

Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the Israeli Palestinian Conflict

By
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'In every generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness.'

This is the voiceover at the beginning of every episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

'For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth'. Deuteronomy 7:6. And this is the essence of Judaism.

Holden Webster, a high school friend of Buffy's, said to her in the Season 7 episode 'Conversations with Dead People': "All chosen. All destiny. Who could live with that for seven years and not feel superior?"

Philip Roth noted that, while the Jewish culture transmitted to him by his parents was at best fragmentary, he had 'received whole a psychology which could be expressed in three words: Jews are better.'

But the rabbis taught that to be 'a chosen people' meant more responsibility rather than special privilege. I would like this to mean that no one is proved to be better than anyone else except by their deeds.

Therefore I propose the Jewish Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

Buffy is a confusing combination of human, demon and superhero.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is confusing as well. I used my series of paintings entitled: 'Include Me Out' - portraits of non-Jews framed by Stars of David - together with articles from 'Slayage' the Journal of the Whedon Studies Association, to try and uncover underlying patterns in the conflict which are generally hidden, repressed or 'unthinkable'.



Buffy, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 100x85 cm

'Sunnydale is on a Hellmouth. It's a center of mystical convergence,' Buffy reminds us in 'Teacher's Pet', Season 1.

The birth of the three monotheistic religions in the Middle East suggests some kind of mystical convergence as well.

Jeffrey Bussolini writes in 'Slayage' 18: 'If the Hellmouth opens or if the Bomb goes off, humanity in general is doomed, and perhaps all life... as well!'

The Israeli nuclear reactor in Dimona was an open secret even before Mordechai Va'anunu, an Israeli former nuclear technician, revealed details of Israel's nuclear weapons program to the British press in 1986. Va'anunu is a traitor or a hero, depending on where you stand: a traitor to the Israeli government, a hero to the anti-nuclear movement.

The position of Iran's Ahmedinejad is double-sided as well: those who are the most aghast at the possibility of Iran's attaining an atom bomb are themselves in possession of huge nuclear arsenals. As Bussolini writes: 'Deterrence logic' has guided research and strategy throughout the nuclear age—yours is big, ours is bigger!

The expectation of Israeli and Palestinian leaders that it is somehow in the nature of the two peoples to undertake heroically the well-nigh impossible task of wresting normal lives out of the situation, in the way that Buffy was expected to accept her destiny without complaint, has caused both Israelis and Palestinians to become cynical to the point of despair. In this atmosphere it is easy to lose your soul.

The actual tool of destruction of the Hellmouth was Spike's soul which, as we saw, he acquired through effort - the opposite of despair. If we try very hard to make ourselves into Buffys, will our vampires acquire souls? Well, first we have to 'beat them up a lot'.



Bomb, 2009, ceramic, ø 30 cm

Jenny Alexander, in 'Slayage'15, explains that: 'Kink-fic, or slash fan-fiction... is erotically attracted to the canonical disruption of conventional power hierarchies.' I propose a reading of Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish's poem: 'He Embraced His Murderer' as a high-art piece of kink-fic, the pairing here being the Israeli occupier with the Palestinian occupied. The poem begins:

