

Samuel Bak

THE UNANSWERED QUESTION

Samuel Bak paints in a language of signs and metaphors, expressing his life experience. In three of his many series of oil paintings—*The Past Continues*, *Landscapes of Jewish History*, and *Chess as Metaphor*—he tells his story. For Bak, the unthinkable actually happened—a set of catastrophes destroyed his family and six million other people. Marked forever by his miraculous escape as a young boy from the Vilna ghetto in Lithuania, Bak describes through his oil paintings the emotional reality of his experience and asks, *Why?* His question becomes our question.

Bak's works, brilliant in development, evoke memory and contemporary consciousness simultaneously. His paintings owe their power not only to superb craftsmanship and subtle colors but also to a simplicity that belies the complexity of underlying meaning. In *Othyoth* (Hebrew for "letters"), Bak takes the readily recognized twin tablets of the Ten Commandments and turns them into a metaphor of destruction and endurance. In other works, he uses ships, Sabbath candles, the Star of David, grave-stones, prayer shawls, old stones,

and labyrinths to ring tragic notes in the score of the Holocaust.

At the age of nine, even in the ghetto's crowded misery, Bak's first watercolors revealed his remarkable gifts. Following Bak's release in 1948 from the Landsberg Displaced Persons' Camp, he and his mother emigrated to Israel, where he studied at the Bezalel Art School. He subsequently pursued his career

in Paris and Rome. Widely exhibited internationally, Bak now resides in Weston, Massachusetts. He is represented by the Pucker Gallery in Boston.

Bak's painted world is a no-exit world, a Kafkaesque set of impossibilities, a list of questions. Keys that unlock no doors, candles that grace no Sabbath table, and birds that will never fly.

—Betty Rogers Rubenstein



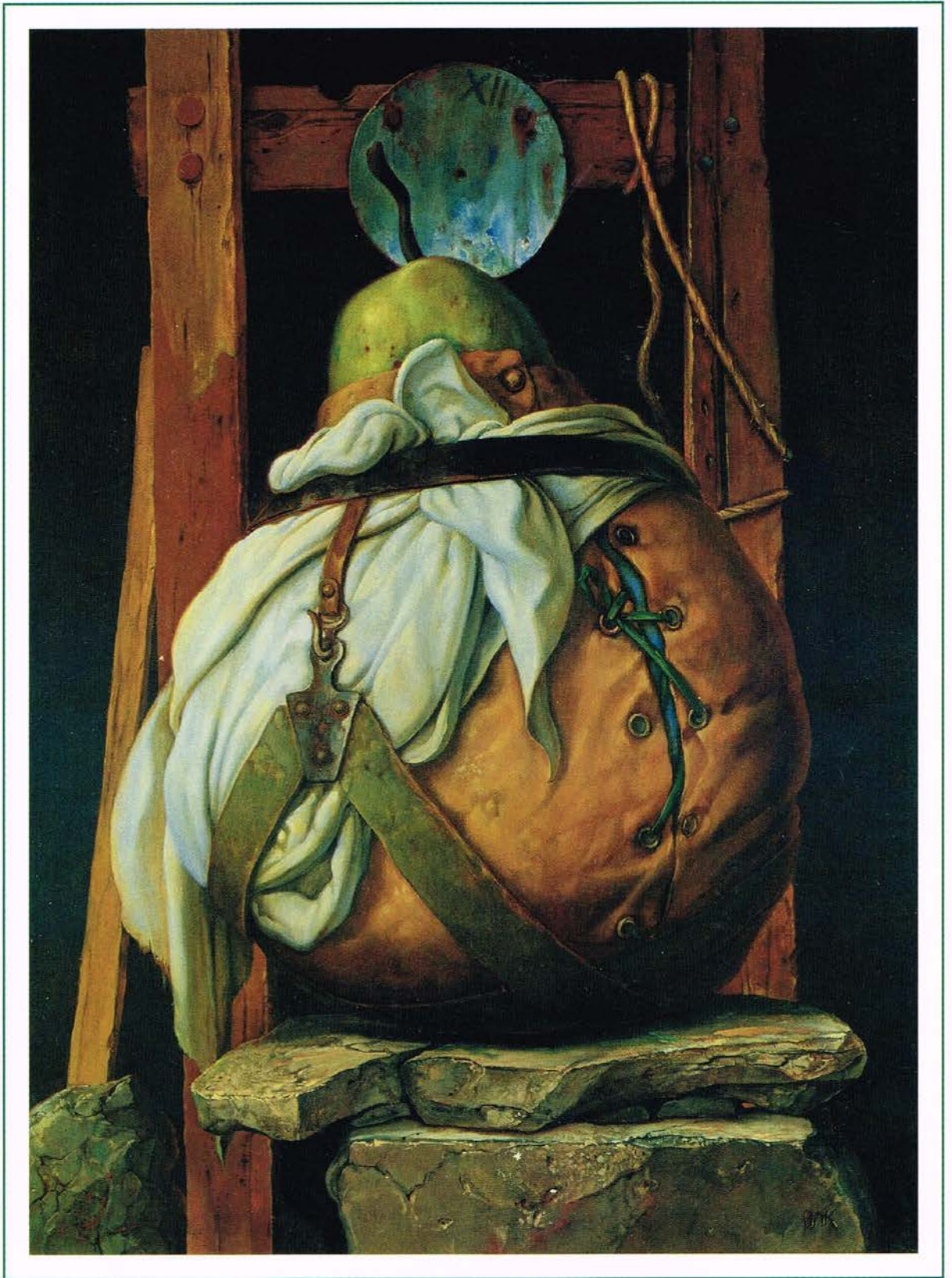
■ *Pardes*, 1992. Oil on linen, 38 9/16 x 51 3/16 in. This title, which means "orchard" in Hebrew, is a mnemonic word used in the thirteenth century to stand for the four basic approaches to interpreting biblical text: *Peshat* (literal meaning); *Remez* (allegorical, often philosophical); *Drash* (haggada, use of legend); and *Sod* (mystical).



