

Passover II 5784

A NEW YORK STATE OF MIND

Israel's incoming US consul Ofir Akunis
prepares for the fight of his life





ROBOTS SIGNIFY 'going through life without thinking, going through the emotions without feeling, doing things without connecting or being emotionally closed to things.'



THE CHICKENS in the book represent the chicken inside of us. Showing your chicken is 'being real' says the artist.

Warrior chicken

From insecurity to self-confidence, through art and poetry

• By DARCIE GRUNBLATT

Jared Bernstein describes *Courageous Chicken*, his book of poetry and paintings, as "delighting in authenticity, risking failure as it digs deep within, and grappling with the things it fears, constantly seeking its higher self."

These themes of failure, insecurity, courage, rising to new heights, and self-confidence are explored throughout this book. His poetry has a rhythm and rhyme, hip hop inspired, and begs to be read out loud. His artwork is reminiscent of American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat – with a Jewish twist, also highlighted in his poetry, adding new dimensions and meaning to the art.

The two art mediums used in the book complement one another and each heightens the other's meaning. The art pops from the page through the use of bright, warm pinks, reds, blues, oranges, and greens.

We meet at the Rosenbach Contemporary Gallery on Jerusalem's King David Street, where several of Bernstein's paintings are displayed and available for purchase. He discusses his inspiration for the book as well as the themes explored in his artwork and poetry.

Originally from New Jersey, Bernstein made aliyah with his wife in 2003, after having gone through the process of

becoming a *ba'al teshuva*. Throughout the book of art and poetry, he describes his psychological state on his journey to becoming religiously observant.

As the book progresses, his mindset changes from an insecure man, unsure of himself, to a religious man, who elevates himself and rises up to become closer to God.

Bernstein was raised entirely secular by both parents, who eventually divorced. His father had a degree in comparative religions and an arrangement with Jared's religious grandparents that they would not talk to Jared or his siblings about religion. His father wanted the children to "figure it out themselves" and "choose what they want," he recounts. He did not attend Hebrew school nor have a bar mitzvah.

"We weren't even Conservative or Reform," Bernstein says. "We were 'nothing.'"

While we sit in his art gallery, he tells me about the first time he believed there was a God, at 10 years old. "I remember I was in my bedroom. I remember I had this moment and I remember it was the first moment where I was like, 'There has to be a God,' and I felt it in that moment – God wasn't even part of my language – 'There's something out there, there's no question in my mind.' I felt comforted, felt like I was going to be ok, and I felt

connected to something."

HE DESCRIBES his life growing up, after his parents' divorce, as without structure or discipline, with nothing to keep him "tethered."

At 17, he totaled his car three times while drinking and driving, although without getting caught by the police. He also began experimenting with drugs.

Bernstein says that the only thing that kept him stable was being creative. He got his first camera when he was around 11, and he was always writing. He choked back tears when described his art as a therapeutic "unburdening" process.

"It feels like the sky's the limit with art," he says. "It can be as big as I want, I can transform myself, walk through my fears by being creative. That's why I work with such big canvases, it feels limitless," he explained.

He adds that creating art was his opportunity to work through certain thoughts and messages he'd lived with in his life. He consistently received the message that he was not good enough – both from his parents and his peers.

When he was three, his father bleached the child's hair blonde, for no apparent reason. He said that the message he got from his father was: "You're not good enough as you are, you gotta be something else." When he was 11, his

father gave him an IQ test. When the results came in, he said, his father told him, "OK you're average, not so bright, it's OK."

Bernstein recalls drawing, seated next to a friend, and seeing that his friend was so much better at drawing than he was; he felt that he could not draw, and that stuck with him throughout his life, even though he is a painter now.

During his 20s, Bernstein worked as a professional photographer and was extremely successful.

JUST BEFORE he set out on his journey to become a *ba'al teshuva*, in his early 30s, he was at the peak of his career. He was working every Shabbat and on all the Jewish holidays, photographing celebrities, models, and musicians. At the time, he was living with his girlfriend, who wasn't Jewish.

Then, he says, "My grandma's voice got into my head."

