

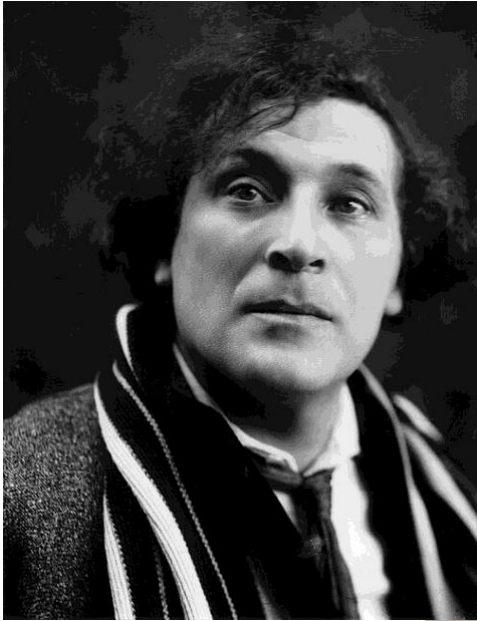
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Jewish Cultural Life: Lessons in Courage and Resilience
Karen Sutton, Ph.D.
July 8, 2026



Chagall's greatest gift is his ability to show the world the tragic, yet love-filled, history of Jews from the shtetl and the Pale of Settlement. With beauty, color, love, flying figures, and humanity, he conveyed his deep affection for the shtetl, preserving its memory for future generations.

"For a Jewish community struggling to overcome the legacy of the Holocaust, as well as the joylessness of Israel's perpetual struggles in a volatile Middle East, Chagall's heartfelt, joyous work should be an inspiration to us."

<https://www.jta.org/2003/08/22/ny/the-lessons-of-chagall>



INTRO

If I were not a Jew...I wouldn't have been an artist," Chagall wrote in a 1922 issue of the Yiddish literary magazine Shtrom.

"His cover for Shtrom reflects this belief, blending his Jewish identity with avant-garde art in support of a groundbreaking Yiddish literary magazine." YIVO.

N.B. Chagall designed the cover of the first issue in 1922 was first Soviet Yiddish literary periodical.
Design evokes themes of radical social upheaval and the many changes in the Soviet Union

SAVING THE JEWISH PAST FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS-HIS PRIMARY ACHIEVEMENT

In his 1931 autobiography, [My Life, \(Chagall, Marc. My Life. 1931\)](#) Chagall related how, while visiting Vitebsk (present-day Belarus), the city in which he was born, he realized that the traditions in which he had grown up were fast disappearing and that he needed to document them.

He paid a man to pose in his father's prayer clothes and then painted him, limiting his palette primarily to black and white, as befit the solemnity of the subject. This portrait is noteworthy for the simplicity of its execution; "nonetheless, its striking patterns, abstract background, and the slightly distorted features of the model demonstrate Chagall's absorption of modern trends, especially Cubism."

<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/23700/the-praying-jew>



I believe this is Chagall's greatest gift to the world whether a painting, a stained-glass window, a book, a poem, a tapestry, a ceramic pot or a museum. In 100 years, he will have shown the world and given to the world the tragic but love-filled history, my own family history, of the Jews from the shtetl and the Pale of Settlement. No one could show it better than he because no one had as much love for the shtetl as Chagall. And he showed it with beauty, color, love, flying figures and humanity. And we will learn much more in this paper.

CHAGALL AND INFLUENCE OF CHASIDISM

He was born Moishe Shagal in Vitebsk, Russian Empire (now Belarus) in 1887. His Jewish heritage in a modest shtetl deeply influenced his art: painting, textiles, glasswork, mosaics, ceramics, drawings, books, poetry and more. Chagall spent summers and vacation with his grandparents and Shabbat at synagogue in the town (not far from his) where the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, was born around 1700.

Chagall was one of two boys and the oldest of nine siblings in a religious, Yiddish-speaking family supportive of his art dreams. Although he went to both Hebrew school and secular school, he did not graduate from middle school. He did go to an art school that his mother had to bribe people to let him attend both locally and in St. Petersburg where he received higher level training.

The love, joy and ecstasy of dancing, hand clapping and loud prayer of the Chasidim he knew so well, never left the mind or heart of Chagall. He carried these images and joyful feelings with him his entire life especially when he was away from home, during and after the Holocaust, and in New York when he and his family escaped the war from Vichy France.

