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LIKE TORAH COMMENTARY, Jewish culture weaves together discordant voices and speaks to myriad — sometimes disconnected — communities. The Jewish arts connect culture to community and community to culture. Imaginatively, the arts integrate new ideas, associations, interpretations, meanings, and translate stories, traditions, and rituals. This issue of *Sh'ma* explores numerous arts media through the works of several talented culture makers. In these pages, art is a vehicle of education, of identity expression, a form of exploring one's relationships to Israel, to Judaism, and to one's sense of self as a contemporary Jew. These essays and conversations ask how the arts strengthen, define, and challenge the norms of our culture.

## Times Square Seder: A Jewish Art Activist Performance

*Melissa Shiff*

I LIKE TO THINK OF MYSELF as belonging to the “shul” of artists; I find Judaism through creating and reinventing Jewish rituals. As a video, installation, and performance artist, I seek to reinvigorate and rejuvenate Jewish rituals to make them more meaningful for myself and others and more relevant to contemporary life.

Imagine a Passover seder that utilizes performance art in the service of social activism. This was my vision for the “Times Square Seder” featuring the Matzoh Ball Soup Kitchen. This seder for the homeless took its mandate from the familiar line in the Hagadah, “Let all who are hungry come in and eat.” I created and directed this “happening” in three storefront windows on 42nd Street on the fourth night of Passover 2002. The seder featured performances by

President of the American Jewish World Service Ruth Messinger and Rabbi Arthur Waskow.

For this activist seder I employed multimedia techniques that helped me visually convey the message of hospitality and of being open to the stranger. *Elijah Chair*, a video sculpture that stood as the central metaphor of this Passover happening, was inspired by a quotation from Israeli philosopher Gideon Ofrat's *The Jewish Derrida*. Ofrat speaks of Elijah as representing unconditional, total hospitality and that one should keep a *chair* forever vacant for Elijah in the expectation of the event of the Messiah. By combining two customs — the opening of the door for Elijah and the setting of the chair — the sculpture symbolically compressed these two Passover customs into one art object with a video monitor embedded into the back of the chair playing a loop of endless doors opening.

I wanted to move Elijah's role beyond the sym-