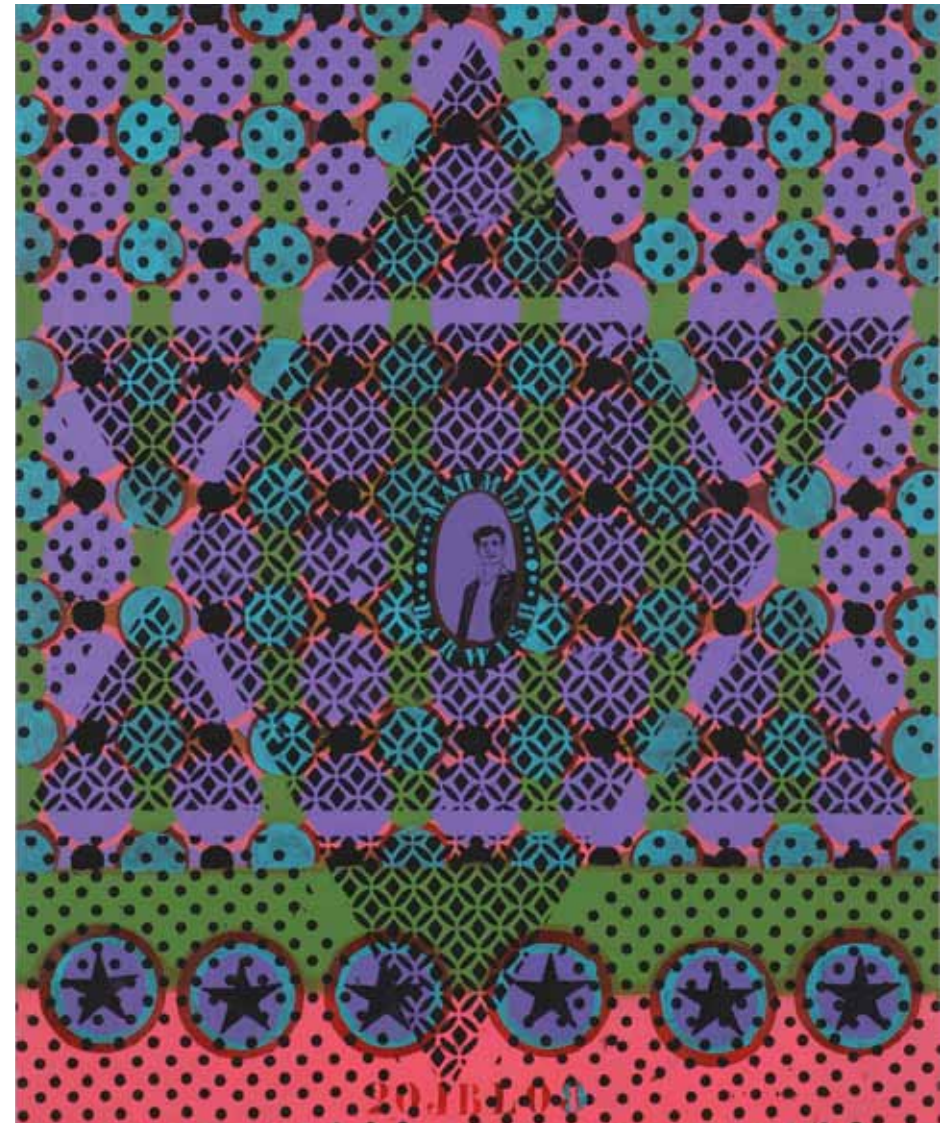
*He embraces his murderer.
May he win his heart: Do you feel angrier if I survive?
Brother... My brother!
What did I do to make you destroy me?...*

Alexander continues: 'In the world De Sade railed against and masturbated over in his writings, two things were not permitted – female sexual power without prostitution and condemnation..., and homosexuality without shame and corruption.' Darwish continues:

*You grew tired of my embrace and my smell.
Aren't you just as tired of the fear within me?
Then throw your gun in the river! What do you say?
The enemy on the riverbank aims his machine gun at an embrace?
Shoot the enemy!*

Fear of and erotic attraction to the enemy are a staple of myth, poetry and fanfic. The reading of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a SMD relationship is not possible, because it is not a consensual relationship. There is however a deeply erotic element in it, based on the sexual satisfaction gotten by the occupier and recognized by the occupied. Darwish's poem ends:

*What crime did I commit to make you destroy me?
I will never
Cease embracing you.
And I will never
Release you.*