Initially, he was introduced to a friend of a friend, who took him to spend his first Shabbat. Within 10 minutes, he recalls, "I saw godliness through these people and that connected me right there with [myself at] the age of 11, [even though it was] 23, or 24 years later." Bernstein was so overwhelmed as the family was singing Shabbat songs, that he had to leave the room. He calls the



A HUMAN figure with a halo atop, likely an angel, with the numbers 99, holding up a robot with the words 'baal teshuva' on its chest.



THESE POEMS are complemented with paintings that are light pink and yellow.

experience “transformative.” He then began learning the Hebrew alphabet at 34. Subsequently, others invited him to spend Shabbat with them and their families. He began keeping Shabbat

and studying with his new friends. That year on Yom Kippur he had a photography job scheduled. He asked his friends what to do and they did not have an answer but told him to ask Rabbi Moshe

Turk in Queens. “Black hat. All the garb. Ten kids sitting at a table.” He chuckles as he recounts that he was terrified. The rabbi asked Bernstein if he *wanted* to work on Yom Kippur. He said he didn’t. Then, the rabbi asked if he *had* to work on Yom Kippur. Bernstein responded that he had made a commitment and had already been paid. So the rabbi told him, “Maybe next year you won’t work on Yom Kippur.” Bernstein says this answer meant a lot to him. “He gave me this answer that it’s ok, it’s alright, you’re learning, you’re in the process. He gave me a nice honest answer and made me look forward to next year on Yom Kippur when I wouldn’t have to work.” At that time, while still living in New York, Bernstein would drive from New Jersey to Queens in the morning to study Torah, a significant commute. His friend taught him the Hebrew alphabet while playing basketball. Slowly, he began spending more time and learning more with the religious community he had built up around him. With these families, he says, he “saw beauty, godliness, and never felt love like that before.” He felt “accepted and loved.” In spite of this, Bernstein emphasizes that becoming religious did take a lot of sacrifice. He sacrificed his photography business in 1999 when he began keeping Shabbat. That year, he was sued by a client over a wedding shoot that fell on Shabbat. When he made aliyah, he had to start over again. After he got married, he stopped painting, only to pick it up again 18 years later. He began writing the poetry and creating the paintings in the *Courageous Chicken* in 2018.

THE COURAGEOUS Chicken profiles a man at first unsure of where to go and filled with insecurities. In his poem titled “Trust,” he writes, “Stumbling through mazes; Lumbering; Earning my heavenly wages; Am I really stable; Better check my gauges.” In “Disassociation,” he alludes to himself as “a baby teething” and “Lost in the woods; Looking for a compass; To get my bearings,” describing a state of “Dizzy” confusion. He says he is “Searching for a clearing; To do something daring.” As the poem continues: “My destiny’s nearing; My eyes misty and tearing.” Toward the end of “Disassociation,” the poet begins to speak about repenting, new beginnings, redemption, and unlimited possibilities. These poems are complemented with paintings that are light pink and yellow. The painting that complements “Trust” shows a robot-like figure with a baby robot attached to the arm. The word “safe” is embedded in the painting. The painting next to “Disassociation” illustrates a chicken-like figure circled with swirls and arrows. Jared told me this



was his favorite poem in the book.

Between “Trust” and “Disassociation” is a poem titled “Nouveau Charedi.” This poem is the first explicit mention of the artist’s *ba’al teshuva* status. He describes himself as someone who is always trying to fit in, to “stay in line.”

“My heart is on fire; I’m a wild Jew; I put forth the real me; I’m the Nouveau Charedi,” he writes, identifying as a new version of something from the past.

As the book progresses, Bernstein discusses rising up, fostering a deeper connection, and elevating to new heights.

In the poem “King Mediocre,” he is “Entering a new phase” and changing his “evil ways.”

The artwork that accompanies this poem is composed of three robot-like figures – the one in the center wears a black hat and has “King Mediocre” scrawled across his chest and five scribbled Stars of David below. The figure on the right has Stars of David scrawled above his head, like a crown.

