

The image of the ancient city of Jerusalem and its Temple, central to Judaism, has long sparked the imagination of artists in the West. Whether utilized as background for allegory, or as the central subject, such pictures have historically conveyed a continuous, dynamic and powerful group of symbols.

Raised in a secular environment, I nonetheless absorbed the fundamental idea that we Jews are a people whose experience has been shaped by exile; that our return to our most sacred space awaits the miracle of redemption. Aware of our dispersion, I have found a need to internalize this ideal, to contain my sense of the sacred center, and to carry a sacred space within the precincts of my imagination. For more than thirty years, my art has been a means for me to reconcile the existence of tangible sanctified architectural elements in the home and in the synagogue with the broader significance of the Temple, its destruction and its mythic re-creation. Recognizing that this work of architecture is the single most potent image in a religion that eschews representation, I have undertaken to explore the symbol of the Temple within strictures imposed by the second commandment.

The site of the Temple is trans-historical. Linked to the creation of the world, Jewish legend indicates that the Temple is also the site of all previous altars, from Adam to Noah, as well as the altar constructed by Abraham as he prepared to sacrifice Isaac. In my Akedah Series of paintings and prints, I look to the storied origins of the Temple as a means to contemplate and comment on our difficult time.

Akedah means, literally, "binding." The Akedah is the biblical story of the binding of Isaac -- also known as the Sacrifice of Isaac. As the narrative that is central to the formation of Judaism, as well as the other Abrahamic religions -- Christianity and Islam -- it is a major theme in the history of Jewish art as well as the history of art in the West in general. The Akedah carries with it a rich tradition of commentary; and it has endured as a metaphor for commitment and devotion, as well as loss, that resonates today in the post-9/11 era. With these works, I hope to add a visual dimension to the discourse surrounding the Akedah by focusing on its symbolism, particularly that which relates to the site and formation of Judaism's ancient Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, which itself speaks to the universal aspiration for repair and redemption -- for peace.

-- Robert Kirschbaum