Mahmud Darwish, 2009, acrylic on linen, 100x85 cm

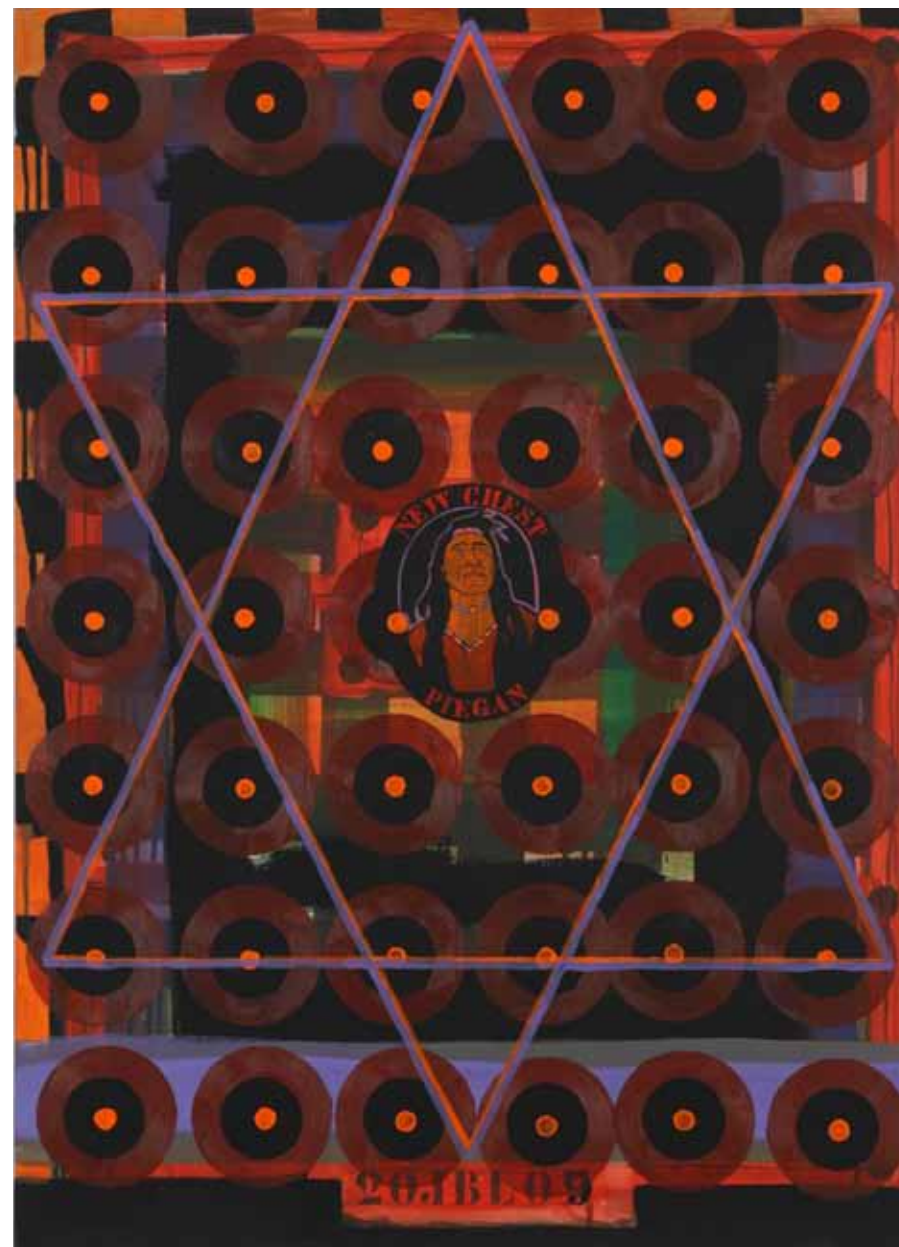
Agnes Curry, in 'Slayage' 25, writes that: 'One of the fundamental tropes of the American narrative is of the person (i.e., white man) who makes himself anew by surviving on the frontier... This life is a risk, of course; the Native Monstrous threatens to engulf the white hero, and he frequently risks misunderstanding by other whites.'

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in its perpetual cycles of revenge, is the real 'Native Monstrous': the ancient antagonism of belligerent tribes fighting for the same piece of land.

But many young Palestinian artists, writers, filmmakers and poets are struggling to extricate themselves from the cycle of revenge, an aspect of the Native Monstrous represented in the episode 'Pangs' by 'the avenging spirit of Hus'. They are moving the conflict towards a place of mutual respect. In the past few years, works about the occupation have dwindled in favor of the artists' finding an individual creative voice, giving authenticity to their feelings, thoughts, and attitudes towards life.

Buffy struggled to balance the 'mission' and her life, and she won her life back in the end. Ayman Sikseck, a young Israeli Palestinian writer living in Jaffa and writing in Hebrew says: 'I am not out to erase Israeliness, but I don't want Israeliness to erase me.'

The 'Native Monstrous' was never differentiated from the Native Americans themselves because they did not have the chance to record their side of the story in real time. All Others are scary until we know them. And we will never get to know them by telling their story, but by hearing it from them.



New Chest, 2009, acrylic on linen, 100x80 cm

Robert Lewis Stevenson's novel: 'Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde', and Stacey Abbott's article 'Angel/Angelus' in 'Slayage' 9, illustrate the results of the refusal or the inability to confront and to contain our shadow side. Sartre claimed that "Man is nothing but the sum of his actions, nothing but what his life is". In the Middle East, tags and titles are racial, religious, tribal, cultural - everything but existential. Distinguishing between soldiers, terrorists and freedom fighters is very difficult.