WHY DID I CHOOSE CHAGALL?

How has he influenced Jewish history? I chose Chagall because having lived for almost 100 years, his life is the amazing story, almost like a great film by director Eisenstein of an impoverished man from a shtetl in the Pale of Settlement who becomes a great success, the most noted artist of the 20th century, a Jew no less, in the secular world creating and sharing fabulous artwork--paintings, ceramics, tapestries, glass windows, etchings, books, poetry—all filled with the memories, emotions and LOVE in the colors he used from memories of his family's life in the shtetl.

He embedded his feelings not only for shtetl life, but for love between man and woman, between man and God, between man and animal and nature, for Jesus the Jew with tallit, hate of the Jewish persecutors who conducted pogroms in Russia, for a failed communist revolution and the Nazis who murdered six million of his people. In a poem inscribed on the wall of the Israel Museum he cried for all the artists who died in the Holocaust; he is quoted from his tragically sad poem (To the Martyred Artists) that honors them and their artwork. He came so close to dying himself when he escaped from Paris to Vichy France and then to NYC. (See the full poem on the last page in this document).

“...I see the fire, the smoke and the gas
rising to the blue cloud and
turning it black.
I see the plucked hair and teeth.
They cast a turbulent pall on me.
I stand in the desert before piles of slippers,
clothes, ash and rubbish murmuring out a single
Kaddish
And as I stand thus...there descends to me
from my pictures the painted David with
his lyre in his hand. He wants to
help me weep and play chapters of
Psalms...”

<https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/chag/Chagall23.pdf><https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/chag/Chagall23.pdf>

PATH TO BECOME AN ARTIST INCLUDED REVOLUTIONARY YEARS IN RUSSIA

Chagall went to Hebrew school, taught the younger children, then moved on to secular Russian middle school but never finished because he wanted to study art. His mother had to bribe people in their hometown to let him study art and be a photography assistant. Then she bribed people in St. Petersburg to study there at an even higher level. Chagall enrolled at an art school founded by the Imperial Society for the Preservation of Fine Arts. He was luckily able to avoid the military draft with support from his sponsors and he returned home. He actually began working on some of his masterpieces including “The Death”, which showed a fiddler on the roof overlooking the deceased surrounded by candles, a frequent element in his paintings—often shabbat candles. After working at an art school with Leon Baskt from the Ballet Russe, he returned to St. Petersburg where he received a scholarship to study abroad. In early May 1911, the artist left for Paris, via Berlin. “I discovered light, color, liberty, sunshine and a joy for life there,” <https://www.marcchagall.com/en/biography>, he said when describing his first impressions of Paris. He became famous with the avant-garde scene in Paris and made many friends while exhibiting his work, but he missed home.

GROWTH IN PARIS—BECOMING FAMOUS AND RICH

La Ruche was unique for a starving artist. The building was originally intended as a temporary building designed by Gustav Eiffel for the Great Exposition of 1900, but the artist Alfred Boucher gave it a new

life and re-opened it as a hub of artist studios in 1902. Its name translates to “beehive” due to the cylindrical shape and maze-like layout of the three-story building. Located in the 15 arrondissements of Paris, La Ruche quickly became a hub of activity because of the low studio rent, free artists’ models that were provided, and proximity to the arts and culture of Paris. When 24-year Marc Chagall moved to Paris from Russia in 1911, La Ruche was already a thriving artist colony with its own robust exhibition and theater schedule. An established population of Eastern European artists had already planted roots in the studio complex and their artistic output was varied and complex. All styles were embraced and living in close quarters gave artists ample opportunity to be influenced by the styles of their peers. Chagall definitely did this, merging elements of **Cubism, Expressionism, Fauvism, and Futurism** together in this own idiosyncratic way. “Paris Through the Window” was created during Chagall’s time at La Ruche in 1913, depicting the view from his studio.

He returns to Russia in 1914 when he marries Bella and the next year they have a baby. World War One begins and they are forced to stay in Russia for the next 8 to 9 years while he works for the government, various art organizations and does some of his finest painting and teaching, but he is extremely dissatisfied and eventually returns to Paris.

