar to the Biblical phenomenon at Mt. Sinai when Moses came down with the tablets and sight and sound were mixed: “And all the people see the voices” (Exodus 20: 16).

Prayer — the singing of the soul, and music — the expression of emotion come together in the painting. The prayer is threefold: the individual’s, the Jews’ as a people, — praising and glorifying God while longing for and yearning to reach the holy city, and of the prayer of Jerusalem itself for redemption emanating from and heard through the domes and rooftops.

Music expresses man’s most sublime emotions. In the Bible, great significance is attached to the song. For example: The Song of the Sea, The Song of Deborah etc. The connection between music and Jerusalem is reminiscent of the songs of the Levites in the Temple, the Psalms and the Song of Songs. The Jewish tradition is imbued with music that elevates the soul, alleviates pain, elates and inspires the human spirit, as is especially the case in the Hassidic tradition where devoutness and devotion to God reach levels of ecstasy through the melody (*‘Hanigun’*) which plays an important role in serving the Lord. Since music that is perceived by emotion stems from higher spiritual spheres and is the highest expression of the soul, the latter can be purified by it²¹. King

²¹This strengthening of the power of music over the soul can also be found in Kandinsky’s philosophy; he was fascinated by music’s emotional power and claimed that because it expresses itself through sound and time, it allows the listener a freedom of imagination, interpretation and emotional response that is not based on the literal or the descriptive, but rather on its abstract quality and language.

David said: “Serve the Lord with gladness; Come before His Presence in singing” (Psalms 100:2).

In the center of the sky with the horizon as a backdrop, in the midst of the prayer, the word (יהוה) i.e. HE is visible indicating the presence of the Supreme Mighty Power reigning over and uniting upper and lower Jerusalem. Above it, there is a light glowing with an inner radiance for which there seems to be no obvious source, an indication, perhaps, that it emerges from the ‘*Shechina*’.

While the earthly lower sphere is darker and more realistic, providing an echo of what is taking place above, the celestial upper sphere is lighter, freer, more abstract and awash with spiritual light.

The painting emits a sense of a characteristic yet unique view of Jerusalem with its essence of holiness and tranquility.

THE DIAMOND

The Midrash tells us about Rabbi Akiva who minded Calba Savoia’s sheep for a week and married his daughter Rachel. He expressed his love for her by saying that were he able he would give her a “Jerusalem of Gold”, a piece of jewelry for her hair imprinted with the shape of the Eternal City.

The city has been endowed with many titles — ‘crowns’ among which are: ‘Jerusalem of gold’, ‘Jerusalem of light’. Each of the seventy names of love and yearning bestowed upon Jerusalem has a distinct symbolic meaning such as: ‘Bride’, ‘The Epitome of Beauty’, ‘Loyal City’, ‘Zion’, ‘Eternal City’ and ‘City of David’ as no single name has ever sufficed to capture the entirety of its essence. It is the only city graced with sayings such as:

“If I forget thee Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten, let my tongue cleave to my palate if I not speak of thee” and “Ten measures of beauty came down to the world. Nine of them were granted to Jerusalem and one is for the rest of the world”.

In order to express the city’s unparalleled attributes, Rakia places Jerusalem nestling among surrounding hills, all set within a diamond whose outline reminds one of the walls around the Old City. This diamond, is, in turn, placed within the infinite cosmos. One strongly senses the shielding of Zion by the ‘*Shechina*’.

The diamond — the most precious of all gems — is chosen as a frame for the shape and content of the actual city, mainly since it is transcendental, a surrealist dream and a symbolic vision.



Fig. 3. The Diamond (1978). Oil on Canvas, 70×50cm

The sparkling precious stone was one of the twelve set in the breastplate of the High Priest and was thus etched on the heart of the people. This multifaceted gem is considered the most valuable and desirable piece of jewelry since it is the hardest and most brightly shining of all the minerals. Its rarity and the search for it in the depths of the earth, its brilliantly polished crystalline transparency through which light refracts and surges outward, are all qualities that match those of the city.