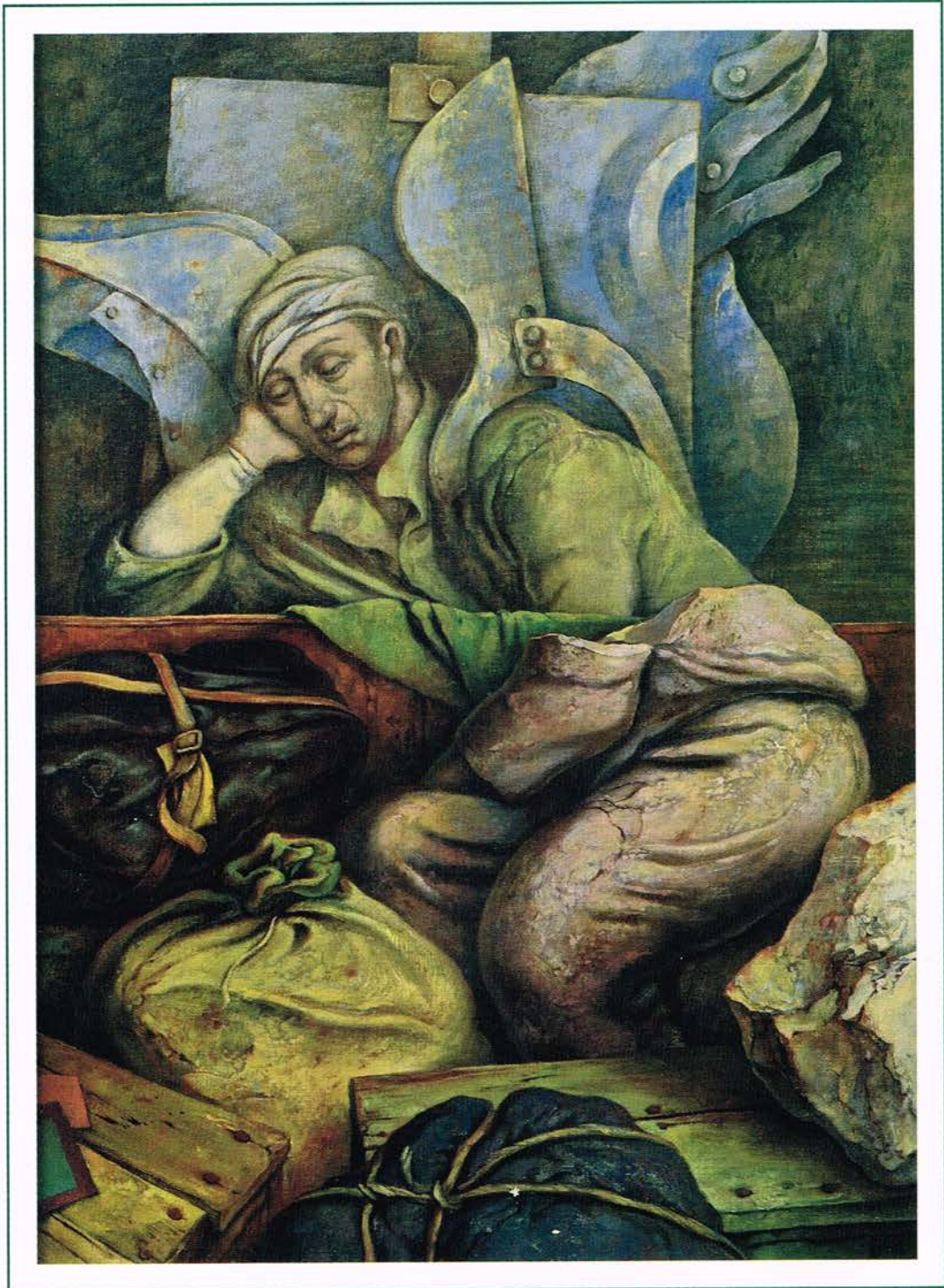
■ *Trains*, 1992. Oil on linen, 25 5/8 x 31 15/16 in.