He only goes back to Moscow one more time in his life for an exhibition of his Yiddish theater panels and to meet with two of his sisters who he hadn't seen for 50 years. By this time, he is a world-renowned artist wealthy with multiple houses, resources and foundations and a generous philanthropist.

BACK TO RUSSIA AND WAR

In summer 1914 he vacationed in his native Vitebsk, where he was caught up by the war. He did military service as a clerk in Petrograd. He then enjoyed triumph after triumph at art exhibitions in Russia and was one of the organizers of the Society for Jewish Art in Petrograd. From August 1918 he served as a plenipotentiary (commissar) for visual arts in the Vitebsk region, the mandates for which came from the Commissar of People’s Education, Anatolii Lunacharsky. While serving as art commissar, Chagall had a chance to try his hand as a theater artist at Terevsat (an abbreviation of the Theater of Revolutionary Satire). Petrograd theater director, Aleksei Granovsky, invited him to join his newly formed Jewish studio, then on tour in Vitebsk; but Chagall was then occupied with his own projects.

Together with his colleagues El Lissitzky and Malevich, Chagall initiated a number of avant-garde art projects, the best known of which the design of a daring street décor that was transforming Vitebsk for the first anniversary of the October Revolution. The three also founded and headed a people's art college.

Following an open conflict with Malevich, Chagall was ousted from his Vitebsk projects as “not revolutionary enough”, leaving Suprematism reigning supreme in the art school. In June 1920 Chagall left for Moscow, where he taught literature and drawing at the Jewish orphanage in the suburban village of Malakhovka. Meanwhile, the studio founded by Granovsky had received state support and was invited to move to Moscow, where it merged with a small local Jewish studio and became the Jewish State Chamber Theater.

Granovsky asked Chagall to make the décor for their first production, which was based on three Sholom Aleichem one-act plays. In November-December 1920 Chagall, in addition to the décor and the costumes, covered the walls of the new theater with murals on the theme of Jewish theater—universally deemed his masterpiece.

In 1923, having fallen out with the theater people in Moscow, he decided to go back to Berlin and then to Paris.

INVITATION TO PALESTINE

On an invitation from Meir Dizengoff, the mayor and founder of Tel Aviv, Chagall visited Palestine with Bella and Ida between February and April 1931. Chagall worked in Tel Aviv and painted synagogue interiors in Safed and landscapes in Jerusalem. He returned to Paris and immediately set to work on the preparatory gouaches and Bible etchings commissioned by Vollard the previous year. In 1931, the Stock publishing house in Paris released the French translation of My Life, his autobiography. Later, Chagall was a strong supporter of Israel, vocally, financially and, of course artistically with major projects at The Hadassah Hospital, the Knesset, and the Israel museum. Chagall visited Israel eight times, frequently in connection with monumental projects in Jerusalem, such as his twelve stained-glass windows for the synagogue of the Hadassah hospital (1960–62) and his large tapestries and floor and wall mosaics for the Knesset building (1965–69).

According to the artist, however, it was his first visit, made in 1931 with his wife, Bella, and young daughter, Ida, that left the most vivid impression. During their three-month stay, Chagall worked incessantly, recording his impressions of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Safed. While in Safed, he painted several views of synagogue interiors.

“Interior of a Synagogue in Safed” employs color and spatial distortion to create a mood of spirituality. The work is dominated by a pale blue luminosity, reflective of the strong sunlight pouring into the building and broken only by the saturated red-brown hues of the ark curtains and the flower motifs in the two

visible stained-glass windows. The Ari Sephardic Synagogue still stands today, looking much as it did when Chagall fixed its image on canvas. *This painting is one of the few works in Chagall's oeuvre that describe a place that actually exists and thus can be thought of as a "document."*

<https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/194081-0>

WHAT DO THE FLYING SYMBOLS MEAN

You see flying in most of his paintings--flying violinists, flying cows and goats, flying clowns and dancers, upside-down lovers, flying brides holding hands with flying grooms and goats and cows upside down on the road. They fly over barn roofs, trees, flowers, cemeteries, Paris and synagogues. Personally, I think flying meant the lightness of being, the joy of being alive, the ecstasy of being close to one's spirituality and God.

- We see the flying symbols even from his earliest works in St. Petersburg, Russia. There is a musician on the roof during the funeral in "Death" 1908, reminding the artist of his Zayde who once ate carrots on the roof.



