

**‘It is a place, Makom, where each man may be called up’:**

## **Being and time in Barnett Newman’s art**

**By Richard Mather**

‘Even if you don't know Newman's place in art history, walking into a space full of his paintings can inspire contemplation. They give you nothing and everything to look at, these huge canvases whose only subject is themselves, enveloping you in the moment, confronting you with seemingly pure fields of color and contrast.’<sup>1</sup>

In an 1965 interview with art critic David Sylvester, Jewish-American artist Barnett Newman stated that his overwhelming *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (painted in 1950-51) “should give man a sense of place: that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself.” The notion of place rather than space plays an important role in Newman’s work. Space is relatively unimportant to him

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<sup>1</sup> Molly Glentzer, “A different stripe Barnett Newman,” *Houston Chronicle*, <<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/entertainment/arts-theater/article/A-different-stripe-Barnett-Newman-6236750.php>>

because it is common property, without identity. Place, by contrast, takes into account both time and consciousness. It is *place* that generates in the viewer a “feeling” of his or her own “totality,” of their own “separateness” and “individuality” as they stand before his painting:

“[T]he painting should give man a sense of place: that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself. In that sense he relates to me when I made the painting because in that sense I was there ... To me that sense of place has not only a sense of mystery but also has a sense of metaphysical fact. I have come to distrust the episodic, and I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his own separateness, of his own individuality and the same time of his connection to others, who are also separate.”<sup>2</sup>

That Newman was given to metaphysical pronouncements will not be surprising to those who are familiar with his writings on art. Newman had a philosophical background and was later exposed to some of the existential ideas of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. Indeed, Heidegger and Sartre’s

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<sup>2</sup> Barnett Newman, “Interview with David Sylvester,” *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*.

preoccupation with *being* (being-in-the-world, being-for-itself etc) can be seen in some of the titles of Newman's work: *Right Here; Here; and Not There-Here*, among others.

Many critics have noted the significance of place and its Hebrew correlate, *makom*, which means "place" but is also a name of God (*ha-makom*) in Judaism. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 68:5) explains that God is the place of the world, and yet the world is not his place. This idea resonated with Newman, according to Harry Cooper, curator and head of modern and contemporary art at the National Gallery. "He hoped such a place would be created between his art and the viewer," Cooper remarked.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Newman used the term *makom* in 1963 when describing his design for a synagogue:

"It is a place, Makom, where each man may be called up to stand before the Torah to read his portion ... My purpose is to create a place, not an environment ... Here in this synagogue, each man sits, private and secluded in the dugouts, waiting to be called, not to ascend a stage, but to go up to the mound [*bimah*] where, under the tension of that "Tzim-tzum" that created light and the world, he can

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<sup>3</sup> Menachem Wecker, "His Cross To Bear," *Forward*.  
<<https://forward.com/culture/159912/his-cross-to-bear>>

experience a total sense of his own personality before the Torah and His Name.”

The space between the viewer and the artwork (or in this case the *bimah*) is no longer just space, but sanctified place where the physical and metaphysical meet. This meeting is what might be termed *presence*, a term that captures the sense of physical location (here), time (the present) and awareness of self (here I am). It seems that with the design of the synagogue, Newman intended the worshipper to have a real sensation of “being there,” that is, the consciousness of being present before the Torah. This awareness of being-there, this awareness of presence, is what Newman elsewhere calls “sublime.”

### **Time and the *il y a***

It happens that the materiality or sheer presence of Newman’s paintings exposes us to what Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls the *il y a*: literally, “there is,” “the horror of being,” existence without being. Levinas describes the *il y a* as impersonal, anonymous, as something that deprives consciousness of its subjectivity. The experience of the *il y a* is an experience of existence in which nothing happens.

But it would be a mistake to think Newman's chromatic abstractions represent the *il y a* and nothing else. On the contrary, Newman's mature paintings boast a particular and distinguishing feature: the *Newmanesque zip*.

