A Guide for the Perplexed

Merhav Yeshoron writes about the words in Yossi Breger's last solo show, and those absent from it.

Essay / Merhav Yeshoron July 21, 2016

In Yossi Breger's last show, the artist's act is reduced to a short list of names displayed on the walls. Each name is written in white type against a black background. The viewer is reflected in the glass, so that the word shows on his or her face, inviting a reading. What is it like to read a word?

Usually, a word does not stand alone, devoid of context. In a dictionary, too, where each word has its entry, the entry comprises the surrounding words – synonyms, explanations, or examples. The single word leans against the adjacent words, which anchor its meaning, and, in turn, it would do the same for them – all words vouch for each other; the dictionary is a circular network of links. In Breger's show, each word floats by itself within its frame, though other words frame it on the wall. An inevitable question arises: what is the relationship between the exhibited words, and can they be strung together in a sentence?

Word #37, 2016.JPG



[1]Yossi Breger, Word #73, archival inkjet print. 52x52x2 cm.
2016. Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery

Each word is positioned individually, as in any other show where different works are exhibited side by side, constituting the range of contexts from which the viewer is invited to actualize the work. The eye jumps from one exhibit or another to the entirety, from the part to the whole, and back and forth. The work becomes a space where the viewer can move and be. The meaning of the work - its face - evolves within this movement.

The flow from the one-ness to the many, from the detail to the whole, is central to Maimonides's book *A Guide for the Perplexed*, after which the show has been named. The first part of the book is dedicated to deconstructing the figure of the Biblical God. Since Judaism forbids the making of images, representation of the God is lingual. However, if the verbal images coalesce into pictures in the mind of the listener, then the tongue might be creating an image, causing the believer to sin.

Maimonides encourages the reader to pay attention to the picture and see that it is only a picture, and to turn from it towards God, who is more sublime than any picture. For that purpose, he reveals the names that comprise the image of God to the reader. These are the participating names: names with multiple meanings, used throughout the Bible to shape the image of God so it would be accessible to the believer. The picture is assembled from, and deconstructed into, those very names.

Yossi Breger,The Guide for the Perplexed, Homonyms, 2016, Exhibition view (2).jpg **[2]**



[3]Yossi Breger, "A Guide for the Perplexed: Homonyms" installation view, Dvir Gallery 2016. Photography: Elad Sarig

Breger has chosen eighteen names for his show, out of the forty or so lexical entries in part I of Maimonide's "Guide for the Perplexed". As the words have been selected from an already reduced list, it might be interesting to look at the gaps. Maimonides' list presents the underpinning of being – the figure of God, and the reflected figure of Man, and the whole world within. Breger's list derives from this a reduced figure.

Here is the list of the participating names, in order of appearance in a "Guide for the Perplexed". The bold names indicate Breger's *Guide to the Perplexed*:

image likeness **figure** to see man **woman** child place **throne** descended ascended **sitting rising standing** Adam (both the first man and the species of human beings) to stand erect urge/flint come near **touched approached (advanced) full** high **passed** came going out going back going reside(dwell) **foot sadness (nerve)** eat **face** back heart **air** soul living wing **eye** found thing said

wrote did rested **Sabbath** ride

These names appear as a collective image in the vision of the chariot, revealed to the prophet Ezekiel when he was in exile in Telabib (Tel Aviv) (Ezekiel 3:15). Of the creatures it is written, "and the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning." (Ezekiel 1:14). Those who follow Maimonides's guidelines understand that the creatures' movement in the four directions and back to the center is the movement of the reader as he extracts meanings from the different chapters, and brings it to where he requires it. Back and forth stands for the erection and collapse of the structure of meaning – the secret of the "Guide for the Perplexed".

Word #1, 2016.JPG **[4]**



[5]Yossi Breger, Word #1, archival inkjet print. 52x52x2 cm.
2016. Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery.

To understand Breger's action, we would do well to examine the names he selected, but also those he rejected, so that a portrait emerges – Breger's extraction of words has created a void, a negative – it is the image of the empty space in the dictionary. For example, the words 'man,' 'place,' living,' and 'soul' are missing from the show. The word 'image' (*tzelem* in Hebrew) holds the eye, and the disparity between the image of man and image-making is evident. (In Hebrew, the words for image [*tzelem*] and for photography [*tzilum*] derive from the same root.) It is tempting to charge photography with the creation of images, with the flattening of the human figure. According to Maimonides, *tzelem* is the essence of the thing, and in the case of Man, his essence is his unique consciousness as a speaking creature. In contemporary Hebrew, a reference to the '*tzelem* (image) of Man' is rare; it has been superseded by *tzilum* (photography). The name of the human-rights organization Be-Tzelem captures both meanings: its activists take pictures of the reality in the

Occupied Territories, as an alert to preserve the *tzelem* of Man, who has been created in the image of God. Representation occurs in any language, and is not unique to photography or to art in general, but here Breger evokes the familiar but somewhat overlooked question: how do you make art in a culture that forbids making images?

