

Helène Aylon

Artist, humanist, activist, Jewish feminist — Aylon likes to shake things up.
And she does.

by JUDITH A. SOKOLOFF

The standout magnet on my cluttered refrigerator door makes a simple but powerful statement: IN G-D WE TRUST. The hyphen is pink. The creator of the original image and many decades' worth of other compelling art is Helène Aylon. The image is part of her "The G-d Project: Nine Houses Without Women." Twenty years in the making, it is Aylon's effort to "rescue God." Through her art, she has also worked to rescue the body and the earth — and ultimately herself. Both cautious and intrepid, Aylon is a woman who is able to contain paradoxes. She poses difficult and disturbing questions, challenging her audiences to think and talk about the world and themselves in ways they never thought before.

"I like to shake things up," says the 80-year-old Aylon in her loft in Westbeth, a residence for artists in New York's West Village. And she's been keeping things roiling for the past 50 years as a visual, conceptual, multimedia, performance and installation artist. "I pretty much make up my own rules — I'm my own guide." Her lovely, peaceful face, her soft movements, calm words and gentle laugh belie her inside rebel.

Aylon walks me through her loft — a museum. I'm entranced. There are enigmatic photographs of her as a small part of vast landscapes; a synagogue pew from a work titled "Alone With My Mother"; some of the books from her installation "My Notebooks," each



Courtesy, Helène Aylon

Text from Jewish sources is projected on the face of Helène Aylon, from a series titled "Self-Portrait: The Unmentionable."

with lined empty pages signifying the dearth of female commentary during her schooling; abstract paintings from her early years; two of her "Paintings That Change With Time," first exhibited in the 1970s; army stretchers from an anti-war work; a pillar from "My Bridal Chamber" installation; magazines with articles about her, including the recent last edition, sadly, of the Jewish feminist journal *Bridges*, which features a dialogue with Aylon and her friend, the poet Rachel Berghash (see her memoir excerpt in this issue); DVDs and museum catalogs of her work.

Aylon's long list of exhibitions covers the world, and her work is in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the

San Francisco Museum of Art and The Jewish Museum in New York. Her own memoir, *Whatever Is Contained Must Be Released: My Jewish Orthodox Girlhood, My Life as a Feminist Artist*, was published in April by The Feminist Press. It is a riveting look at her remarkable life, swathed in her strong sense of humor and compassion.

Aylon's latest project, now being shown at the San Francisco Contemporary Jewish museum, concerns the biblical Hagar and addresses the background from which Jewish-Arab hostility has sprung. "Hagar is a foremother," observes Aylon,

"a stepmother, but also a foremother." Created for Tu BiSh'vat, she placed a large bowl of water, a kos Hagar, on a table, surrounded by three napkins. Written on the napkins, in Hebrew, Arabic and English, is a proclamation that apologizes for the banishing of Hagar and her son Ishmael. "It's a metaphor, a gesture," Aylon points out. "It says we're sorry, we have chesed (kindness). Hagar was humiliated, used like a Shabbes Goy. God felt sorry for Hagar — we, too, should have empathy for her."

"As a Jew, I'm full of pride and shame," states the "post-Orthodox" artist. Much of her work reflects complex, antithetical feelings.

Aylon's busy schedule of exhibitions took her to the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in spring 2011 for a solo show "The Liberation of G-d."



The artist used a pink marker to cross out words in the Five Books of Moses that she found inhumane, misogynist and cruel.

This past February, she traveled to Israel for an exhibition at the Museum of Art, Ein Harod, titled “Matronita: Jewish Feminist Art” (Matronita is a Talmudic term for an important woman, a woman who engages in discussion with rabbinic sages). Examining feminist consciousness in the Jewish world, it featured the work of female artists who come from traditional religious backgrounds. Three of Aylon’s large installations were shown, including “My Marriage Bed/My Clean Days.”

Aylon stayed on Kibbutz Ein Harod for a month, giving her the chance to see Israel for the first time in 20 years, to rediscover the country she once desired to live in. There, she felt the “richness” of life, as compared to the “thinness” in the United States.

