

The White Fire in Jewish sources, in art and in art therapy: Revelation beyond the words

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This paper presents the concept of the White Fire in a variety of contexts. The first section explores its meanings in rabbinic sources and in Jewish hermeneutical tradition. Central here is an exposition by R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, who suggests that the White Fire is the "surrounding light" [or mekif] of the Torah and represents its concealed, spiritual dimensions. The white spaces between and around the letters symbolize the transcendent dimensions of reality. Just as the white part of the text is proportionately larger than the space taken by the black letters, so the higher worlds, concealed beyond the dimensions of visible earthly reality, are greater than what is revealed. Following this primary understanding of the White Fire as representing hidden aspects of the Torah, the author considers two Hasidic stories told by R. Shlomo Carlebach and suggests that the notion of White Fire is expressed in them as an elevated spiritual experience beyond the realm of words (story of the white page soaked with a rebbe's tears, used by a Jew as a passport that saved his life), or as a spiritual relationship between people too profound for words (story about the friendship between the Rebbe of Warka and the Rebbe of Trisk who sent one another blank letters.) The second section describes some uses of the concept in art therapy that can aid in connecting to the higher, concealed aspects of experience, the "White Fire" of the psyche, and suggests ways in which art can be used to express psychological states such as pain or transcendence that are too intense to be put into words. The last section presents works of contemporary art by Collette Ziv that embody the notion of the White Fire in various ways. Analysis of these works, along with description of the artist's creative processes, illustrate the connection between meaningful spiritual experience and the possibility of giving form and matter to abstract experiences that are difficult to verbalize.