The background of the painting is that of the dark night — a deep blue. “Blue is the truly celestial color. It creates an atmosphere of calmness — a solemn, supernatural depth”²². It is the blue of the cosmos out of which the diamond flickers — bright, clear and transparent in which the illuminated eternal city can be seen enveloped in the mystery of sanctity and immersed in the endless purity and ancient glory. The facets of the diamond are cut straight, where the top and bottom are upward pointing triangles. Its vertex penetrates the cosmos

²²V. Kandinsky, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

and merges with the Absolute, while at the bottom it is the cosmos that strives to enter *it*. In the center of the diamond stands a pink-ochre structure beside which we see part of the walls of Jerusalem surrounded by rising vegetation and trees straining upward. The nocturnal scene, simultaneously real and dream-like, lyrical and super-natural with the night's infinite spaces, is filled with moonlight interwoven into the view of the city. In the upper part of the landscape, three hills of a pure white radiating halo of the 'Shechina' form a 'crown' flooding and embracing the regal city, thereby joining earthly and ethereal Jerusalem. In Rakia's words: "To me, light is the connection between the higher and lower heavens"²³. The realistic ancient landscape of the historic buildings and parts of the walls are enshrouded in a mystical mist. "Mysticism is what happens behind the mountain. The unknown"²⁴. said David Rakia. On the left a 'plant' is growing out of a book, seemingly advocating learning and the wisdom of generations; perhaps the Tree of Knowledge? The word 'harp' (נבל) is clearly visible in the forefront of the tree. Since King David who built Jerusalem was a musician who played the harp, a connection is established by Rakia between the instrument and the city. However, Rakia goes even further by demonstrating Jerusalem's oneness and its wholeness, by exhibiting it as the unique meeting place of the three arts as well: literature, music and painting which when joined together heighten and enhance the Jerusalem experience in the Eternal City.

JERUSALEM IN THE EYE OF THE COSMOS

Everything we know about nature, its laws and spaces is encompassed within the concept that the universe is one of the main purposes of Creation. If at all possible, we perceive its physical meaning and dimensions through our senses, the incoming messages of which are interpreted by the rational mind. But in fact, the cosmos we live in extends even beyond what the senses transmit. The more our knowledge of the universe is enriched and our perception of its boundaries expanded, the better one comprehends that these boundaries are merely temporary and partial, that the structure and complexity of the universe indicate something more sublime than we could ever perceive and explain. Jerusalem is part of that sublimity, and since it has become a symbol

²³G. Ofrat, op. cit., p. 41.

²⁴Ibidem, p. 46.



Fig. 4. Jerusalem in the Eye of the Cosmos (90's). Oil on Canvas, 100×100cm

of the encounter between Israel and the Divine Spirit, not only does it hold in the Jewish consciousness the status of 'Holy City', but Rakia positions it at the very heart and core of the cosmos.

At the end of the 1970s, Rakia was disillusioned with politics and diplomacy based mainly on power and guile and so "his moral yearnings that cry out from all his paintings and his search for supreme order — all raise his eyes to the heavens and the planets"²⁵. Since 1982, Rakia has been painting cosmic pictures

²⁵Ibidem, p. 64.

in which light has been one of the strongest forms of expression as we see in this painting. It is an ongoing attempt to touch the mystical essence of being and the bond between our earthly existence and the ensemble of the universe that surrounds us. The shapes and colors are the tools with which the cosmos and its cycles of time, light and sound are illustrated. Circles of heavenly light with their supreme radiance encounter Hebrew letters and sometimes even words so as to give his works a spiritual Jewish character. At the center of some of his cosmic paintings lies Jerusalem as a symbol of morality. During this latter period, the artist has studied the secrets of astronomy and sought the moral solutions he has been thirsting for since his childhood.

“It is thus that he reaches his original cosmic transcendental concept that invariably integrates Jerusalem into the universe... He constantly emphasizes the great similarity between light and sound between space and substance... he describes the supreme values revealed by the cosmos, among which we find the eternal city of Jerusalem and the Hebrew letter as a cultural value and an eternal Jewish symbol”²⁶.

In this portrayal of the artist’s perception of the cosmos, the primeval appearance arouses the sense of the six days of Creation. The partial circular shapes sail across a background of deep space illuminated in the center with crystal clear light surrounded by a dark background that flickers and is separated from the darkness. These shapes are seeking the spiritual and the transcendental as they encounter the geometric forms inherent in the anthroposophists’ view of the world and in Mondrian and Kandinsky’s philosophy. The entire space abounds with floating celestial bodies that suggest blurred letters or winged creatures — angels perhaps — which fill the space of the Creator²⁷. In the top centre a ‘golden eye’ — (the sun perhaps?) beholds its surroundings. Celestial circles radiate a divine luminescence as if flowing “from a «spiritual sun» (to use a term of Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg)”²⁸. From under and around the ‘eye’, bright white rays spread out, as if emanating from the ‘sun’ filling the universe. Where they end — two ‘*shin*’-like forms float as if to announce and reinforce the presence of ‘*Shaddai*’ within the Creation.

²⁶Ibidem, p. 65.

²⁷Rakia said of himself to me (R.D.): “Inside me there is an angel, and the angel implements what God does... I am a painter with a vision. My only aspiration is to work according to this vision and by means of it to create a world with a higher moral order than the one existing today”.

