ART THAT'S JEWISH?

Designer Arie Ofir, Professor of Fine Arts, talks about contemporary Jewish art and its role in developing a local culture.

ANYTHING to do with Jews is complex. After 3,500 years of peoplehood there is still no consensus regarding the basic question: who is a Jew? Similarly, there is no simple answer to the question: what is Jewish art?

In my opinion Jewish art covers a multitude of areas. But many people, when they talk about Jewish art, refer to those beautiful ritual items that grace the homes of most Jewish families. In many cases these items have passed from generation to generation as heirlooms. Springing to mind are also those priceless exhibits in various collection or museums — the Baroque style *Hanukkiya*, the Venetian spice box with a tower that actually resembles a church spire in Pressburg, the candlesticks or *etrog* box with Rococo lines. But these lines prompt the question: what is Jewish about these designs? Answer: Nothing! Most of them were designed and made by craftsmen who were not Jewish. This was because Jews were forbidden to work in most trades and crafts in medieval Europe. These items were designed in accordance with the times and styles of Christian Europe at that time. Later, when Jews were allowed to work as silversmiths, they followed similar styles becuase they were considered to be traditional.

Such Jewish ceremonial art, in my opinion, was not really Jewish art. And many of the Jewish ritual items so dexterously made today by skillful Jewish craftsmen, which still follow those old styles, cannot really be called Jewish art.

Now I think it is very important that we develop a local culture in this country, and as a designer of Jewish ceremonial art I feel I have a definite role to play in this, and therefore a responsibility towards the actual subject of ceremonial art, towards my fellow designers and of course towards the people who use my work.

At the outset I must, however, declare that I am not advocating a break from the past or a rejection of any influences that might not be Israeli or Jewish.

Why do I think that developing a local culture is so important for this country? The answer is simple. We'd be missing a vital aspect in the realm of human experiences. Our society would tend to become narrow-minded and provincial. It just doesn't make sense for Jews not to develop a culture of their own, when after such a long exile, we are finally living in a country that is our very own again.

Now Jewish ceremonial art is probably the most effective medium for spreading a facet of culture here. Every home, whether religiously observant or totally secular, has Sabbath candlesticks or a *Hanukkiya*. Very few of these people are actively engaged in any art form. Few are artists, collectors or regular visitors to galleries or museums. But most are serious about the beauty of their Jewish ritual items. So here we have a ready-made interest in a certain aspect of art, of culture. The artistic designer can introduce them to new attitudes regarding form, proportion, harmony, texture, etc. The general population becomes directly exposed to contemporary ideas and styles.

In other words, the *Hanukkiya* can serve as more than a device to commemorate a miracle. It can serve as an object of aesthetic value — as an aspect of national culture.

THE DESIGNER'S CONSIDERATIONS

Within this context, as a designer I have many considerations. I represent a certain aspect of culture, and I express myself through the use of form. I do not propagate any message, or words of wisdom or philosophy. I work solely with form. Of all the arts, the use of form is expressed most tangibly in sculpture. Attitudes regarding size, proportion, use of materials, and texture are most strikingly displayed in sculpture. Many of these aspects are incorporated in other forms of design such as architecture or the design of furniture or even in industry. My problem as a designer of Jewish ceremonial art is to be able to make use of form without creating a sculpture. A *Hanukkiya*, for instance, is not a sculpture. It cannot be. Simply put, a sculpture is a sculpture, and a *Hanukkiya* is a *Hanukkiya*.

The *Hanukkiya* is an object used to commemorate a memory. It reminds us of a miracle connected with freedom. From a functional point of view it must be designed to enable the user to light up to nine candles in a certain prescribed manner. That is all. There are few religious laws regarding its construction. Apart from rabbis, very few people know the details of these laws. Indeed, there are many misconceptions regarding the height of the candles and