“Just looking out the window of the car on the highway and seeing the word, yetzia, exit, gave me a thrill,” Aylon says. “The words assume extended meanings. They are layered. There is this duality, the two cultures twisting and braiding. The past and the future and the present all seen in a glance like an epiphany every moment of the day.”

“I constantly asked myself the question — could I have lived here? Could I have done it? There’s a section in my memoir comparing the all-Jewish neighborhood of Borough Park [Brooklyn] to the Israeli Jewish neighborhood. I guess I found Israel more sensual!”



“My Marriage Contract” shows Aylon as a bride of 18, holding up a canopy. She dedicated it to the mothers whose names were omitted on the occasions of the marriage of a child and the death of a child.

Digging into her deep well of utopian notions, Aylon has some ideas for improving Jewish-Arab relations in Israel. She wants to “humanize checkpoints until they cease to exist.” Her plan involves providing delicious free food for those detained; chairs for mothers and elders and anyone who wants to sit; apologetic soldiers with manners; free books for Arab children to replace incendiary ones, along with other amenities.

Aylon grew up in a “Modern Orthodox” home in Borough Park; she studied at the Shulamith School for Girls and attended Young Israel synagogue. She shared a room with her grandmother, who spoke only Yiddish.

Her youth was a time when she thought there were answers, when her mother always encouraged her to “belong, belong” (Aylon’s mother played a large part in her life until her death at age 100). She couldn’t imagine life without faith.

Aylon married a rabbi at 18. From a very young age, she knew she wanted to be an artist, but in her married years, her main work was illustrating the newsletter of her husband’s shul. On the week of her 30th birthday, she became a widow with a daughter and a son. Soon after, she began studying art at Brooklyn College, where the abstract expressionist Ad Reinhardt was a mentor.

She wanted to be both “in and out” of the Borough Park community. But eventually, she writes in her memoir, “My de-

Did God really say that to Moses, or is it a patriarchal projection?

gree in art would be a degree in freedom.” She coined a new surname — Aylon, from the Hebrew name for Helène, Aylonna. After graduation, she rented a studio in the East Village, always feeling conflicted and guilty that she wasn’t spending more time with her children and also more time creating art. Around 1970, she was “rescued by feminism,” inspired by women like Maya Angelou, Andrea Dworkin, Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly, who, she writes, “inhabited the world in a new way,” threatening “to turn it upside down and inside out.” Aylon realized it was okay to be both a mother and an artist.

When did she know she was a feminist Jew? Aylon tells me about her turning point. In San Francisco in the early 70s, some secular friends insisted she attend a Chabad Shabbat — their delinquent son had been “cured” by Chabad. She was reluctant to go. To her surprise, when she saw all the candles burning, she started crying profusely, out of nostalgia for the Shabbat candlelight of her youth. “Well,” she recalls, “I was saved by looking over the mechtizta and seeing the men huddled together in their exclusivity, away from the vayber, the wives — and my tears completely dried.” At that moment, she realized she was a feminist, and more, a Jewish feminist.

Aylon divides her work over the last 50 years into three categories, she explains. “The 1970s were about the body; the 1980s, about the Earth; the 1990s, God.” The “three landscapes of feminist thought” in her oeuvre, in other words, are “bio-logical,” “eco-logical,” and “theo-logical.”

In the ’70s, when she lived in San Francisco, Aylon turned from abstract art, which she found “too arbitrary,” to process art, centering on the “visceral



Helène Aylon stands behind a 1999 installation she created for her mother, reflecting their conflict over her work. She calls it “Epilogue: Alone with my Mother.”

and orgasmic body and the inevitability of change.” She focused on the connection between the human body and the body of the land: “its arteries of rivers, its oceanic heartbeat, its vein-like branch forms, its oval female forms — the handwriting of the universe.” Her metaphoric use of sacs filled with liquid, her pourings, and her “Paintings That Change in Time” (designed to change over time) reflected the flow of life.

