Tablet

Eternity Is Beneath My Feet

A mosaic on the Lower East Side by the late artist Mark Podwal shows who we are, and must be

By Dara Horn
September 30, 2024

Mark Podwal stands in front of Torah curtains of his own design at the Altneuschul in Prague, 2012. Karel Cudlín

Is it possible this horrifying year has almost turned? That we are still here, in stupefied and ever-worsening grief and anger and despair, jump-scared almost daily by some new and previously unimaginable shock, and that it is now almost exactly a year later? Yes, it is. Here we are. It is a relief not to have to explain to readers of these pages what I am talking about, and I will take that relief where I can get it.

Sometimes, that relief is literally on the floor beneath our feet. Which is why I want to tell you, as we stand on the threshold of a new year, about a simple image on a threshold, where I accidentally wiped my feet on eternity.

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I can’t remember now what agonizing part of the year it was, but the year had already lasted forever. I was on the Lower East Side with time to spare and decided to stop in at the Eldridge Street Synagogue, a 137-year-old building which has been refurbished as a historic site. Its sanctuary is a sight to behold. But that isn’t the sight that stayed with me.

It was a torrentially rainy day. As I entered the narrow vestibule leading into the sanctuary, I stamped the water off my feet on the floor tiles. Like many synagogues of similar vintage, the Eldridge Street shul has a narrow lobbylike space with easy-to-clean tile flooring, a place to shake off the dirt of the outside world and move from the profane space to the holy—or, as it was beginning to feel like in a city where “Zionists” were being hounded out of subway cars, from their place to ours. Floor tiling for in-between rooms like this is usually basic and functional; it’s the kind of urban space people pass through without noticing. But as I stamped my feet on the Eldridge Street tiles, I noticed that there was nothing basic about the tiles under my feet. I was standing on a subtly stunning mosaic.

A detail of the mosaic in the entryway of the Eldridge Street Synagogue
Courtesy of Mark Podwal’s family

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I first noticed the large Hebrew letters, set in rich, deep colors on an irregular blue background with unexpected sparkle. Like a child, I followed the letters with my feet, stepping on each, my rational brain working to read them. Surely they spelled out some generic biblical phrase, right? But the letters were not arranged into words. They were independent, floating freely, released from the need to convince and justify and explain. Then I saw that each letter was intertwined with other things: a bull, a ram, a set of scales, a bow and arrow. What was this? I found myself experiencing emotions I had forgotten that I could have—curiosity, bemusement, delight—for the first time in months. And that's exactly what these letters were: months. I suddenly understood, with a snap of childlike joy, that this was a calendar.

Ancient floor mosaics with zodiac calendars have been discovered in the ruins of millennia-old synagogues in the towns of northern Israel. I remembered my unease at seeing those magnificent mosaics years ago; their Hellenistic zodiac signs felt strange because I was there during Hanukkah, the celebration of Jewish political and cultural independence. Those ancient artists made no attempt to reconcile the zodiac's pagan associations with the synagogues they were decorating; they just carpeted the floor with cognitive dissonance. But this newer artist was far more thoughtful and imaginative, infusing the symbols embedded in the letters of each month with notes from the cycle of the Jewish year. The letter samekh for the month of Sivan, for instance, didn't feature Gemini's twins—but it did feature "twin" tablets of the Ten Commandments, honoring the giving of the Torah celebrated that month. The letter tav for the summer month of Tammuz had a crab like the zodiac sign Cancer, but this crab was holding shards of those tablets, because Tammuz is the month when Moses broke the first set after he found the people worshiping an idol. The month of Av corresponds to Leo, but the lion's mane in the letter aleph contained a burning Temple for Jerusalem's destruction on the ninth of Av, since Jerusalem is known in Hebrew poetry as *Ariel*, lion of God. The letter tav for Tishrei, the month of judgment, held the usual scales of Libra, weighed down on one side by a shofar.