In 2004 a case reached the media: a Palestinian violinist was forced to play his violin for the soldiers at a checkpoint in order to prove he was himself. Yoram Kaniuk, author of a book about a Jewish violinist forced to play for a concentration camp commander, said that the soldiers responsible should be put on trial "not for abusing Arabs but for disgracing the Holocaust... Our entire existence in this Arab region was justified, and is still justified, by our suffering; by Jewish violinists in the camps."

There is another point of view, expressed in the book: 'The Holocaust is Over: We Must Rise from its Ashes' by Avrum Burg. Burg argues that Israel has been too long imprisoned by its obsessive use - or abuse - of the shadow of the Holocaust as "a theological pillar of Jewish identity".

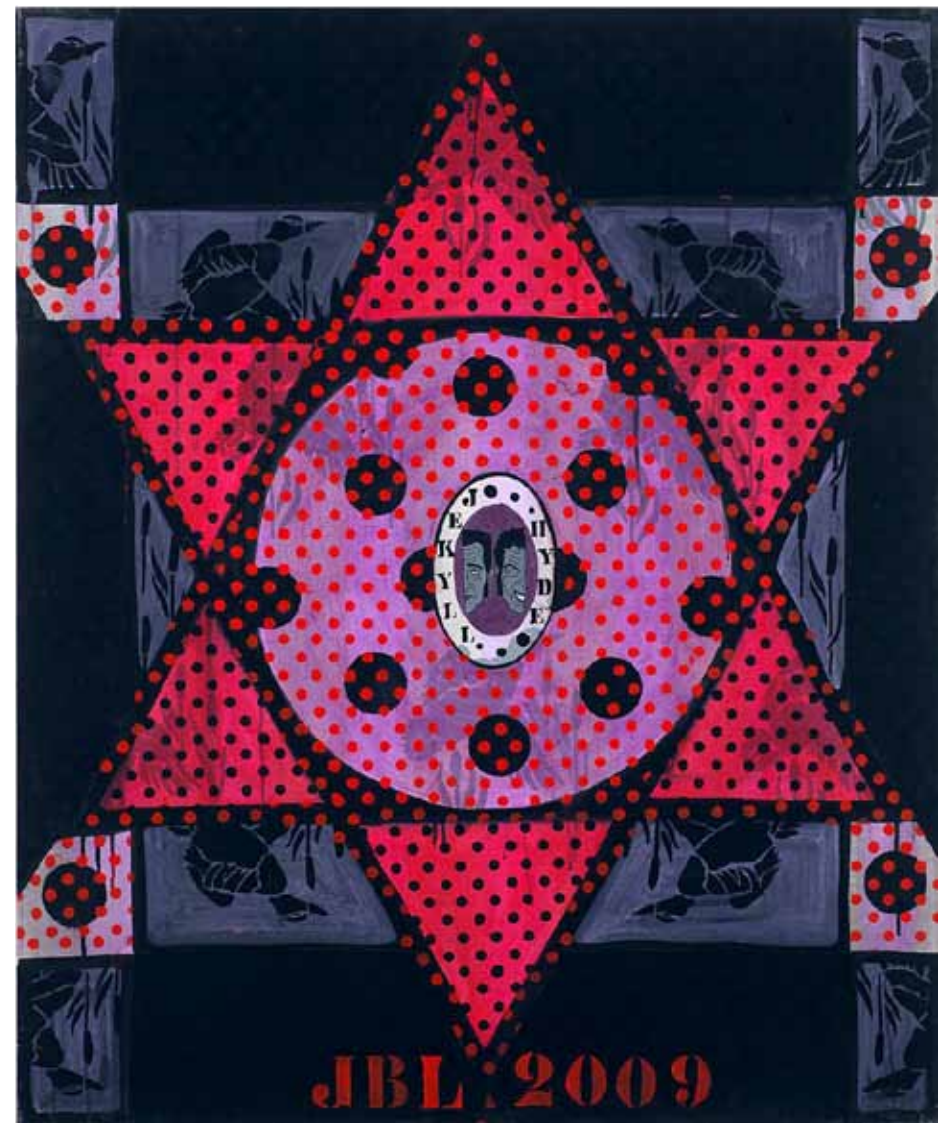
When Angel arrives in Sunnydale to help Buffy in the final apocalypse of the series, and finds out about her relationship with Spike, they have a conversation in which Buffy says: 'And the guy thing? I always feared there was something wrong with me. You know, because I couldn't make it work. But maybe I'm not supposed to.'