'Image,' picture,' 'woman:' these are the first items in the show, constituting a short story. A photographer (the image-maker) has made a picture of a woman. The photographer is the verb, and the woman is the subject. The picture is what stands between the photographer and the woman. The words 'man,' 'to see,' 'child' are conspicuously absent. According to Maimonides, 'man' and 'woman' represent the sexes (male and female) and "anything that is ready and willing to connect to anything else." 'Child' represents the existence of cause and consequence – in medieval language, the whole world was called 'consequence.' Also glaringly absent is the name *tzur* – rock – which share a Hebrew root with the words for urge, form, and creation (*yetzer*).

Word #9, 2016.JPG **[6]**



[7]Yossi Breger, Word #9, archival inkjet print. 52x52x2 cm.
2016. Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery.

The next exhibit in the show, after 'woman, ' is 'chair.' The proximity of the two evokes the tension between of the two parts of a metaphorical equation. A woman is photographed, and she becomes a picture; she is now placed among other household furnishings. The thesis about objectification in an exhibitionist society crashes against this chair, which is also God's throne. This is how the image is constructed: the photographer sits like a king, his legs crossed, and imagines God saying, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool." (Isaiah 66:1). The chair is a symbol for everything that is made, including the table and the house, the hammer and the nail, the pen and the sheet of paper.

Since the hammer has come up, we should bring in Martin Heidegger as well. In his book "Being and Time," he has used a hammer to demonstrate how the space of our existence is woven as a collection of available tools: not just the wardrobe, constructed with hammer and nails, but also the

clothing inside the wardrobe, made of fabric woven from yarn, which in turn is spun on the spinning wheel; or, alternatively, the car in which we drive to purchase our clothing. The blinker handle and the open hand painted on the stop sign - all are inter-related. It is impossible to comprehend the hammer without the nail or the blinker's arrow without the language of signs – the language too is part of the signifying apparatus. So we are back at the beginning – the dictionary as a closed network of contexts. Is there no way out of this dictionary, which is as vast as the whole world?

The system, any system, cannot validate itself from the inside. A system needs rules, or laws, which ostensibly are outside of it. The bank guarantees the value of the currency, but who vouches for the welfare of the State? What if 'inside' and 'outside' are nothing but dead metaphors?

Either way, language is a conscious, emerging organism, not just an instrument. Language, like the Internet, lies before us and behind us, and we are in it as much as it is in us. He who speaks strangely speaks what passes through him. Language is an informer; it talks about us.

In Lacanian language, all signifiers are interrelated in a chain of pursuers and the pursued, but one signifier has a different status: the phallus, the father, the law. These are the various names of the same super-signifier, the only one that has a signified, meaning something to lean on. It signifies what is; it keeps the language from dispersing and dissipating into the air, because something is being talked about, and this is what exists, not what does not exist.

Word #61, 2016.JPG **[8]**



[9]Yossi Breger, Word #61, archival inkjet print. 52x52x2 cm.
2016. Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery

In Hebrew, this status is reserved for the four-letter explicit name of God. Breger shows this name in the one-before-last exhibit. The appearance of the explicit name of God concentrates the paradox of representation. As a gesture to the tradition that forbids using that name, it is broken into the names of the letters: *yod*, *heh*, *vav*, *heh*. It becomes an exhibit in a show. The explicit name of God is now a work of art by the artist Yossi Breger.

The word that ends the show is 'Shabbat', where the myth of the God who creates through speech

and the myth of the artist intersect. Sabbath is not just a name for one of the days of the week. According to Maimonides, the names of the days are related to fables. He states that observation of the Sabbath preserves the fable about the one God, who has created a world in six days and rested on the seventh. This ancient story still dictates the reckoning of days throughout most of the world. For six days, God created and filled the world with everything that is in it. On the seventh day, when the work of creation was done, God rested and consecrated it as a day of rest. This obliteration, the absence of work, the cessation, the rest, are the void that balances the fullness. God has filled the world and now He creates the break, the interval, which make room for the spiritual in the world. The Sabbath restores and revives. It is the small respite, contrasted with the larger respite of death: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." (Genesis 3:19)

Word #67, 2016.JPG **[10]**



[11]Yossi Breger, Word #67, archival inkjet print. 52x52x2 cm.
2016. Courtesy of the artist and Dvir Gallery

Yossi Breger, "A Guide for the Perplexed: Homonyms [12]," May 14 through June 25, Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv

For further reading on Yossi Breger's show, see the article by Hagai Ulrich, "Homonyms," [13] also published in Tohu Magazine.

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