Her series “Breakings” incorporated sacs that participants broke in a way that resembled the release of amniotic fluid at birth. Aylon would “accept” what was released unconditionally, as she accepted all the ongoing turnings of nature. And she was making the distinction between the visceral body, the one that lives and dies; and the idealized or sexualized body, as defined by men, the body that men want to control.

In 1979, she was part of the first

conference on eco-feminism in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her eco-feminist worldview has persisted through the years. One sees her ethereal figure in a series of panoramic otherworldly landscapes (like salt flats). She is “going to the land,” she explains, “walking, crouching, crawling, looking for unnamed foremothers she yearns for. I felt the land could tell me something, answer questions that I was not going to get from God.” The photos, taken in 1980, weren’t shown until 2005. Since then, Aylon “goes into nature” every year and continues her search. Does she get answers? She tells me that she experiences “turnings” and now visualizes herself as a “future foremother, greeting those that will follow. This is daunting, the continuity!” Maybe that’s an answer.

Back in New York in the early 1980s, Aylon’s

work became “less metaphoric, more activist, more tikkun olam,” she explains. It was about healing the earth, halting the arms race, uniting women from warring nations. In 1981, women carried Aylon’s sand-filled sacs in San Francisco in support of a Friends of the Earth event. Later in the year, during the intifada, she gathered Jewish and Arab women in Israel to clean up stones that the Arabs were throwing and carry the sacs in a show of peaceful coexistence. It was a period during which she says she was “naïve and utopian,” thinking her art could help change people, that Arab and Jewish women would just “love each other,” that you just had to talk to women and things would be okay and lead to global feminism. A second stone carrying, in 1992, she recalls, was “more tense” and less idealistic.

After hearing the anti-nuclear activist Dr. Helen Caldicott speak about

the arms race, Aylon drove her earth ambulance to Strategic Air Command (S.A.C.) nuclear bases across the United States where she filled pillowcases with soil and transported them to the United Nations Second Special Session on Disarmament on June 12, 1982. The film of the work, "The Earth Ambulance," was shown as recently as 2004 to 2008 at the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, New York.

In Japan, she asked survivors of the atomic bomb to write their dreams and nightmares on pillowcases and exchange them with her. In a video, Aylon talks to a Japanese woman with deep facial scars who is still coming to terms with her beautiful childhood memories that clash with the memories of her post-bomb hell. Aylon tells her: "Maybe we will dream together — I'll sleep on your dreams and you sleep on mine."

Later that year, 1,000 pillowcases were hung around Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza at the United Nations, where she

carry in your sac?" Aylon notes that the sacs remind her of a peckel, the bag shlepped by peddlers and other wandering Jews.

In the 1990s, Aylon immersed her art in Judaism. "My aim was to shine a feminist lens with a scholarly inquiry into ancient texts and practices that omit or deny the presence/input of women." God, she felt, "had to be liberated from ungodly patriarchal projections in order to be God of the Bible." Her work became more autobiographical, concerning her background and her Orthodox identity issues.

For two decades, starting in the early 1990s, Aylon worked on "The G-D Project: Nine Houses Without Women," a series of installations confronting gender inequality in Judaism and acknowledging forgotten foremothers. The works are audacious, yet respectful of Judaism.

The first of the nine installations is "The Liberation of G-D," a reexamination of sacred texts from a feminist point of view that is very much in keeping with the Jewish tradition of midrash (biblical commentary). In this powerful work, she has gone through the entire Five Books of Moses (it took her six years), using a pink marker to cross out passages she finds inhumane, misogynist, cruel, militaristic, vengeful — eschewing the concept of the "most limited and unevolved hierarchal God." She also highlighted between words where a female presence is omitted. The pink marks were done on transparent parchment paper that covered the actual text. As the artist went through the text, she challenged: "Did God say

these things to Moses, or are they patriarchal attitudes projected onto God? — as though man has the right to have dominion even over God." She sees herself as "sticking up" for God who is being victimized. The work reminds us that so many heinous biblical commands still have a hold on people today. "The Digital Liberation of God," a video of her action of highlighting the problematic words, has been shown in many venues.

