

Jewish artist Tobi Kahn crosses religious lines

by [David Van Biema](#) in the [June 8, 2016](#) issue

As Passover approached, Tobi Kahn worked in his studio in Queens, New York, putting washes of glaze on a silver-painted peg, a miniature sculpture soon to join 48 others.

The 49 pegs fit into a two-foot-high case. Hang the case on your wall, and you have a sculpture that evokes the grids of modernist art. Remove or add a peg daily, and you're counting the Omer, a Jewish practice marking the days from Passover until the festival of Shavuot, which marks Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. This year it falls on June 11.

Kahn's first Omer counter hangs in New York's Jewish Museum. His clients sign an agreement saying that they will remove and replace the pegs once a year. But not all of them are Jewish.

"All I ask," he said, "is, Can you understand the idea of devoting 49 days to marking the passage from slavery to freedom? You don't have to be Jewish to understand that."

In his boyhood home Kahn was influenced by *hiddur mitzvah*, or the act of "ornamenting the commandment."

"We had a special tablecloth for Saturday," he said. "My mother had special candlesticks; we had special food. It was a visual experience."

Kahn broke through as an artist as part of a group show in 1985, *New Horizons in American Art*, at New York's Guggenheim Museum. At that time his work was associated with Mark Rothko and a group called the New Imagists.

Kahn had already begun making high-art versions of Jewish ceremonial items. For his marriage to the writer Nessa Rapoport in 1986, he redesigned the huppah, or wedding canopy, to emphasize permanence. Noticing that the portable Torah scrolls provided to families in mourning tended to be housed in "ugly pine boxes," he made one with Shaker lines and a landscape image evoking Sinai.

“My lens is as a God-fearing person,” he said. “Judaism is the religion I know, but I’m very interested in all the others. Someone once asked Abraham Joshua Heschel, ‘Would it be a better world if there was only one religion?’ And he said, ‘Would the person like all the paintings at the Metropolitan Museum to look alike?’”

Kahn has increasingly turned to creating meditative spaces and meeting places, often populated with his canvases. One is the convening and seminar space at Auburn Theological Seminary in Manhattan. Kahn’s paintings there allude to Genesis.

“We’re bringing together Christians, Muslims, Jews, and people who don’t identify with any religious tradition,” said Katharine Rhodes Henderson, Auburn’s president. “Because he is grounded as a Jew, Tobi’s work is spiritually powerful. But his art speaks across lines of religious difference.” —Religion News Service

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