Angel replies: 'Because you're the Slayer.'

Which Buffy denies.

Angel, though he reads the Existentialists in the original French, immediately identifies Buffy with her official position as Slayer and makes it the font of all her problems, including her relationship problems. Buffy, on the other hand, who never, as far as we know, reads anything, sees deep into the actual reality of herself and, finally, lets nothing extraneous define her but the here and now.

Confronting the Israeli shadow-side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might mean, as Avrum Burg argues, that Israel needs finally to recognize the damage of clinging to the old "Judaism of the ghetto", and to choose to replace it by a "universal Judaism", based on humanistic values.



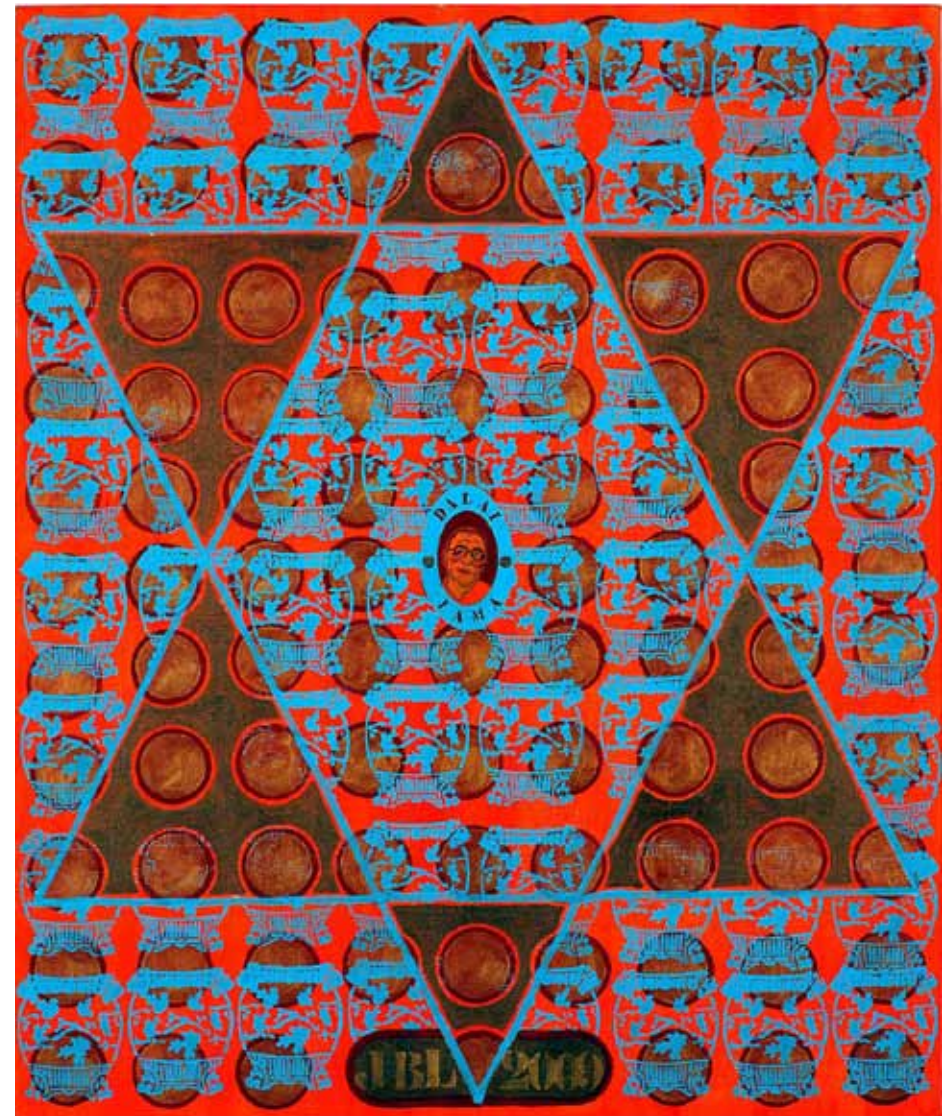
Jekyll and Hyde, 2009, acrylic on linen, 100x85 cm

'In 1998, a Palestinian parliamentary panel conducted an investigation into the shocking fact that almost half of the Palestinian Authority's budget – \$300 million – was unaccounted for.' This is from an article by Hasan Abu Nimah on June 24th, 2004 in The Electronic Intifada. It continues: 'Corruption and war-profiteering are the hand-maidens of military occupation.'