The process, Aylon says, was a "meditation and a release for me." In the act of liberating God, of nurturing a healing in the relationship with God, she liberated herself as well. She discovered that she could embrace her upbringing and cast it away at the same time (I'm "Schizo-Orthodox," she quips) — a concept that permeates much of her work. When the Jewish Museum in New York showed "The Liberation of G-D" in 1996, it represented her "going public as a Jewish feminist."

Aylon is seeking the part of Judaism that was erased: the beauty of the foremothers' input and guidance that was not recorded or acknowledged. She writes in her memoir: "In order to save Judaism for myself, I had to turn to the sod (secret things), the nistar (the hidden). The nistar that moved me the most often came from the foremothers." She has found that, through insights, extrapolations, conjecture and inspiration, she can honor God and honor women in new ways with new stories.

She explains that there is no commandment to cover mirrors when sitting shiva, but Aylon imagines that there was a foremother once so full of grief over the death of her husband that she covered the mirrors because she

Aylon covered the façades of art museums with her anti-war "Bridge of Knots." On the pillowcases, women have written their dreams and nightmares.



Courtesy, Helène Aylon

"All Rise" is Aylon's imaginary female Beit Din (Jewish court of law), where women are allowed to bear witness and judge.

and other women camped out for 14 days.

For the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1995, her video of two sacs filled with seeds en route to Hiroshima and Nagasaki on a Japanese river was shown on the Sony Jumbotron in Times Square. Words appear on the screen: "What would you



Courtesy, Helène Aylon

I'm seeing myself as a future foremother. I follow my own footsteps.

couldn't stand to look at herself. This ritual soothed Aylon when she mourned her husband. She talks about the sacred lighting of the candles, pointing out that nowhere in the Five Books of Moses is there a commandment for women to light candles. But it became a custom that got passed down from mother to daughter, as she passed it down to her daughter who passed it to her daughter. She sees the prayer for a rainbow as the creation of a woman who was so delighted when she and her children first saw one. She is the woman who braided challah and the havdala candle the same way she braided her hair; who covered the twin challahs like a mother gently covers her babies. "I say she was the first to say *Who bringest forth bread from the earth,*" Aylon intuits.

"We must think of ourselves as foremothers — a comforting thought." And she invites all women to be their own midrashists.

Aylon and I look at photos of her installation "My Bridal Chamber." In one part, "My Marriage Contract," there are four columns, each covered



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Behind Aylon are photos from her series "Turnings" in which she is seeking the footprints of the foremothers.

by a large photo of her as a bride of 18, holding up a canopy. The ketubah refers to her as "Helène, Virgin daughter of Anshel." No mention of her mother. On the floor is a photograph of her late husband's headstone, highlighted

presence. The tzitzit under the judicial seats refer to the fringes worn around the groins of religious men to protect them from the lure of women. The work, like many of her others, appears

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in pink where his mother's name was left out. The artist dedicated the piece to the mothers whose names were omitted on the happiest and the saddest of occasions: the marriage of a child and the death of a child.

The final installation in "The G-d Project" is "All Rise," Aylon's imaginary female Beit Din (Jewish court of law). Here, women, who have been forbidden (along with minors, idiots and slaves) to bear witness and to judge by the Shulcan Aruch and the Mishna Torah can now do so. She thinks this is a solution for the agunah (chained woman), who can't escape her marriage if her husband denies her a Jewish divorce. It could also be the redress for other acts of discrimination against Jewish women. Pink pillowcases — universal flags — in her beit din hang on flagpoles. The pink neon in the words *In G-d We Trust* represents a feminine

Torah Paradox

Oh, but that dear young rabbi from Chabad — he was so very warm. He reminded me of my ten-year-old grandnephew, Tuvia, who has that same special vahrmkeit (warmth), even at such a young age. For years, Tuvia gave himself the job of calling me every Friday to inform me of the time to light candles. "We have Shabbos one minute later in Passaic than in New York, New York," he would tell me excitedly. "You bench lecht [light candles] at 6:17 p.m. and 22 seconds. Have a great Shabbos!"