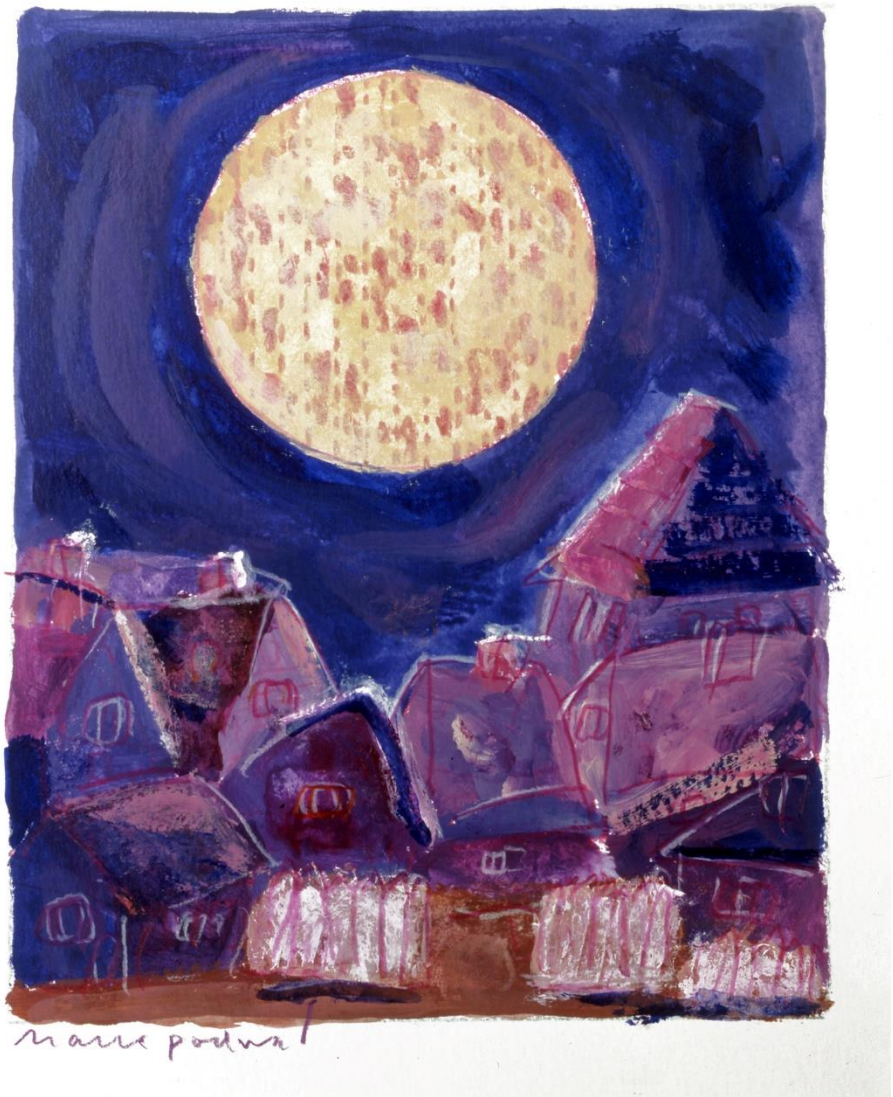
A detail of the mosaic in the entryway of the Eldridge Street Synagogue
Courtesy of Mark Podwal's family

I realized I was standing on a kind of miracle, a spare and simple work of art reminding me, almost like an inside joke, of the never-ending Jewish cycle of tragedy and responsibility and loss and renewal. Here was the revolving firmament, holding me in place in the middle of this unsteadying year, when the ground has been constantly shifting beneath my feet. Somehow this magic was achieved by what was basically a doormat.

I was not at all surprised to discover that the mosaic's artist was Mark Podwal, who has for more than 50 years provided the thought-provoking and deceptively modest backgrounds on which Jewish life unfolds. His is the art of reality, of this world, featured less in museums (though yes, his work is in the Metropolitan Museum and premier museums worldwide) than on things that surround us, on newspaper pages and opera posters, on ark covers and Torah scrolls, on holiday cards and award medals and jewelry and plates and postcards, and in this case, on things literally made to be stepped on—that is, things made to support us. They do.

