



**Marc Chagall:**

**The Wandering Painter**

by Mariacristina Natalia Bertoli, PhD



**Who was Marc Chagall?**

Marc Chagall was actually born **Moishe Segal** in **Vitebsk** (then Russian Empire, currently Belarus) in **1887**. As his name suggests, he was of **Jewish descent** – Chagall's attachment to his Jewish roots as displayed in his work is going to be the focus of our guided tour.

**What Did it Mean to Be Jewish  
back Then?**

We tend to associate persecutions of Jews with the Nazi Reich, but the truth is that they had (sadly) been customary in Europe since the **Middle Ages**, when **forced conversions** and **mass slaughters** were encouraged by Christian authorities on the ground that the **Jews were responsible for killing Jesus**. European Antisemitism reached its first peak as early as **1096** with the so-called **Rhineland Massacres**. Later, Jews were expelled from England in 1290, France in 1396 and Spain in 1492. Subsequent to these expulsions, numerous Jewish communities inhabiting Western Europe fled eastward, where they would soon give birth to a culture of their own – that of the so-called **Ashkenazi Jews**. However, their settlement in Poland, Russia, Belarus and Lithuania did not go without bloodshed: in **1791** Eastern European Jews were confined to a territory known as **Pale of**





### Life in the Shtetl

**Settlement**, where they would build towns called **shtetlech** (sing. *shtetl*).

Life in the *shtetl* was less comfortable than it was in the Tsar's ostentatious cities, such as Moscow, St. Petersburg or Minsk. The language spoken was neither Russian nor Polish, but **Yiddish**, a Germanic dialect incorporating words from Hebrew and Slavic languages.

To this day, Yiddish is the language of Ashkenazi culture, whose one of the most remarkable expressions is the tradition of **klezmer music**. The upbeat rhythm of this instrumental music lends itself well to joyful occasions (such as weddings and *b'not-mitzvah*), but its origin is actually religious, as its melodies imitate the human voice's modulations employed by **cantors** (*hazzanim*) during liturgical singing. These vocal modulations (such as sobbing or laughing) are reproduced on the **violin** through a series of **musical ornaments** (*dreydlekh*) meant to make it sound as if it was a praying cantor. The violin, in effect, has always been the leading instrument within klezmer orchestras.



Chabad Hasidim and  
'The man on His Way Out'

### Task #1

The **fiddler** (or violinist) is a central figure in Marc Chagall's work. Do you find any example of this motif in the works exhibited here? Can you detect any trace of **religious overtones** in these pictures?

Marc Chagall's family was not simply Jewish, but adhered to **Chabad Hasidim**, a branch of orthodox Judaism founded in the 18th century by Polish rabbi **Baal Shem Tov**, who wished to react against the overly legalistic aspects of Judaism by appealing to the



See Chagall's illustration for  
**Der Kuntzenmakher**:  
<https://www.wdl.org/en/item/9615/>

Read Suzanne Smith's article  
**Religious Law and the Visual  
Secular** in the *Harvard Divinity  
Bulletin*:  
<http://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/winterspring2015/religious-law-and-visual-secular>

### The Strangeness of Being A Jewish Painter

For further details, read  
**The Visual Culture of Chabad**  
by Maya Balakirsky Katz  
(Cambridge University Press,  
2010)

**mysticism of Kabbalah.** Chagall was an unobservant Jew, but his work is spangled with (more or less) overt references to his forefather's faith. One such reference is featured in **Feast Day** (or **Rabbi with Citron**, 1914).

The painting was inspired by the Yiddish tale collection **Der Kuntzenmakher** by **Y.L. Peretz**, which Chagall had illustrated in 1917. It features a rabbi carrying in his hands a citron (*etrog*) and a palm leaf. The *etrog* is one of the four species of plants mentioned in the Torah as being relevant to celebration of **Sukkot**. These four plants are the citron and the branches of a date tree, a myrtle and a willow. Waving them at Sukkot symbolizes **a Jew's service of God**. On top of his head, the rabbi sports a smaller-sized rabbi. This represents the transmission of the duty to serve God from a rabbi to his successor.

#### Task #2

*Observe closely the attitude of the miniature rabbi in this painting. In your opinion why has Suzanne Smith identified him Chagall himself and defined him as a symbol of 'the man on his way out'?*

Chabad Hasidim differs from other branches of Judaism in many respects. Among them, the interpretation of the **second commandment**, which – in strictly orthodox environments – restrains Jews from visual representation, as by doing so the artist supposedly sins of arrogance against God, the only real Creator and Representer. As early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century, some Jewish scholars created the art of **micrography** (writing in the shape of geometric and /



or abstract patterns) with a view to sidestepping the problem. Chabad Hasidim – which developed much later than micrography – has traditionally shown less hostility towards visual representation than other branches of Judaism have done. This accounts for the presence of a few Ashkenazi painters in Eastern European art history – Chabad Hasidim having developed and spread more in Eastern than in Western Europe. **Yehuda Pen** – who first taught Chagall in 1906 in Vitebsk – was one such (relatively rare) Jewish painters. Chagall studied painting under his guidance for just a few months before moving to **St. Petersburg**, where he was a student of **Léon Bakst** (a yet another Jewish painter) between 1906 and 1910.