I know this boy will always have a great Shabbos. Once he and his ten siblings reach yeshiva age, they are invited by their Dad to take turns standing at an actual lectern set up at the head of their dining room table to give a dvar Torah (a "learning" from the Torah). There's a small stool for the younger children who can't reach over the top of the lectern, and even these little ones repeat what they learned in the yeshiva's kindergarten. This is how I could spend twenty years denouncing what's in the Torah, but still love the idea of Torah.

— From *Whatever Is Contained Must Be Released* by Helène Aylon

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with a proclamation — Aylon’s frequent way of getting messages across verbally along with the visual. Here, she respectfully asks that women be permitted to judge and give testimony, and she petitions for an apology to all females who weren’t allowed to judge — and whose judgments will never be known — because they weren’t men. “In this way, all women will be honored and God will be honored,” she notes. (See Aylon’s Web site, www.heleneaylon.com for a look at the other installations and more of her work.)

Aylon tells me that her most recent official work of art is the minimalist “Eternal Light,” a metal rectangle with a pink neon dash in the center. It “sums up my whole career,” she observes. She has taken away everything else. This is the essence.

Does this mean she has come to some conclusions? No. As she writes in her memoir, “I cannot come to any conclusion.” She tries to “keep my balance, holding paradoxes, waiting to see what will happen,” as in her “Paintings That Change.” But, she adds, “Judaism remains a constant.”

What’s next? I ask Aylon, as I know she will not just wait for things to happen. The artist says she’s thinking about a return to process painting and wants to “deal with civilization, with where did we go wrong with nature and civilization, about the intersection and explosion of the two.” She blames patriarchy — no surprise.

It’s Passover. Aylon and I are sitting in her loft eating matzo and cantaloupe. She has just returned from Princeton where her “Conservadox” son held a seder (her son is Nathaniel Fisch, director of the Program in Plasma Physics and professor of astrophysical sciences at Princeton University, and her daughter is the drama therapy pioneer Renée Emunah). She remarks that many physicists are Orthodox Jews. I tell her about the two seders I attended — both argumentative, provocative, questioning and yet also traditional. Which brings us to the endless conversation about God. I, too, have my God issues, but growing

up in a progressive Jewish atmosphere, I have not had to wrestle with it the way an Orthodox Jewish woman might. Aylon’s “Beit Din” was supposed to be the finale, she notes with humor, but she is “still not finished with God.” I understand, though I carry fewer peckles.

Aylon directs me to a series of photographs she did in 2010, titled “Self-Portrait: The Unmentionable.” Text from the Bible and other Jewish sources are projected on Aylon’s face. In one, the holiest name for God, the unpronounceable Hashem, appears on her forehead. The four Hebrew letters of the Name — YHVH — translate to past, was; present, is; future, will be. She says: “I realized this is eternity. God is eternity, whatever that is.”

Truth is what Aylon seeks. “And Godliness — not the limited and unevolved hierarchal God of the Bible.” She has studied Kabbala, she explains, “where God is everywhere and everything, and there is no end — Ein Sof.” Reviewing her years of wrestling with Judaism and her changing sense of the human concept of God, she has written: “The truth shall make you free, and I must not shrug off the discomforts. That is the gain. Of course, ignorance is bliss, and I can never attain that sense of joyous confidence that faith inspires. I can say thank you [to God], but I find it difficult to say please, thinking that my plea will be answered. How can anyone think that after the Holocaust?”

She tells me: “There’s a thirst for spiritual elevation and the Torah does not quench this thirst. Some passages make us flinch and squirm and we had better seek a rationale. The music can stir the spirit to rise. The wisdom and elasticity of the Kabbala can touch that same chord. The word Matronita takes away the stigma of an ‘old lady’ and now that same person can be considered an elder woman from whom others seek guidance. A Matronita can write proclamations. We can all aspire to grow into Matronitas.”

So when will I be a Matronita? I ask Aylon. Maybe at 65, she tells me. We laugh. My future foremother is a hard act to follow.

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