- I and the Village (1911): Painted right before he moved to Paris, features a floating, inverted woman and other dreamlike, gravity-defying elements over his Russian hometown.



- Over the Town (Over Vitebsk) (1918): Painted after he returned to Russia during the revolution depicts Chagall and his wife Bella soaring hand-in-hand over the snow-covered rooftops of his hometown.



In his book Marc Chagall, writer Jonathan Wilson suggests that the recurring flying figures themselves are a pun on Chagall's Jewish identity and come from the literalization of a Yiddish word:

"The word luftmensch, which denotes in Yiddish an individual overly involved in intellectual pursuits, literally means 'man of the air,'" writes Wilson. Marc Chagall Wilson, Jonathan Published by Schocken Books, 2007

Chagall, ever the dreamer, wishing he was in a cosmopolitan center when at home, then longing to return after he had broken free—perhaps he himself was the luftmensch he depicted. But like his animals and violinists, this symbol was unmoored from any sort of strict logic. It seems Chagall used his motifs when and where they felt right.

CHAGALL'S INVOLVEMENT WITH YIVO VILNA

<https://yivo.org/from-the-pages-of-yedies-11>

In August 1935, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research hosted its first international conference in Vilna and Chagall attended. He was a strong supporter of the institute and helped open YIVO's new art gallery that showed many of his engravings. The museum's first exhibit included speeches by prominent figures like Simon Dubnow. Another gallery displayed sculptures by Jewish artists, and art collectors and artists pledged to donate works. The document describing the event highlights the recurring flying symbols in Chagall's art, reflecting both personal memory and Jewish identity, and explores the cultural meaning of these motifs in connection to Yiddish culture and Chagall's own themes of longing and belonging. The festive occasion concluded with a farewell tea for Chagall and his wife.

Chagall and YIVO were a perfect match. Chagall's art painted the exact folk culture that YIVO scholars were writing down, documenting and saving for future generations.

He was the guest of honor and served as the "initiator" for a new Jewish art museum within the YIVO building. Chagall and his daughter wrote many letters to YIVO's team. You can explore some of these [Marc Chagall: Reflections of a Granddaughter](#) stories online.

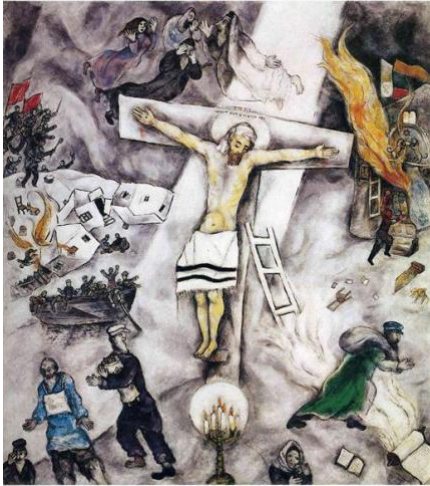
Chagall's ties to the region are still celebrated in Vilnius. Historical exhibits frequently display his original letters. "Chagall Blue" belongs to a wider local effort in Vilnius to use large-scale neo-frescoes and murals to revitalize urban walls with historical narratives. This includes projects like "Walls Remember" (bringing back memories of the historic Jewish Quarter) and other contemporary public installations spread throughout the capital. <https://neakivaizdinisvilnius.lt/en/routes/vilnius-street-art/>

I can't wait to visit Vilnius, hopefully within the year

WAS HE A POLITICAL JEW?

Chagall was included in the infamous 1937 "degenerate exhibition" curated by the Nazis under Joseph Goebbels. The German authorities made a mockery of Chagall's art, describing it as [an] "assault on Western civilization".

"White Crucifixion", painted following the Kristallnacht in 1938, the night in which Nazi politician Joseph Goebbels sanctioned a pogrom. The canvas shows European Jews subject to violence, their homes and synagogues burnt, while Christ—his Jewishness emphasized by his wearing a tallit instead of a plain loincloth, and with a crown of thrones conspicuously absent—dies in the center. It shows fire and Jews escaping but no broken glass, but there is a sense of terror and he and Bella were heartbroken. What about their family?



Chagall, Bella and Ida did think for quite a while that they were safe in Paris although Chagall was one of the first artists that Hitler declared degenerate. The artist's request for French citizenship was rejected because of the role he had occupied as fine arts commissioner in Vitebsk. With the help of his French friends, in particular Jean Paulhan, Chagall obtained French citizenship. His naturalization decree was published in the Official Journal on June 13, 1937.