I first encountered Podwal's work as a child, in a book about the golem written by Elie Wiesel. The story's menace felt far-off back then, in a way it no longer does. But Podwal's illustrations were much more magical than the story, because in a book about the golem, *none of the pictures were of the golem*. Podwal understood that the real magic was the intertwining of time and Torah, fear and courage. So instead of a monster, there were

crosshatched pen-and-ink miniature masterworks of the Jewish ghetto in Prague, or its Altneu Synagogue (today the oldest surviving synagogue in Europe), or the city's river and bridges and spires, or the golem's rabbinic creator bravely entering the Prague castle or standing at the threshold of a cathedral. These images were realistic until they weren't. The ghetto rested on the pages of an open book. The Jewish town hall's Hebrew-numbered clock face floated like a moon in the night air. Hebrew letters rose skyward above the ghetto like a plume of smoke, or formed a floating figure, or escaped the pages of a burning book. The letters were almost always flying, evoking the story of Rabbi Hanina ben Tradyon when the Romans wrapped him in a Torah scroll and burned him alive: *The parchment is burning, but the letters are flying free.* As a child I stared at these images and their letters, noticing, without understanding, how they intertwined beauty and dread.



'Matzoh Moon,' 2004
Courtesy of Mark Podwal's family

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I noticed without noticing Podwal's work again and again as I grew older, often on *The New York Times* opinion page, where his simple ink drawings illustrated arguments by people like A.M. Rosenthal and Cynthia Ozick, a generation of Jewish writers and thinkers whose elegant reason and resistance to cant is depressingly rare today. Podwal's illustrations—a tefillin-wrapped hand emerging from a tank, Jerusalem's Old City with a price tag attached, Hebrew letters bursting forth from the Kremlin fortress, menorahs growing as olive trees—might have been cartoonish in less talented hands. In his, they emerged as intimate imaginings of what was, is, and could be.

As an adult, I have kept coming across Podwal's works without looking for them. They appear around me unbidden, in galleries and greeting cards and most of all in books, jolting my eyes open with their subtle surprises: a painting of the Angel of Death as a winged hourglass, an unfurled megillah with its parchment arranged into a labyrinth, Israeli passport stamps on an off-kilter diagram of *sefirot*, a Torah *yad* holding its own quill. I'm not going to explain the terms and references in these works, because Podwal doesn't—just as no one needs their relatives or friends to explain the details of the lifetimes they've shared. There is no need to explain things, as the world now constantly demands of Jews, requiring Jews to arrange their letters in order and make the case for their existence. In the quiet magnificence of Podwal's art, Jews do not explain. They just exist, exalt, and exult.

After accidentally stepping on Podwal's zodiac, I sought out his work deliberately. I became fascinated with *Reimagined*, a thick retrospective volume with beautiful reproductions of his art. I was amazed to discover new dimensions even in works that previously felt conventional to me. Cheery, colorful paintings that I'd considered sentimental were suddenly provocative and eerie, revealing unexpected undercurrents of bravery and resilience. I turned again and again to a series called "All this has come upon us …," a set of painted and handwritten works commemorating Terezin, the "model" concentration camp the Nazis set up outside of Prague for their most high-end Jewish victims, accomplished and prominent people who had fully accepted Europe's modern promise of emancipation and protection. But instead of depicting the Holocaust, these images evoke other things: Roman coins featuring the Jerusalem-destroyer Titus, a statue of the villainous Antiochus enthroned in the Temple's sanctuary, a crusader knight's horse standing on a Torah, tefillin straps unfurling from the Kremlin, a ship carrying a Torah off to sea.

Mark Podwal, ‘Abomination 167 BCE - Psalm 27.3. Though an army surrounds me, my heart will not fear; even if attacked I am confident,’ from ‘All This Has Come Upon Us’ (the Terezin Portfolio)
Courtesy of Mark Podwal’s family

On its surface, this seems like what the historian Salo Baron criticized as the “lachrymose,” tear-filled view of Jewish history. But Podwal’s images are so bright and playful as to be defiant. Alongside each one are drawings laced with Hebrew words from the Psalms, written in a modest hand, and the verses themselves echo through time: “Though I am belittled and despised, I do not forget your precepts.” “All this has come upon us, yet we did not forget you, and we did not betray your covenant.” “If an army besiege me, my heart will not fear. If war besets me, still I trust.” They are thoughts few American Jews have ever had reason to think, until now. We have endured this year besieged and bewildered, but here we are still, with our trust and our hope.