The poem “Magnus Opus” continues the themes of elevation and fostering a deeper connection with God. Although it did not particularly speak to me, the artwork that accompanies it is exquisite. Bernstein uses bright, vibrant colors including deep reds and pinks, along with blues and yellows. In this painting, his use of color is reminiscent of Matisse.

The following two poems are a juxtaposition between two different feelings, enlightenment and regression. The poem “Enlightenment,” accompanied by a green painting of a robot surrounded by light bulbs, really explores elevation and uses phrases such as “I’m cutting all my earthly ties; soaring to new heights” and “Letting go; from deep inside.”

“Regression” highlights more insecurities, and is accompanied by a golden, orange painting of a man with gritted teeth and wide eyes. He uses lines such as “When it’s scary; I hang on dearly” and “I have a secret box; where all my fears are buried.”

THE NEXT part of the book that stands out is a page entitled “Kikel: The origins of the word ‘Kike.’” This page is accompanied by a painting that makes references to antisemitic slurs used against Jews. It also has a picture of a Star of David with the word “Jude” inside, a reference to the Holocaust. On the right of the painting is a yellow box with the word “Zionism” inside. Elephants cross the bottom of the painting. At the end of the page, Bernstein writes, “I’m proud to be called a Kike; what an HONOR and a PRIVILEGE.”

I ask Bernstein about this page. He tells me that this page was inspired by his grandparents, who had a profound impact on him.

His grandfather had arrived in New York via Ellis Island and told him stories about coming from Russia. His grandfather told him that when he arrived at Ellis Island they were herded through, and the officers who worked there



THE ARTWORK that accompanies ‘Trust’ is composed of three robot-like figures – the one in the center wears a black hat and has ‘King Mediocre’ scrawled across his chest and five scribbled Stars of David below.

wanted them to mark a list with an x, but many Jews there said they wouldn’t because it looked like a Christian cross. Instead, they marked the list with circles.

Bernstein says he found out that “kike” comes from the Yiddish word “kikel,” meaning circle. He says it made him see the word as positive, instead of negative. Through this page, he says, he is changing the perception of the word to a “big compliment” instead of an insult.

I asked him if anyone had ever called him a kike or if he had experienced antisemitism growing up. He responded that he had heard the word when he was a teenager in high school but it didn’t mean anything to him because he wasn’t a “proud Jew.” As he grew older and reflected on his experience, he more clearly understood the significance of what people were saying to him.

Now, he says, discussing the current antisemitic trends across the world, “I watch what’s going on in the world and I hear the hate and I hear the anger and it’s painful to see other people suffering like that and to realize that they’re carrying around such negativity in their lives. There’s such a venom.”

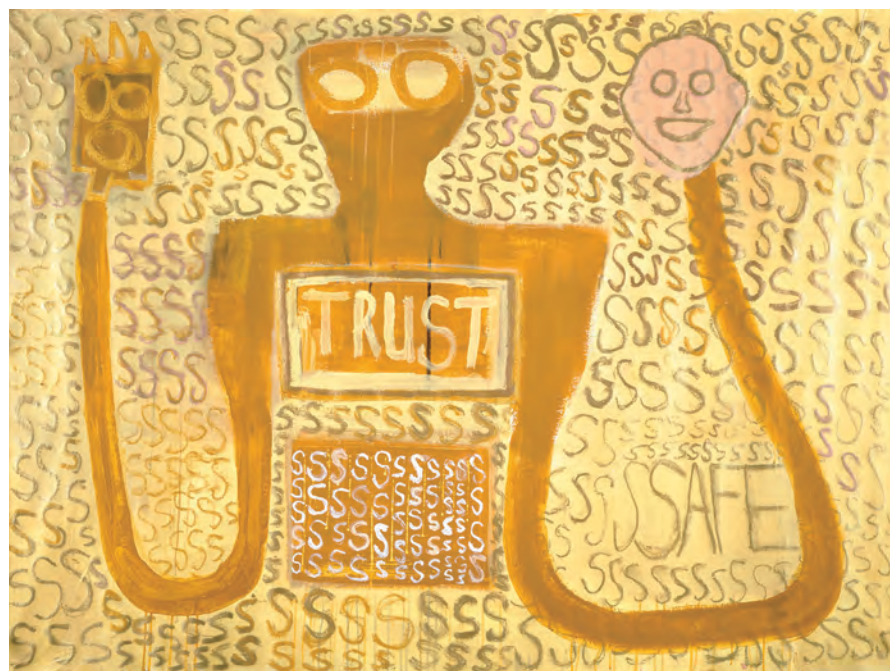
“If someone called me a negative name, it wouldn’t touch me. I work so hard at building up my own self-image and my own self-esteem and my own identity that once I continue to strengthen that, nobody else can touch me,” he