**Task #3**

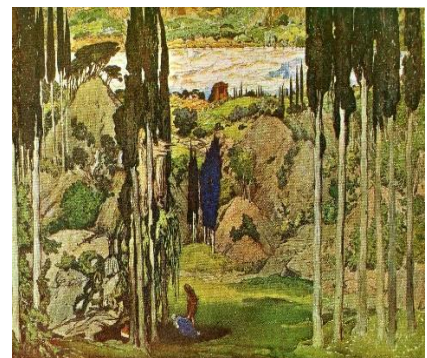
*Compare and contrast an early painting by Chagall, **Window in Vitebsk** (1908) with two among his masters' paintings: what elements already bear the marks of Chagall's unique style?*



Marc Chagall  
*Window in Vitebsk* (1908)



Yehuda Pen  
*House with Goats* (1920s)

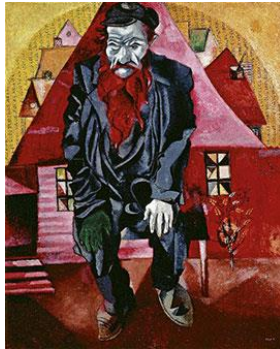


Léon Bakst  
*Daphnis and Chloe* (1912)

**The Jew  
as the Figure of the Exile**

Between 1910 and 1914 Chagall lived and work in **Paris** before coming back to Vitebsk to marry his





fiancée, **Bella Rosenberg**, whom he had met in 1910. He had originally planned upon coming back to Paris with her straightaway, but **WWI** broke out and got the couple stuck in the Soviet Union until 1923. His longing for Western Europe, though, shines through most of his paintings of that period, including **The Jew in Pink** (1915).

#### Task #4

*The Hebrew writings in the backdrop of the painting are quotes from the **Talmud** in the following order (from right to left):*

- 1- *The fact that Jews are the people of exile,*
- 2- *The prophecy according to which Jews will eventually constitute a great nation,*
- 3- *The fact that Jewish identity rests on circumcision,*
- 4- *The intertwining of the biblical quotes with Chagall's own signature in Hebrew, Moïse Segal (MSH SGL).*

*How do you interpret the painting in the light of the information provided by the contents of the text in the backdrop?*

#### **Bella Rosenberg: Love and the Hasidic Folklore**

Between 1914 and 1924 **Bella** became an ubiquitous presence in Chagall's paintings, representing the very embodiment of **Love** as the highest form of spiritual life. The way Bella (and Love) are represented in Chagall's work can't be fully grasped without referring to Hasidic folklore, most notably to the figure of the **dybbuk** and the **ibbur**. The **dybbuk** is the most popular character in Hasidic folklore, and is a malicious possessing spirit believed to be the dislocated soul of a dead person. The **ibbur**, by contrast, has enjoyed



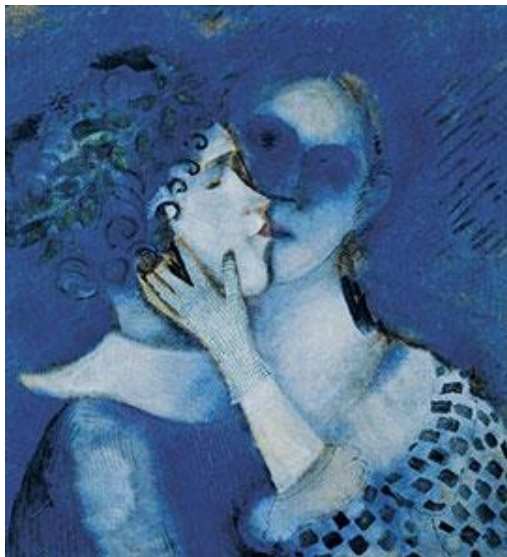
*Dybbuk*

less popularity than the *dybbuk* in Yiddish literature and legends. It is the very opposite of the *dybbuk*, and its very name means pregnancy or impregnation. This positive possession occurs when a righteous soul decides to occupy a living person's body for some time, thus spiritually impregnating his or her soul. In **Lurianic Kabbalah**, *ibbur* happens when an incomplete soul that cannot achieve **tikun** is completed by the soul of a **tzadik**, or spiritual master. Luria believed this to be possible even when the possessor was still alive.

**Task #5**

Observe **Blue Lovers** (1914) and **The Promenade** (1917-1918).

- 1- How is Bella connoted as an *ibbur* and a *tzadik* in these two paintings?
- 2- What is the connection with love and the artist's biography?



**Kosher Jesus (?):  
Chagall and Christendom**

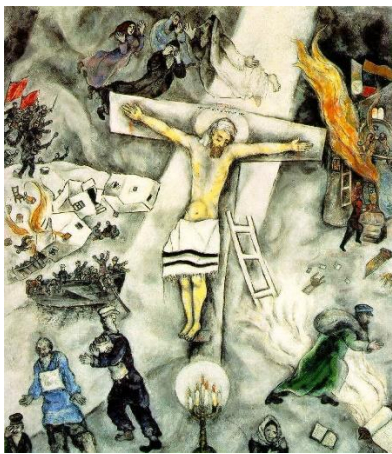
The Jews' relationship with **Jesus** has always been controversial: whereas on the one hand Jesus himself was a Jew, on the other he was an unorthodox one whose followers persecuted the Jews for more than



a millenium. There have recently been openings towards incorporating the figure of Jesus within Judaism on the part of some rabbis, most notably Rabbi **Shmuel Boteach**, the author of **Kosher Jesus** (2012). Way earlier than these recent openings, Chagall's work showed a willingness to harmonize Jewish and Christian traditions...

**Task #6**

- 1- In which way does the figure of **Christ** shown below reconcile Jewish and Christian views?
- 2- Why can the **goat** and the **rooster** (ubiquitous in Chagall's work) be interpreted as ambivalent symbols connecting Judaism to Christianity?



The White Crucifixion  
(1938)



Bride and Groom of the Eiffel  
Tower  
(1938)



Bella with Rooster in the  
Window  
(1938)