The zip is a vertical band of color, often made with the aid of masking tape and palette knife. Newman introduced the technique in the late 1940s and it remained a constant feature of his work throughout the remainder of his life. Paintings in which the zip went down the middle of the canvas (as in *Onement I*) developed into paintings where the zip was off-center, and others in which there were several vertical zips. In some paintings, the zip is up to eleven feet tall. (There are a few instances of horizontal zips, but the vast majority of his paintings feature the vertical bands.)

Newman's zips act as a kind of intervention or temporal event that differentiates the canvas, preventing Being from falling into the anonymous and impersonal *il y a*. The zip is what might be described as *ecstatic temporality* (ecstatic from the Ancient Greek *ek* "out" + *histanai* "to place, cause to stand out"). Time not only gives sense or meaning to Being, it marks the emergence of *sensation*, the physical materiality of *something* or *someone*. Humans, in particular, but also some animals, are not just *in* time, they are conscious *of* time and *take account* of time. As Claude Cernuschi points out (in *Barnett Newman*

*and Heideggerian Philosophy*), “Humans exist *in* the present, *with* the past, and *in* anticipation of the future.”

Time is a physical experience: To those of brought up under the influence of Greek philosophy (which is most of us), the past is *behind* us; the future *ahead* of us, while the present is where you are located at this exact moment (hence the words *presence* and *present*). The ancient Hebrews, by contrast, thought of the past as something in front of them, as something that can be seen, while the unknown future is hidden from our view, as something behind us, hidden from our eyes.

Time was a dynamic process for the ancient Hebrews. Whereas the Greeks tended to think in terms of space and stasis, the Hebrews conceived of time as activity, the unfolding of events. In fact, this dynamic sense of time is embedded in the four-letter Hebrew name of God: *yhwh*, which is a derivation of *yhyh* (future), *hyh* (past) and *hwh* (present)

I mentioned earlier Newman’s association of *makom* with the synagogue. Interestingly, inscribed over the Ark in the sanctuary of many synagogues throughout the world are the Hebrew words דע לפני מי אתה עומד -- *da lifnei mi attah omed* -- “know before whom you stand” -- which is based on a phrase found in the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 28b. This, in turn, recalls God’s words to Moses at the site of the burning bush: “...the place [*ha-makom*] upon

which you stand is holy soil.” And it is here that God reveals the temporal nature of his name: *yhwh*.

And so we have a close proximity of place (*makom*), time (*yhwh*) and event (burning bush). It is also here that Moses emerges as a particular *someone*, a someone who stands in unique relation to the Divine:

“The Lord saw that he had turned to see, and God called to him from within the thorn bush, and He said, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am! [*hineni*]’.”

*Hineni*: Here I am. With the word *hineni*, Moses emerges from anonymity into the self-consciousness of being-there in the presence of God. It is here, at this time, in the presence of God, that generates in Moses what Newman might have described as the feeling of “totality,” of his own “separateness” and “individuality.” In fact, this brings us full circle to the beginning of this essay where I cited Newman’s assertion that his painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* “should give man a sense of place [*makom*]: that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself.”

To experience space fully, we must have a sense of time. Newman once remarked that the sensation of presence “is the sensation of time.” “Each person

must feel it for himself,” he remarked. “The concern with space bores me. I insist on my experiences of sensations in time -- not the *sense* of time but the physical *sensation* of time.”<sup>4</sup>

It is the awareness of time (*yhwh*) that turns space into place, into *makom* or holy ground. This, I think, is what Newman successfully captures in his huge canvases (but also in his design for a synagogue and his sculptures). And it is why Newman deserves to be seen not just as a New York modernist but as a distinctly Jewish painter who manages to represent the sheer presence of being and time without resorting to pictorial representation (“do not make graven images”). Newman’s chromatic abstractions are, in my view, the finest examples of a bold Jewish art that aims for the heights of the Hebraic sublime.

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<sup>4</sup> Barnett Newman, “Ohio, 1949,” *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*.