declares resolutely, adding, “When you have shalom inside, it makes the world that way.”

IN THE gallery, Bernstein pulled out a larger-than-life rendition of the painting from the book. While on the page it looks a little chaotic and the colors

meld together, the larger-than-life original version has bright vibrant colors, turquoise and gold. Each aspect of the painting is well-defined and cohesive. I could not stop staring at it.

I realized that seeing the art in person and reading the poetry with the art are two different experiences.



THE PAINTING that complements ‘Trust’ shows a robot-like figure with a baby robot attached to the arm. The word ‘safe’ is embedded in the painting.



As he continues to show his paintings, he describes what different elements mean. He says that the robots signify “going through life without thinking, going through the motions without feeling, doing things without connecting or being emotionally closed to things.”

The chickens in the book represent the chicken inside of us.

“We all have a little chicken inside of us, so I’m showing my chicken,” Bernstein says. Showing your chicken means “being real,” he explains. “Bringing out your chicken is being vulnerable. Revealing innermost vulnerabilities.

“The chicken is the part of me that wants to connect and be vulnerable and share something meaningful and authentic. It symbolizes that I’m transforming and growing and taking chances and risks,” he explains.

As the book continues, Bernstein describes a process of elevation, and of showing his chicken. He says he “Took the wrong route; lost myself for

a minute; wallowing in self-doubt” in “Temporary”; and also says he is “striving for Ascension” in the poem “Ascension.” My favorite line in the book is “My thoughts are crisp; like potato chips,” in “Temporary.”

In “Good Enough,” he talks about “Jumping through hoops; dodging hurdles,” clearly referencing perseverance through challenges, but also indicates his determination to keep going.

At the end of the book, Bernstein makes two references to the Passover story, the first in the poem “Self-Made Man” and the second in one of the last poems in the book, “Closure.”

In both of these references, the concepts of repentance and renewal are present. In “Self-Made Man,” he says, “As a slave in Egypt; Nearly got smote; Went to great lengths; To repent.”

The poem “Closure” sums up a transition of becoming more connected to God. He talks about rising and persevering through difficult times. His last lines in this poem are, “Was in exile;

Crossed the Nile; Ultimate act of survival; Against all odds; I’m feeling wild; My love is alive.”

I asked Bernstein if he ever feels constrained by the rules of being religious, since he had emphasized that he likes the feeling of being limitless when he creates art. He told me that the halachic part works for him because “it keeps things structured and in the lines.” Sometimes he wants to break, but he doesn’t.

He told me that “the writing and the painting gives him the opportunity to be boundless and help him get it out.” He said that the outlet allows him to be a better father, husband, and Jew. It helps him “daven” better. He said it allows him to feel limitless – while halacha is structured. He added that he thinks he wouldn’t have been as happy religiously without having a place to be limitless.

The final poem in the book titled, “Higher than a Tzadik,” is only nine lines long, with three words to each

line. It briefly tells the story of his becoming a *ba’al teshuva*. The artwork that accompanies this poem is a human figure with a halo atop, likely an angel, with the number 99, holding up a robot with the words “ba’al teshuva” on its chest. The angel-like figure is light blue, and the robot figure is bright blue and orange. The robot figure has yellow streaks coming from its head as if it is exuding light, seemingly an enlightened being.

The first poem in *Courageous Chicken* is accompanied by a painting that includes a box-like figure next to a chicken. The figure has arrows inside his body. Bernstein describes this as “a warrior.”

He concludes, “When people get more confident and comfortable with their chicken, they feel stronger, they’re a warrior.” ■

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