Podwal’s imagination taught me that we always have been. Dread is inseparable from beauty, because vitality and mortality are one and the same, an hourglass with wings.

In Memory of Mark Podwal, 1945-2024

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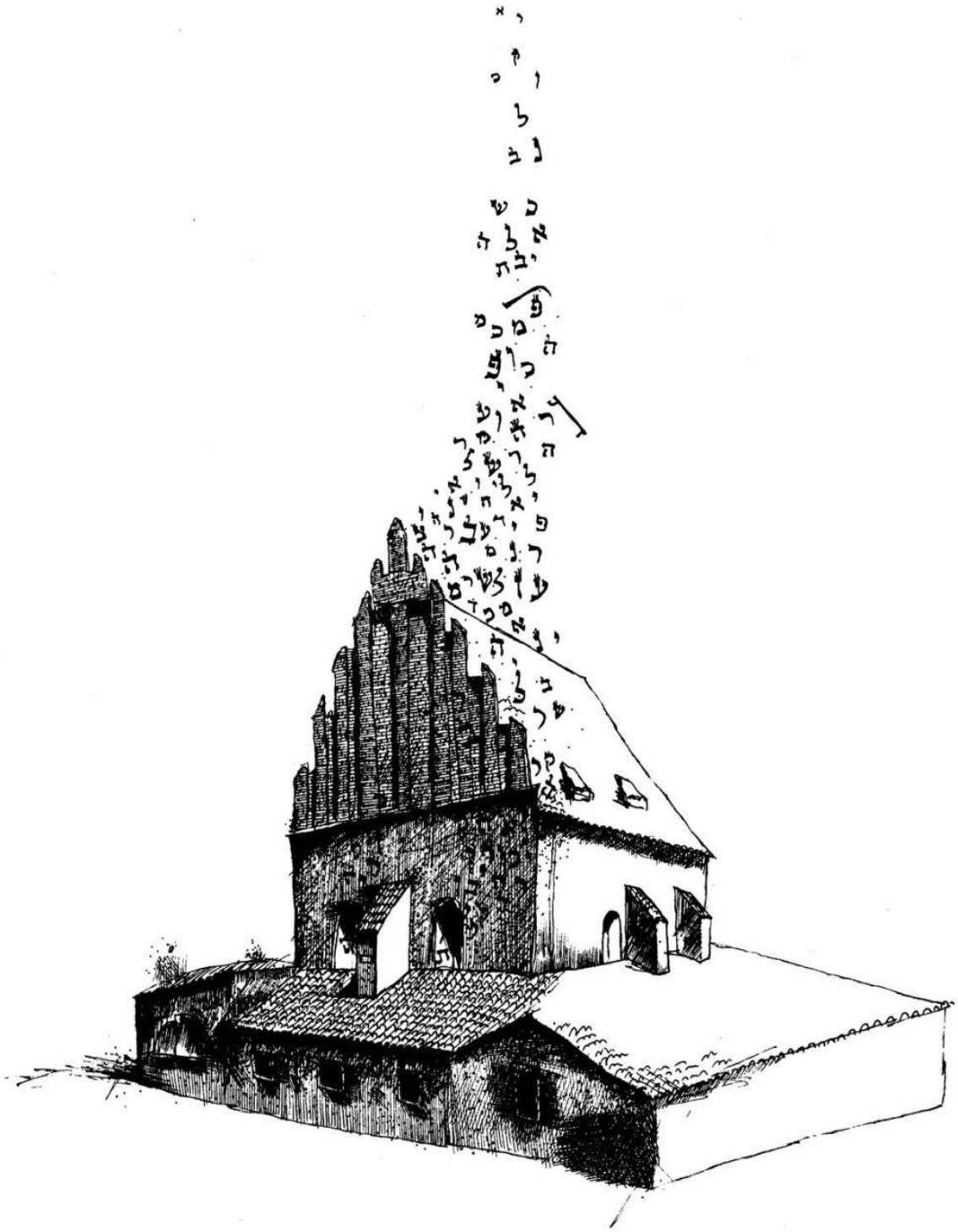