■ *The Eve of the Sabbath*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 25 5/8 x 31 3/4 in.



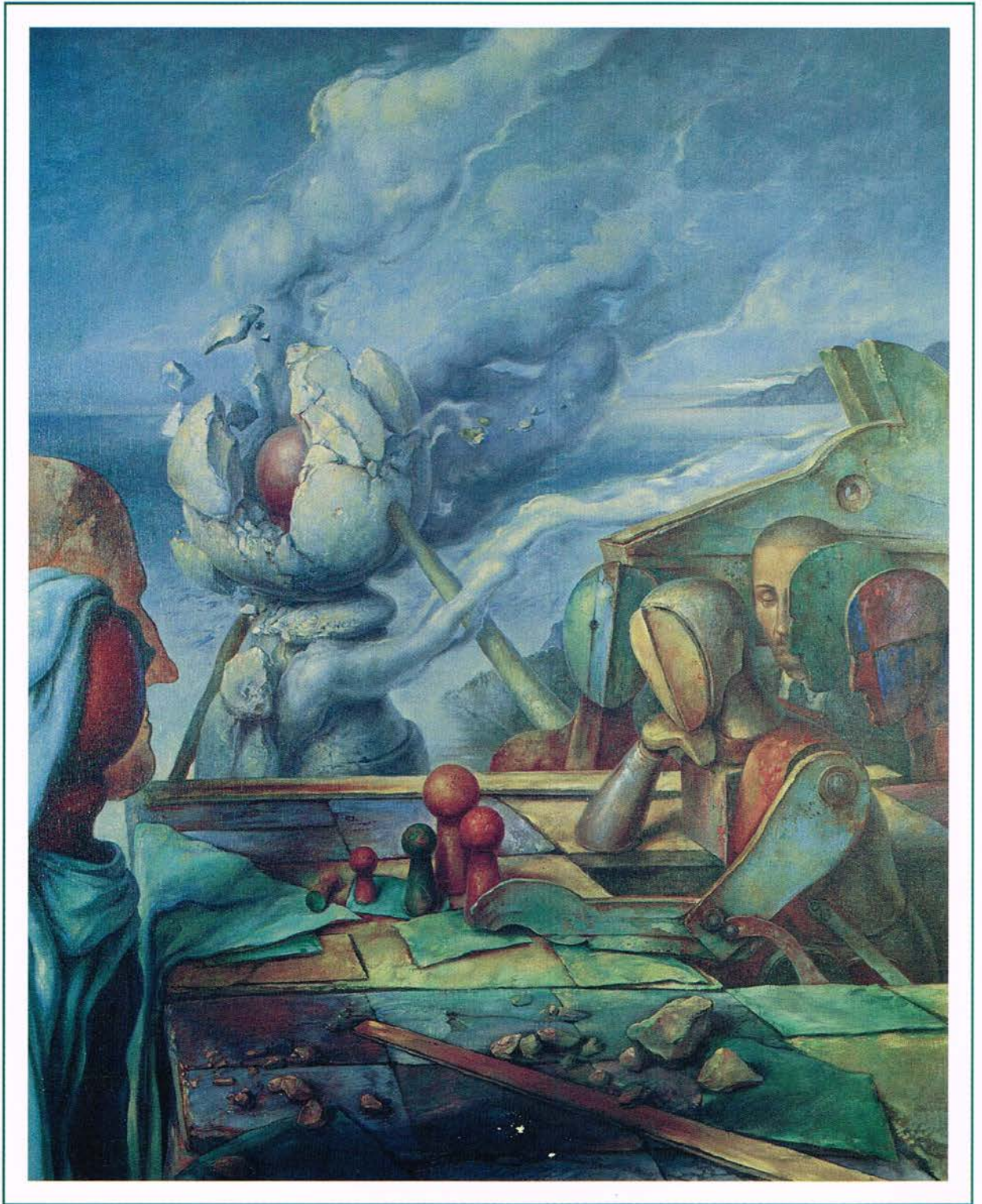
■ *Portrait*, 1982. Oil on canvas, 31 7/8 x 25 5/8 in.