²⁸G. Ofrat, op. cit., p. 83.

Several circles of different sizes are depicted, as the background resembles the timelessness and infinity of the universe, the galaxies, nebulae and primordial dust clouds — a celestial environment. The circle, according to Kandinsky, is a cosmic symbol as well as a symbol of perfect form: “It is the synthesis of the greatest oppositions. It combines the concentric and the eccentric in a single form and in equilibrium”²⁹.

There is a pervasive sense of movement, depth, and infinite space accompanied by geometrical precision in which purity and rationality exist which anchors the elements in the process of the Creation. Beside the ‘eye’, an ascending ‘stairway’ in shining gold and white light, might hint at the stairs of the Levites leading into the Temple, as well as to the virtues of Jerusalem. Rakia’s great affinity for letters and words might have allowed him this play on the word ‘*ma’alot*’, which in Hebrew means both ‘stairs’ and ‘virtues’. Those of Jerusalem are its three ‘crowns’: of the Torah — as it says: “And the Torah will emanate from Zion and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem”; of the priesthood — the city of the Temple; and of the monarchy — the House of King David.

In the bottom left hand corner it is as if Rakia has stated his artistic creed on the subject, for the word (חיים) — ‘life’, floats as in a semicircle suggesting the essence and significance of the painting: the universe at the time of Creation and the beginning of life, with Jerusalem as the focal point of contact between the earth and the cosmos.

JERUSALEM, CITY OF PEACE

In this light, colorful drawing Rakia characterizes Jerusalem succinctly and symbolically. In an illustrative free and flowing style where it is the letters that outline its portrait — its soil, buildings and its spirituality — the sophisticated depiction where the words ‘*shalom*’ and ‘*Yerushalaim*’ are intertwined, is not detailed but rather subtly hinted at through the ancient style architecture at the bottom of the picture and the brown-beige coloring of the Jerusalem hills and landscape.

The ‘*Shin*’, with its base on the ground and its three prongs directed towards the skies — is connected to both the upper and lower spheres and serves as unifier and harmonizer. This letter brings up immediate associations of peace,

²⁹F. Whitford, Kandinsky, London, 1967, p. 36.



Fig. 5. City of Peace (1976). Handcoloured lithograph, 35×25cm

which is one of the names of the city ‘*Ir Shalom*’ — ‘City of Peace’³⁰, ‘*Ir Shalem*’ — ‘City of Wholeness’ and ‘*Ir Shlemut*’ — ‘City of Perfection’³¹. When talking about this painting, Rakia explained that “All the forms soared in an upward quest, even if some of the letters sprouted from the earth like cactus bushes, no less than they flew into the air”³².

The City of Peace emerges from the ground up and is also reminiscent of a harp. The link between the harp and Jerusalem is its founder “David the sweet singer of Israel” (Samuel II 23:1) who played the harp for King Saul to heal and calm his melancholic soul.

The ‘*Shin*’ meets the ‘*Lamed*’, the top horizontal part of which presents us with the walls of Jerusalem. It connects heaven and earth as it rises, trying to meet the Divine Presence, the Absolute. The ‘*Mem*’ closes off the left side of the painting as an architectural shape, or perhaps as a rising flag. The image of Jerusalem is comprised of letters which also serve as plants, buildings and signs linking matter and spirit. Against the backdrop of Jerusalem’s blue skies, which constitute the greater part of the picture — the letter ‘*Yod*’ represents spirituality in its purest form since when it occurs twice together, as a pair, “the two ‘*Yod*’s constitute one of the abbreviations of the name of God... Rakia sees the ‘*Yod*’ as a basic constitutive form of every letter (in the two ‘eyes’ of the ‘*Ayin*’ (𐤀), and the ‘*Tzadi*’ (𐤆), in the three prongs of the ‘*Shin*’ (𐤑) and in the head of the ‘*Vav*’ (ו) and therefore, as a spiritual element present everywhere in Creation. Still, its most natural habitat is in the upper, more ethereal spheres”³³.

The ‘*Yod*’ is emphasized by its central position; it stands alone, free and independent and is surrounded by sky and light. In addition, it resembles a teardrop that might be a reminder of the tears of generations of Jews who were exiled and isolated for many a century, lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem. It may, on

³⁰An ancient Midrash of the name Jerusalem, this time it is definitely in the Midrash, is the common belief that the meaning of the name Jerusalem is the City of Peace or the Foundation of Peace. Y. Klein, *Seek the Peace of Jerusalem — The Origin and Meaning of the Name Jerusalem*, [in:] Y. Boussidan, *Jerusalem, Names in Praise*, Jerusalem 2005, p. 29.