Illustration from ‘The Golem,’ 1980
Courtesy of Mark Podwal’s family

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Illustration for an Elie Wiesel book
Courtesy of Mark Podwal's family

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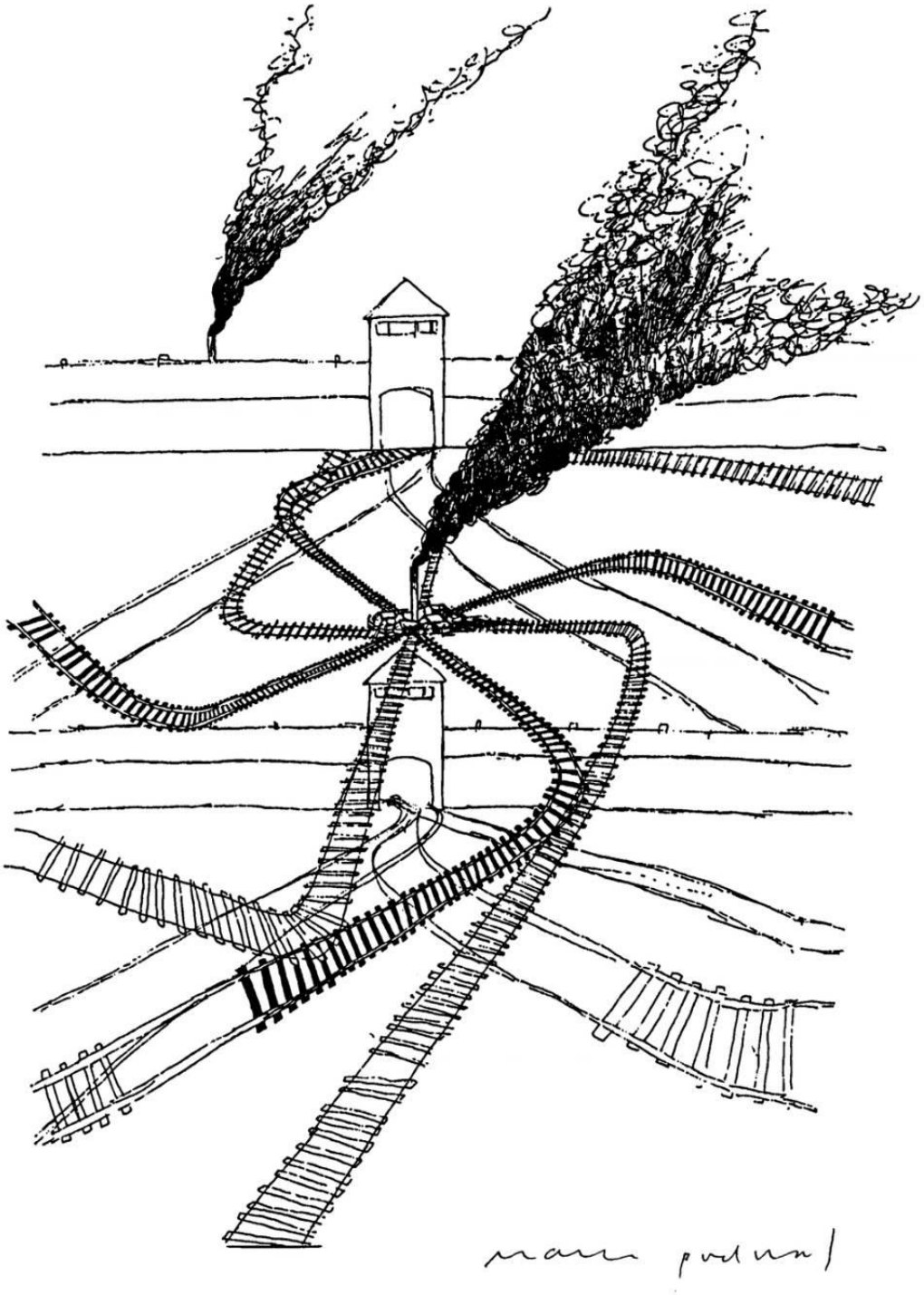