Corruption, however, is not a problem brought on only by military occupation; corruption is rife. Palestinian leaders, like all leaders these days, flaunt their new riches. They build themselves mansions, drive expensive cars, and throw big weddings. In Israel, a former Prime Minister has been put on trial for suspicion of corruption during his tenure. There is no parallel in Palestine. The people have no possibility of confronting their leaders: everything is shunted onto the Occupation, therefore crippling the concept of personal responsibility and the dynamics of civil action. 'Unless each individual develops a sense of responsibility, the whole community cannot move,' warns the Dalai Lama.

Julie Sloan Brannon writes, in 'Slayage' 24: 'The mythology of the Slayer tells us that her power has been forced upon her and her alone; what Buffy achieves through her quest to define her Self is to alter the very nature of that power structure.'

To alter the nature of the power structure of Palestine might mean for Palestinians to acknowledge that the Occupation cannot be blamed for everything. It is not 'the source of them': the potential for agency is personal and universal.



Dalai Lama, 2009, acrylic on linen, 150×125 cm

Kevin Durand, in 'Slayage' 28, shows that the powers of darkness against which the Slayer and her friends battled are the power which is based on 'the hierarchical worldview that supports the claim to elevated status'. Patriarchal oppression is built on the dehumanization of women and the total denigration of the 'feminine' values of compassion, kindness, cooperation and love. The tide of the battle against evil turned when Buffy understood that victory is gained by replacing the existing values of society with others.

Diana Spencer, by the end of her short life, had made some headway in doing exactly that.

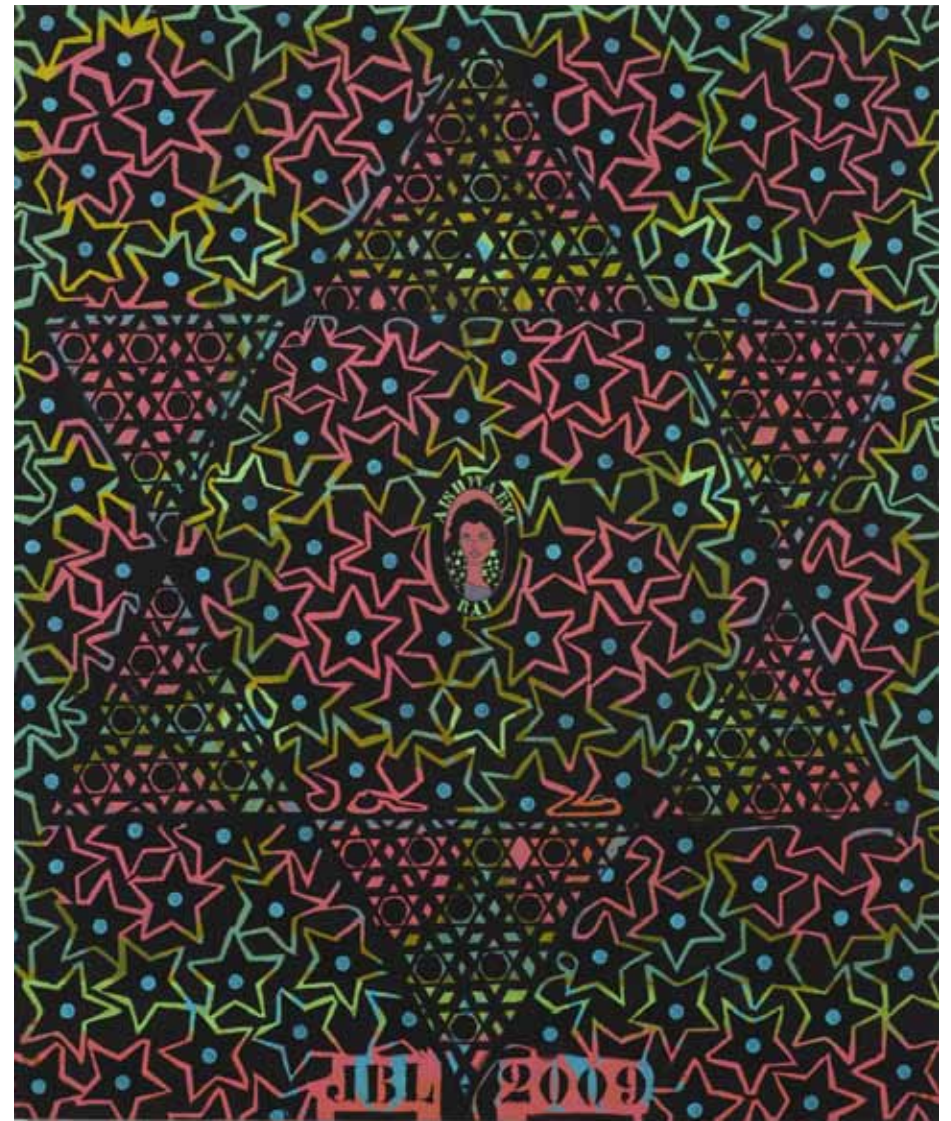
The main work of royalty is the dispensation of peerages, orders of chivalry, knighthoods, in short, the system of status symbols which are the rewards it confers for serving it. Diana, rather than being satisfied with conferring the momentary status on her subjects that her royal presence granted, seemed to need to see the weakest members of society, to hear them, to touch them and to expose their plight via her spotlight.

