

# ART & SOUL

Live Creatively



A NEW MONTHLY COURSE FOR WOMEN  
FROM THE ROSH CHODESH SOCIETY

## Course Rationale

Art is not only for artists. Not everyone is a world-class painter or a virtuoso violinist; but the greatest art form is life itself. Art is a way of seeing the world, interacting with the world, and transforming the materials of nature and of the human experience into something that is more useful, more beautiful, more meaningful.

What is the Jewish approach to art? We know that Judaism is concerned with morality, social justice, the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, loving our fellows, serving God, and fulfilling our purpose in Creation. But what about creativity and aesthetics? Are these Jewish concerns?

Art & Soul is a seven-part course exploring seven art forms—painting, music, literature, dance, architecture, clothing design, and the culinary arts—from the perspective of Jewish teaching and Jewish life. Seen through the lens of the Torah, the teachings of the sages, and the writings of the Chasidic masters, we gain a deeper appreciation of the inner dynamics

of these seven art forms and how they can be applied to enhance our daily lives. Each lesson also includes an interactive workshop, in which the ideas and methodologies explored in the lesson will also be experienced firsthand by the class participants.

While our explorations focus on art in its various forms, the discussions they spark touch upon some of the most fundamental questions to occupy the human mind. What is beauty? Where in our psyches do our most deeply-held convictions reside, and how do we access them? Is there anything that we, mere creatures of an infinite Creator, can create that is truly original and significant? How do we weather the ups and downs in our relationships with those closest to us? How do our personal goals and aspirations live within the larger context of society, environment, and Creation? Why do we get so bogged down in the minutiae of physical life? How do we achieve self-transformation—or is this even possible, or desirable, to achieve?



## **Lesson One - Painting & Drawing** **The Inner Eye of the Artist**

Lesson One begins with a drawing exercise, which reveals some surprising ideas about how the human eye and hand render objects into images. A workshop then follows with a visual presentation and discussion of a number of paintings by great artists, explaining their insights on the objectives of their art. These experiences and discussions set the stage for an exploration of the Torah's views on beauty and artistic talent and the manner in which the mystical teachings of Kabbalah explain the interrelation between truth, harmony, and beauty.

We note that while our lives contain deeply significant occasions, these are few and far between; the great majority of our days and years are taken up with activities and experiences that are routine, mundane, and downright boring. We then ask: How do we apply our innate artistic abilities, and all that we have learned about the inner vision of the artist, to transform the routine and uninspiring in our lives into works of beauty and meaning?



## **Lesson Two - Music:** **The Pen of the Soul**

What is music, and why does it move and inspire us in ways that nothing else can? Music communicates ideas that we cannot put in words, and it evokes feelings that defy description. Yet these ideas and feelings are even more potent than our rationally understood thoughts and emotions.

Lesson Two explores the role that music plays in our lives and the role it plays in the experience and practice of Judaism. It then proceeds to examine the mystical definition of music as "the pen of the soul": What is it that the soul knows and communicates through music? The lesson also includes an interactive workshop in which we listen to a number of classic Chasidic melodies (nigunim) and discuss their meaning and message.

At the conclusion of this learning experience, we come away not only with a better understanding of music and its role in Jewish life, but also with a deeper appreciation of the inner rhythms of our own soul and its most deeply-known truths.



### **Lesson Three - Literature:** **The Art of Narrative**

We Jews are no strangers to literature: there is hardly a people whose identity and lifestyle is more entwined with the written and spoken word. But the fascination with literature and storytelling is universal. Why has the human race produced so many works of written or spoken narrative? Are we just entertaining ourselves, or is there something deeper at play? A workshop in which all participants hone their story-weaving skills, regardless of their degree of literary proficiency, will bring us one step closer to answering these questions.

Both the ancient philosophers and the masters of Kabbalah referred to the human being as "the speaker," implying that this is the defining trait of humanity. From the moment we are born, we are telling a story, to ourselves and to others—the story that becomes the reality of our lives. But are we just interpreting facts and events that exist independently from whatever perspective we have on them? An examination of the statements by the Torah and the Talmud on our role as "partner with God in Creation" will afford us a new appreciation of human creativity and the very nature of reality.



### **Lesson Four - Dance:** **The Dance of Life**

Life is movement: it is comprised of all the ways in which we move in relation to a loved one, in relation to our community and society, in relation to our Creator and Source. We move in circles, we dip and soar, we rebound, we vibrate.

Employing participatory dance workshops, reading and analysis of source texts, and group discussions and exercises, we probe the nature of relationship. When I feel distance between myself and my loved one, does this mean that our relationship is in trouble? Why am I constantly torn between the desire to fulfill my responsibilities and the desire to escape them? Which is the real me—the self that seeks connection, or the self that yearns to disengage? In the process, we discover how intimacy and distance are inexorably bound to each other and how the tension between them produces the dance of life.



## **Lesson Five - Architecture:** Edifice and Environment

The architect transforms material into structure and converts environment into habitable space. In this sense we are all architects, as we seek to create equilibrium between our own individual lives and personalities and the greater context within which they reside.

The history and legal traditions of the Jewish people contain a wealth of insights into the nature of structure, personal space, and the place of the individual within his or her environment. Consider the great detail in which the construction of the Tabernacle and Holy Temple are discussed; recall the dimensions of the sukkah and of the "four domains" of Shabbat; these are but a few examples of the laws and principles that help us define our place in society, in the environment, and in the divine plan for Creation.



## **Lesson Six - Fashion Design:** Interface and Engagement

We don and remove our clothing at will. Their textures, colors, and shapes are in a constant state of flux, changing to adjust to weather, function, even the whim of the season. But make no mistake: these are no mere appendages to our self, but are integral to our self-expression. The art of clothes-making has much to teach us on the nature of the interface between ourselves and our world.

A workshop that helps us choose our natural color; an examination of the biblical story of the how the first man and woman came to require clothes; and a passage from Chasidic teaching discussing the "garments" of the soul; these serve as our stepping stones toward a better understanding of the clothier's craft and the role that our clothes—both material and spiritual—serve as the instruments of our calling to impact the world in which we live.



## **Lesson Seven - Cuisine:** **The Art of Self-Transformation**

We begin this lesson with a workshop in which we mix and blend different types of food, thereby discovering the most fundamental principle behind the culinary arts: creating a tasty dish requires a variety of flavors and textures that interact with and balance each other.

After exploring the role of food in Jewish teaching and practice, we apply all that we have learned to the more spiritual art of self-transformation. We discover that all the ingredients for an improved self already exist within us, and we gain insight into the process by which these diverse traits and drives are harnessed to form the most ideal sum of their respective parts.