Mark Podwal, ‘Roads To Extinction,’ 1985
Courtesy of Mark Podwal’s family

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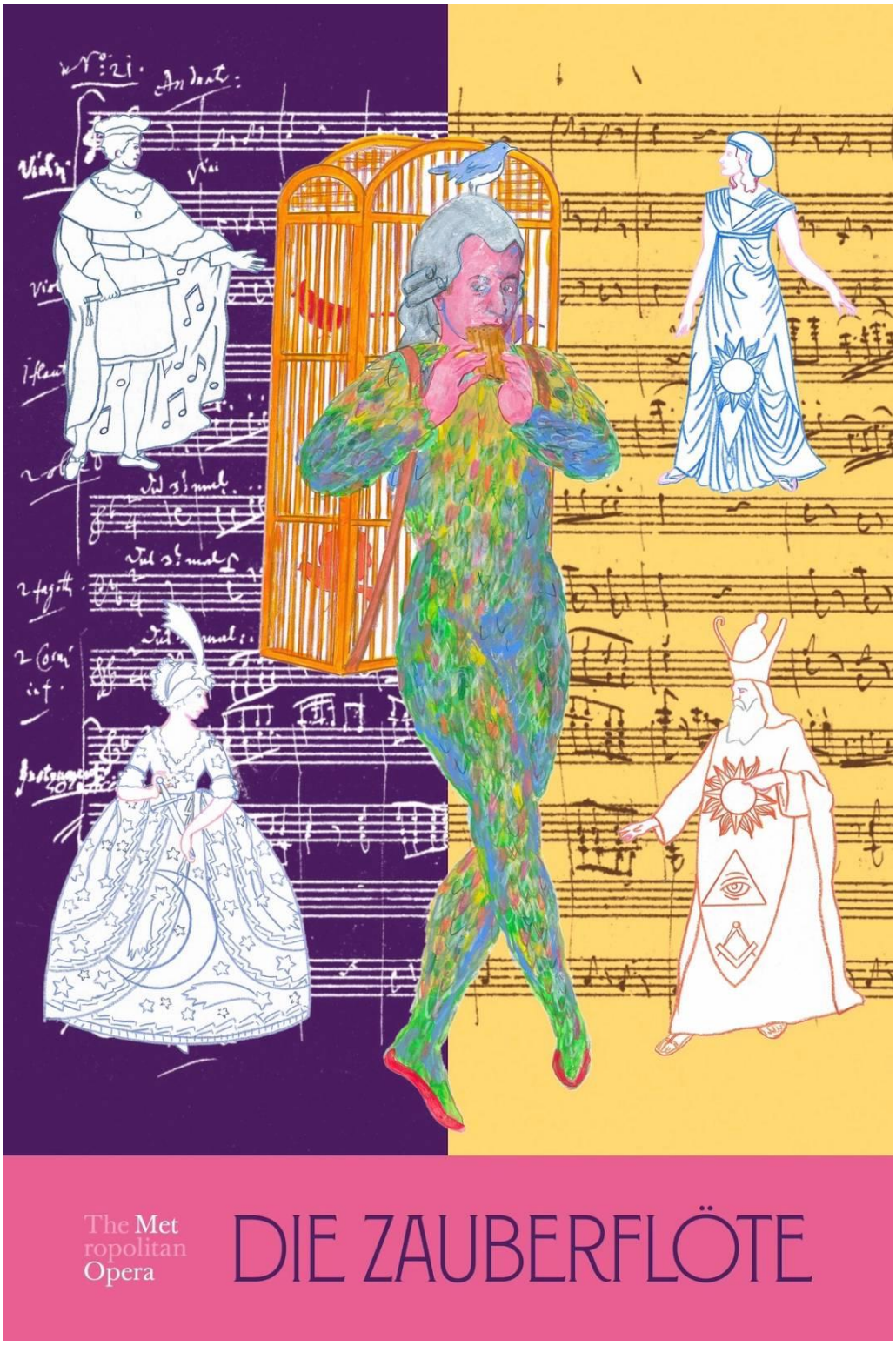

Poster for the Met Opera's production of 'Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)'
Courtesy of Mark Podwal's family

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An illustration of a Torah yad holding its own quill
Courtesy of Mark Podwal's family

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Jewish life cycle plate, reproduced by The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Courtesy of Mark Podwal's family

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