To replace the supreme value, power, with another, compassion, is the ultimate feminist agenda.



Princess Diana, 2009, acrylic on linen, 150x125 cm

Aishwarya Rai is one of the rare Indian actors to be known in the West. At age 30 she was still living with her parents. When she married it was to the actor Abhishek Bachchan, a member of Bollywood royalty, and then they moved in with his parents. Rai is a very rich and powerful woman who nonetheless toes the line of her society's expectations of women. Stereotypical gender assignments are the Middle Eastern ideal. The repressed feminine has a very destructive influence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, causing governments to operate in a confused, emotional way, controlling by tears and fears. Peace negotiations progress from attraction, to seduction, to wooing, to vows of fidelity, and then, suddenly, unravel. Feminine influence, being repressed, reappears as fear and helplessness, which leads to betrayal, deceit and victimhood. The politicians acting as negotiators of the conflict unconsciously take on the worst aspects of both masculine and feminine stereotypes, much like in Wesley's prep school: '... the nights you made the lower classmen get up as girls and watched them.' ('The Prom')



Aishwarya Rai 2009, acrylic on linen, 150×125 cm

Virginia Woolf's anger at having been-home educated rather than sent to one of the prestigious universities which her brothers attended is more than vindicated by her oeuvre: a feminist literature reflecting the anxiety and pain of women trapped inside their own minds by a society which hates, fears and despises them. The Biblical punishment for female intellectual curiosity was the immersion of all humanity in sin and its expulsion from Paradise.

Zoe-Jane Playdon in 'Slayage' 5, writes that ancient religious beliefs which have a divine female at their centre were outlawed by the orthodox Church, but the persistence of the image of the Virgin Mary kept alive some of the redemptive and creationary aspects of the Sacred Female. A powerful feminine element, remained, therefore, part of the enduring consciousness of Western civilization. It is no wonder that the West is the cradle of feminism.

The image of a numinous female deity has been obliterated from the Jewish and the Moslem traditions. The denial of a feminist spirituality in Judaism and in Islam has weakened Middle-Eastern women. The Rabbinat still controls the branch of law called 'Family Law' in Israel, which seals the fates of women and children. 'Sharia', Moslem law, also has different legislations for men and for women. The separation between Family Law and Civil Law in the Middle East grants the balance of power legally to men through the religious laws which favor them.



Virginia Woolf, 2009, acrylic on linen, 100x85 cm

Greg Stevenson writes in 'Slayage' 15, that on BTVS, 'living eschatologically is not only about gaining a greater appreciation for life, but also about learning what is most important in life'.

In the world of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where real death is ever present, things become twisted. The dead are heroes, shahids and decorated warriors. Death is revered.