■ *Traveller's Rest*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 27 5/8 x 18 3/4 in.



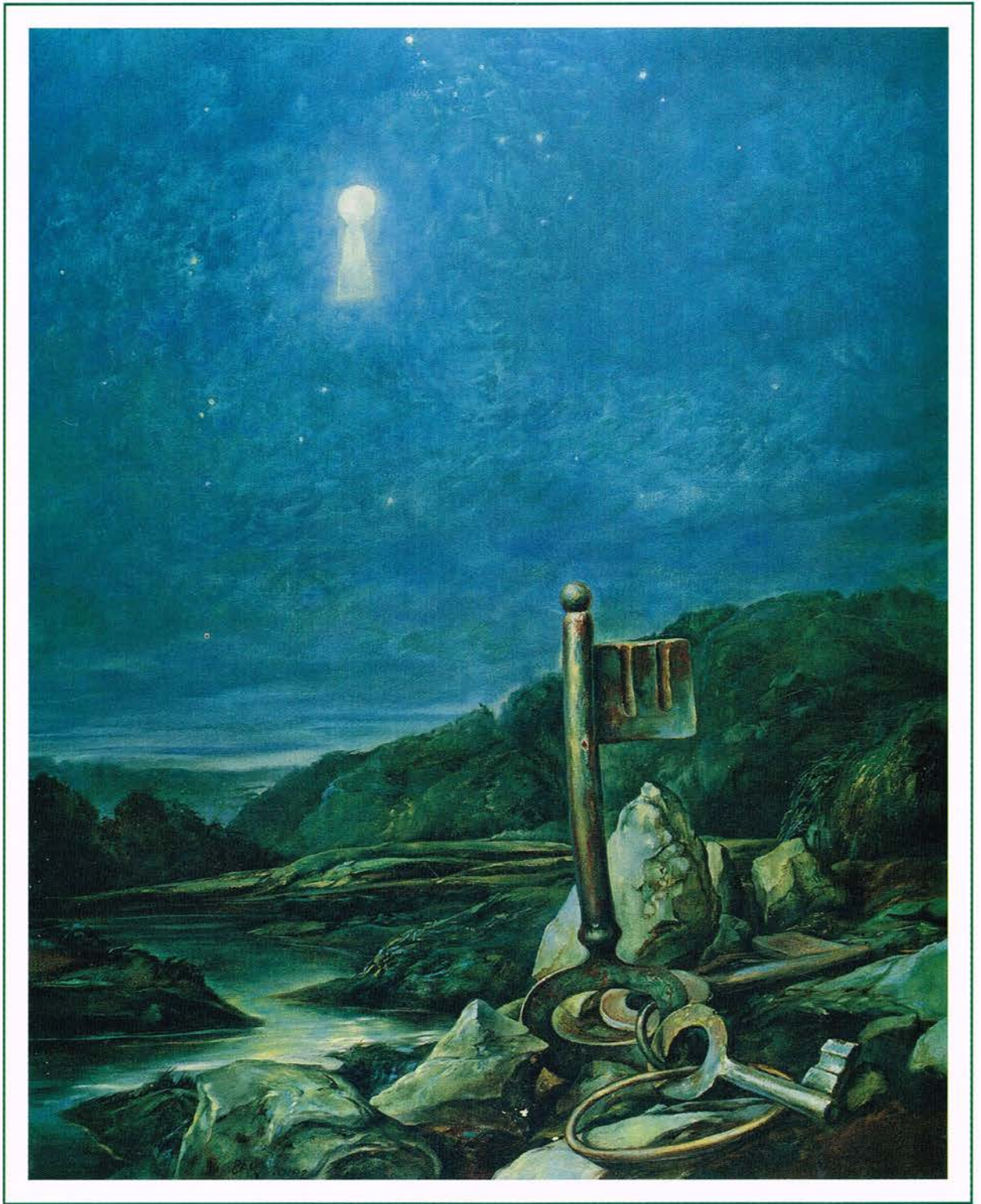
■ *Shema Israel*, 1992. Oil on linen, 31 15/16 x 39 3/8 in.



■ *Blow Up*, 1990. Oil on linen, 39 x 32 in.



■ *Home of the Wandering Jew II*, 1991. Oil on linen, 18 1/8 x 21 5/8 in.



■ *The Second Oracle*, 1970–1992. Oil on linen, 31 15/16 x 25 5/8 in.