³¹N. Dov, *Jerusalem City of Spirit*, [in:] Y. Boussidan, op. cit., p. 20: “Jerusalem’s name is a complex, multidimensional one, and for this reason is impossible to isolate the three letters of the original root... Many popular etymologies exist, the most common explanation being that it is made up of ‘*Yirah*’ meaning fear, honor and respect (from the root YRA) or ‘*Yirah*’, (he will be seen, he will appear from the root RAH, to see) and ‘*Shalom*’ or ‘*Shlemut*’, full or completed”.

³²G. Ofrat, op. cit., p. 60–61.

³³M.L. Mendelson, op. cit., p. 11.

the other hand, stand for the tears of joy at the hope that true peace will eventually come; along the same vein, it may be the image of a dewdrop, or a drop of rain against the watery-blue background — a sign of growth and blessing.

Jerusalem opens towards the sky to welcome harmony, perfection and the pure, Divine Spirit hovering over it, represented by the white dove spreading its blissful, protective, shielding wings over the city.

Throughout Rakiá's work, the letters made discreet appearances among the structures of the Jerusalem landscapes, but with time they became prominent features of Rakiá's compositions. In this painting they are not merely a tool; they have become the very theme and focus of the work. It is the letters themselves that construct the city both visually and symbolically. Moreover, the two words 'Jerusalem' 'Yerushalayim' and 'Shalom' seem to be, vying for supremacy over territory, 'invading' each other's space: two of the prongs of the 'Shin' in the word 'Shalom' penetrate the space belonging to the 'Lamed', while the middle prong penetrates its horizontal part — the wall. The letters 'Yod', 'Reish' (ר) and 'Vav' seem to ride along the top part of the 'Lamed'. The central letters are in conflict. There are flame-like shapes, such as in the right prong of the 'Shin' and the top part of the 'Lamed'.

This symbolic scene was painted in 1976, after the Yom Kippur War, thus it is no wonder, that flames are intertwined in the letters for they express the long history of wars and hostilities Jerusalem has witnessed. Those exact same letters — 'Shin' and 'Lamed' intermingle, constituting the two words: 'Yerushalaim' and 'Shalom' although they each appear only once. The final, single, 'Mem', completes both words, uniting them as well. It is pleasing to notice that the word 'Peace' (שלום) 'resides' in (ירושלים) leaving no doubt as to the hope that 'Peace' will 'dwell' eternally in the Holy City. In this sense, the picture expresses not only the religious clashes, national and political rifts and historical conflicts the holy city has experienced, but also their dissolution and resolution. Here the form and the content merge into one ensemble against a backdrop of shades of blue and white — the colors of Israel's flag.

The rich expression of a symbolic letter painting that integrates into the Jerusalem architecture is the personal vision of the artist who yearns to express the singing of the Hebrew letters along with the resurrection of the nation and the aspirations of its capital, the unity of humankind and creativity in liberty and peace. The artist seeks to portray the wholeness and unity of the Holy City, its centrality in the collective Jewish consciousness and the bond of its people with it throughout the generations. He seeks to highlight the phenomenon that there is no historical precedence of a nation returning to its homeland,

re-establishing its sovereignty over its country after 2000 years of exile during which it scattered to all four corners of the earth. Rakia celebrates the victory of humanism through Jewish history and the triumph of its national spirit and power through his paintings of the eternal capital of Israel. In them, it seems, one can hear Jerusalem's history in the whispering of the wind as every stone tells the wondrous story of the city.

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JEROZOLIMA — “NIEBIOSA MÓWIĄ”. DAVID RAKIA — MALARSTWO

Streszczenie

Artykuł pokazuje, jak wyjątkowość miasta Jeruzalem wyraża się w oryginalnych, mistycznych cechach twórczości sławnego jerozolimskiego artysty Davida Rakii.

Rakia dostrzega zarówno ziemski, jak i pozarealny wymiar Jeruzalem, łącząc te pierwiastki w doskonałą jedność, która jest istotą świata.

Przez zastosowanie trzech elementów artysta zespala wyobraźnię i niepowtarzalność w niezwykle udanym przedstawieniu autentycznych obrazów miasta: czystość światła niesie z sobą mistyczną duchowość; użycie liter hebrajskiego alfabetu przydaje treści i uobecnia nawiązania biblijne, historyczne i religijne; dzięki zaś wyborowi jednego dominującego koloru, który niekoniecznie bywa realistyczny, artysta sprawia, że miasto jednocześnie jawi się jako realne i duchowo-wyimaginowane, co trafnie odzwierciedla jego niezwykłą złożoność.