



RA GALLERY

# Grisha Bruskin

(1945)

*Alefbet*

1990

Signed lower right 'Grisha Bruskin'  
ink and gouache on paper  
30 x 21 cm

**Price on request**

**Provenance:**

Marlborough, New York  
Hokin Gallery, Palm Beach, FL  
Private collection



Alefbet, which is created by Grisha Bruskin, who is a highly intellectual artist and a brilliant virtuoso of graphic arts, represents much more than an independent, isolated work of art. The displayed drawing is part of the artist's entire world which can be designated as a fundamental, crucial creation in the art of Bruskin. This series of works, which has grown over the years of Bruskin's creative career, encompasses all kinds of artistic means of expression, such as painting, drawing, sculpture, porcelain, performance, installation, and literary texts. The artist offers an escape into the realm of mystical imagination through his work. Bruskin has said: 'I have always lived in a mythological world'. To a greater extent, the Alefbet series has its origins in Kabbalistic literature. Lexicon of Jewish mystical tradition, the theme of the myth of Judaism, metaphorical production - all together created Bruskin's characteristic, unique 'code'. The artistic universe formed by Bruskin presents emblematic figures, which refer the viewer to the Old Testament, the Kabbalah and the Talmud. These isolated characters look phantasmagorical and grotesque in their traditional Jewish clothes. They are positioned in a very organised manner, allocated each to its own cell. Often these

figures have historical prototypes and are imbued with metaphorical sense, a parable, a symbol. Bruskin was explaining his creation: 'The characters of Alefbet are just presented. There is no action. There is no conflict. It is neither a theatre, nor a parade, but rather a collection. Accessories denominate these characters, register and make a kind of dictionary out of them'.

So much in this concept revolves around the word, the text, the Scripture. Not surprisingly, the starting point for this metaphor was the Book. The universality of the all-encompassing text is perfectly embodied in the Judaic tradition and conveyed by Bruskin through his artistic prism. 'Alefbet' means the Hebrew alphabet. However, this reference is not direct, literal, after all, Bruskin's creation strikingly differs from the system of the written signs depicting separate sound elements. After all, 'Alefbet' is impossible to translate to any other language, this world exists only in its unique position within this artistic space with its own rules and laws that are restricted to the concept that Bruskin had applied. Since each figure in the series is equipped with a special 'accessory', a particular object, it is reminiscent of Russian icons. In general, the whole series easily invokes a sense of the medieval miniature, especially considering Bruskin's tapestry work (spalliera), as well as, in addition to the icons mentioned above, murals and manuscripts. Attributes, 'accessories', which figures are equipped with, whether it is a branch of flowering almonds, symbolising mount Zion, or a bunch of grapes, reminding of the Promised Land, act as symbols and are directly related to the Jewish tradition. However, what is quintessential for an understanding of the breadth of Bruskin's works, they are not limited to this tradition. Bruskin gives the viewer the opportunity to interpret these images in their own way, to try to solve the puzzle, to enter into a dialogue with the work. It is a fascinating contradiction, which is expressed in a combination of specific artistic images, which are endowed with a constant iconographic value, and the innermost depth, which lies in them, and, at the same time, a liberal assumption of endless interpretations. All these mythological figures, in general, give rise to a kind of system of meanings, or as Bruskin calls it, is a 'collection, alphabet, dictionary, lexicon'. Almost flat images, very graphic and stylised, presented before the audience in quite timeless attire, such as kipa, tallith, tfilin, are not time-bound as they are free from any specific historical moment or the ethnographic environment. These are not images of the past, reflections of the present, or predictions of the future, but the vocabulary of the ideal matters spanning to the worlds of angels and demons.

Since the characters of 'Alefbet' were created back in the days of the Soviet Union, when antisemitism was actively cultivated at the governmental level, and religion was essentially prohibited, the whole cycle has served as an extraordinary challenge to the system, authorities and official ideology. It is fundamentally a rebellious act of self-identification in a country where individualism and the cultural heritage of Jews have been subjected to extermination. Bruskin, working on a series of paintings 'Alefbet', has got acquainted with the novel by Thomas Mann 'Joseph and his brothers', which is based on the biblical story. In Germany, 1942, when the novel was first published, political madness reigned in the form of the Nazi extermination of Jews, and Mann's work served as a Manifesto against these atrocities. Bruskin, following in the footsteps of Mann, has protested against the inhuman Soviet ideology and using his works and Jewish themes tried to offer a different path, the alternative humane mythology. As a consequence of the integration of the Shekhinah of the Kabbalists and Talmudists, an alternative world of 'Alefbet' is permeated with the presence of God. The artist has explained his plan in this way: 'Judaism, for



some known historical reasons, did not create an artistic equivalent to its spiritual initiatives. I always felt a cultural vacuum, which I wanted to fill at the individual, artistic level. The Jews - people of the Book. <...> I believe, that the Author's name is hidden in the Book, the Golden key to the secrets of the world; that the letters and the text are written by the Creator. That's why the Book itself was a prototype of my art'. If the figures of 'Alefbet' are revived mystical words of the alphabet, then, the more familiar and comprehensible system of signs to our sight, words, which are scattered throughout the background, are reflections of the text that is taken from the Hasidic book of utmost importance (Chabad movement), 'Tanya'. This book was written by the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyad, who Gershom Scholem has considered the only truly original thinker of Hasidism. Bruskin has explained his intention: 'the inscription on the canvas is the same imagery as the character and accessory. These inscriptions do not explain the images, and vice versa, the image does not illustrate the text'.

Considering the Kabbalistic metaphor, which is so organically woven into the cycle of 'Alefbet', it is possible to juxtapose each element of Bruskin's work, that is, a character and an accessory, with the smallest particle, a spark of light, or Shekhina. Solving riddles of the presented work and moving from one mythologeme to another, we seem to glue together fragments of Vessels (Kelim), restoring the content of the work. And yet, even realising the independent value of the work, it is important to remember that in the case of Bruskin, whether it is a single picture or a cycle, one sculpture or a group, it is always only a fragment that refers us to a greater "Whole". The implicit presence of the 'Whole' is the most important systemic context to which everything that Bruskin had created belongs. Under the pseudonym of the 'Whole' hides the same all-encompassing universal Text of the Book. According to Bruskin, this is precisely what makes each of his works theoretically infinite.

