

The Creative Process and the Jewish Artist

By Nora Gold

Lately I've been thinking a lot about the creative process, because my new novel, *The Dead Man* (which came out this week) is about a composer of Jewish sacred music who is unable to compose. The creative process is – not only to my protagonist Eve, but in general – a complicated and mysterious thing. There is a mountain of literature about the creative process, including tens of thousands of interviews with artists (writers, musicians, dancers, and visual artists) about what is enabling for them in their acts of artistic creation. Yet there is much about this process that remains elusive.

What is far less elusive, though, is our understanding of what impedes, damages, or stunts the creative process. Ever since Tillie Olsen's ground-breaking book, *Silences*, we've known that an artist's work is profoundly affected not only by her inner life, but also by the social context in which she lives (including the classism, sexism, racism, and heterosexism inherent in this place). So social reality plays a significant role in the creative process.

I encountered this fact forcefully about a decade ago when the publishing industry was already deeply in crisis due to the advent of digital technology, and when consequently it was becoming much harder for authors to find publishers for their work. Over a short space of time, I happened to meet several writers who, after years of failed efforts to find a publisher for their work, had become discouraged, depressed, and unproductive. A few of them had even decided to "take a break from writing" and do other things for a while – a break that, in at least one case, seems to have become permanent.

Obviously there are internal factors, not just external ones, at play in these decisions. There are intrapsychic variables (emotional, psychological, and attitudinal factors) that influence an artist's capacity to engage in creative work. But what I heard from these writers really drove home for

me how powerfully one's cultural and artistic environment can affect an individual's creative process.

I also realized back then that, although all writers were being affected by the crisis in the publishing industry, Jewish writers seemed to be getting particularly hard hit. Much Jewish-themed fiction was (and still is) considered "niche" literature, which means it has a relatively small market and is therefore less desirable to publishers. Consequently, as I could see back then, a lot of very good Jewish fiction was not finding a publishing home.

This is why, in 2010, I started the free online literary journal, *Jewish Fiction .net*. Now, six years later, we have published 280 first-rate works of fiction, originally written in fourteen languages, that had never previously published in English, and *Jewish Fiction .net* has readers in 140 countries. We've published some of the most well-known Jewish writers living today, but our primary goal is, and has always been, to create a space for publishing and showcasing new Jewish writing that otherwise might be lost.

If we want Jewish literature (and the other Jewish arts) to thrive, it is crucial that – as individuals and communities – we actively nurture our Jewish artists, and create the kinds of contexts that will enable and bolster the creative process. Thankfully there are individuals among us who love and support (financially or otherwise) the Jewish arts, and there are some very important Jewish organizations, as well. The Jewish Book Council, for example, has had an enormous impact on writers since its inception – not only in the external sense of facilitating contacts, book sales, etc., but also in a creative sense, since – as already mentioned – the writer's external context (if it is positive) supports her creative process.

For those who care about fostering Jewish creativity, obviously it isn't necessary to start a new literary journal or an organization like the Jewish Book Council. Any individual who wants to can play a genuinely helpful role in enabling Jewish creativity. Many people, though, don't seem to know, or believe, that they can have a real impact on Jewish artists. Perhaps this is because of the widespread and romanticized myths and misconceptions about artists and their creative

process. For example, the notion that the (idealized) artist doesn't need any help or support; that his creativity is a mystical, otherworldly experience untouched by the real world; and that the creative process is not real work like any other, but mainly a matter of sitting around and waiting for inspiration to strike, like a bolt of lightning. None of which are true.

When it comes to creating a fertile context for Jewish creativity, even a few small acts on the part of an individual can make a significant difference to local Jewish artists and to the cultural life of a community. Invite a Jewish artist to your home to come speak about her work with a group of your friends. Buy Jewish books and CD's. Go see Jewish plays, concerts and dance performances. Visit Jewish art exhibits. And if you like something you've read, seen or heard, shout it out as loudly as you can to everyone you know, via phone, email, and social media.

You really can make a difference to the lives – and the creative outcomes – of today's Jewish artists. Which means, in essence, that you can help shape the cultural future of our people.

Why wait? If not now, when?

Nora Gold's books include *The Dead Man* (May 2016), *Fields of Exile* (which won the 2015 Canadian Jewish Literary Award), and *Marrow and Other Stories* (winner of a Canadian Jewish Book Award and praise from Alice Munro). Gold is the editor of the prestigious literary journal *Jewish Fiction .net* and the Writer-in-Residence, Centre for Women's Studies, OISE/University of Toronto.