

Hershel Mutka Weiss

Albuquerque, New Mexico

As a child, getting new clothes meant standing before my grandfather the tailor. Almost blind, he'd touch the fabric and pass judgment on its quality. I remember his treadle sewing machine, and the heavy black irons he'd heat on the gas stove. There was something in my grandfather's tools that I wanted. As a young boy, I felt their power and mystery. Sometimes I remember to touch wood like Morrits touched fabric, to thank the tree, the land that grew it, sun, air, water, and the miracle of photosynthesis. Sometimes I remember to thank my fine chisels and hand planes as a drummer must honor his drum. The wood alone is almost enough. The tools by themselves nearly suffice. But skill is the thread in the needle. Skill is memory in the body; salsa dance without counting."

Hershel Weiss, along with having been a New York City cab driver, preschool teacher, busboy, cashier, and

worker in a child assault prevention program, was also at one time a student of creative writing. In 1985-86, he studied in James Krenov's fine woodworking program, to learn the fine points of traditional European cabinet making and he began to get a sense of what might be possible.

He had begun with wood early and, though he remembers his tailor grandfather on one side and his coppersmith grandfather on the other, he recalls, "My father's tools were more related to wood: a hand plane, small hammers he himself had made, handsaws—coping, crosscut, and rip. Together we converted an old bookcase into a desk."

For a while the artist lived in Corrales, NM, in an adobe building with his dog Spirit. He taught fine woodworking at the Santa Fe Community College. Creating Judaica was a sideline. His rustic mezuzahs of mesquite wood sold widely while he experimented with ways to make fine furniture that could be Jewish while being part of everyday living. Judaism, he says, "is not just a set of rituals but a whole way of life."

In time, Weiss sought the community of other artists and a city large enough to offer more opportunities. Now in Albuquerque, he lives and works in a downtown storefront. The building is the site of workspaces for six artists. His neighbors include painters, a paper artist, a dancer and a creator of "installations." They share a common garden in back. Weiss reports the company is exhilarating.

Exhilarating too has been a series of Judaic commissions. The Albuquerque Jewish Community Center commissioned a work for its lobby. Out of ash Weiss shaped two nine-and-



Copyright 1999 by Hershel Mutka Weiss

Walking Moon Chanukiah, by Hershel Mutka Weiss. Kwila wood, 12½ x 11 x 4". A contemporary style menorah that presents the lights in the traditional alignment.