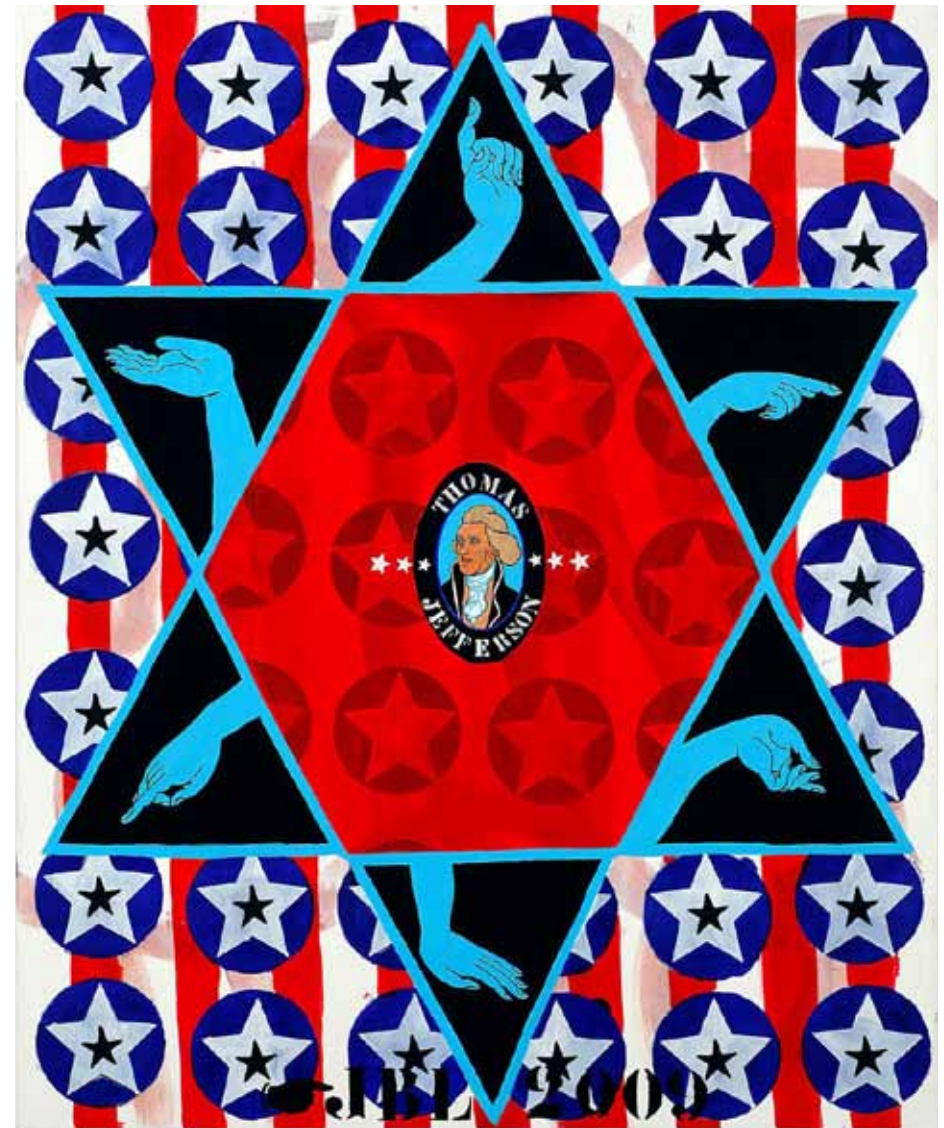
In the Whedonverse, it is not. When Buffy died - for the second time - she was resurrected by her friends.

She described her experience of heaven to Spike: 'I was happy. At peace. I knew that everyone I cared about was all right. I knew it. Time . . . didn't mean anything . . . nothing had form . . . but I was still me, you know? And I was warm . . . and I was loved . . . and I was finished. Complete.'

Stevenson says: 'In Buffy's heaven, God is relegated to the background. Whereas the biblical depiction of heaven is God-centred, Buffy's depiction is self-centred, reflecting American cultural values. It is primarily about her peace and happiness'.

The Declaration of Independence says: 'We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'. These are clear and simple guidelines for Civil Life within a deeply spiritual context. The use of the word Creator rather than God emphasizes the universally divine rather than the narrowly religious potential of humanity.

In the Middle East, the lack of a document separating church and state and emphasizing humanistic values leaves a vacuum which is filled by antiquated religious laws which promote fear, hatred and exclusion of the Other.



Jefferson, 2009, acrylic on linen, 100x85 cm

Whedon has stressed the place of popular media in social change. He said: "The idea of changing culture is important to me, and it can only be done in a popular medium."

My encounter with Buffy the Vampire Slayer inspired the paintings, which in turn helped clarify my thoughts about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The show and the scholarship generated by it presented me with a coherent world-view different than the one prevalent in the Middle East.

The Israeli-Palestinian Territory is a very complicated, confusing and hard place to live. When people ask me: 'If it's so hard to live there, why do you?' my answer is, in the words of Spike: 'I want to see how it ends.'



Joss, 2009, acrylic on linen, 40x40 cm