However, the mood everywhere was becoming increasingly tense due to growing antisemitism, and Chagall revisited the art theme of revolution and, as a result, all his artworks were removed from German art museums by 1937. When the couple started getting fearful that they might be arrested, they moved to the South of France where the Vichy government was in charge.

It really was no better in Marseilles; Chagall was arrested and his artwork was in great danger of being confiscated. Just at the right moment, Chagall and his wife were rescued by an operation to smuggle artists and intellectuals out of Europe by providing them with forged visas to the US. This operation was headed by American Varian McKay Fry, named one of the righteous gentiles by Israel for saving Jews during the Holocaust. He was an American journalist and ran a rescue network in Vichy France from August 1940 to September 1941 that helped 2,000 anti-Nazi and Jewish refugees, mostly artists and intellectuals, escape from persecution by Germany during World War II. Fry was sent on his mission by the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC), which would combine in 1942 with the International Relief

Association to form the International Rescue Committee.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yfkxii5KVJw>

<https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/movies/4027948>

Thank goodness, their daughter Ida escaped several months later and was able to bring the majority of his artwork in cases on her ship to America. It was while living in New York that Chagall heard detailed news of the holocaust and the destruction of his hometown, Vitebsk.

Not many people know that Belarus was the hardest-hit country proportionately during World War Two. Chagall's parents had already passed away before the war. However, the remaining 16,000 Jews left behind in Vitebsk were forced into a Nazi ghetto and systematically massacred. By the time the city was liberated in 1944, only a few hundred people survived, none of whom were Jewish.

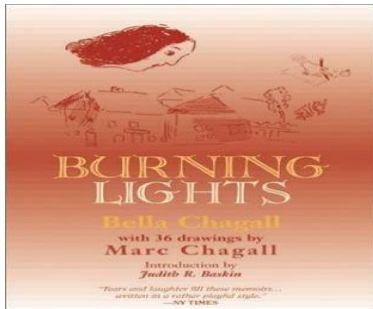
<https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/vitsyebesk/holocaust.html>

LIFE AND WORK IN NEW YORK AND SOUTH OF FRANCE

The heartbreaking stories coming out of war-torn Russia were troubling to Chagall, whose ties with his homeland were strengthened when his old friends Solomon Mikhoels and poet Itzik Fefer visited him in New York. During their three-month stay, the artist saw them almost every day. The Chagalls spent several months at Cranberry Lake, whose forests, birch trees, and snow reminded them of their native Russia. On May 5, 1943, Marc Chagall was stripped of his French nationality by the Vichy regime, under the law of July 22, 1940, which called all naturalizations into review.

Then Bella died in 1944 from an infection when there wasn't enough medication treat her because of all the needy soldiers in the area. Chagall was totally distraught and went into a very dark period. He and his daughter Ida began translating and illustrating the first volume of Bella's memories, Burning Lights, which she'd written in Yiddish. <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/discover/vault/di-ershte-bagegenish>

Burning Lights [CHAGALL, Bella](#) Published by Schocken Books, New York, 1946



That summer, Ida appointed a young French-speaking English woman, Virginia McNeil, to look after her father. He subsequently had a 7-year loving relationship with Virginia and they had a son David McNeil who became an artist and writer.

Chagall, who eventually managed to regain his creative momentum following Bella's death, worked fervently on the sets for Stravinsky's *The Firebird*.

Ida set to work preparing two large retrospectives on her father's work, the first since the 1933 Basel retrospective. One of them was organized by James Johnson Sweeney at the New York's Museum of Modern Art and was unveiled in 1946. The second was designed by Jean Cassou, director of the Paris Museum of Modern Art, as part of a major tribute to Chagall planned for the museum's reopening in 1947. As his daughter had, Chagall went to Paris for a short three-month stay, and reestablished contact with Europe and France, where he hoped to return.

CHAGALL'S PROLIFIC WORK

Chagall's relationship with Virginia ultimately ended and eventually he married Vava Brodsky with whom he lived for the rest of his life (over 30 years) in the South of France. His daughter Ida was his great partner and work manager as was his second wife. He had so many commissions and projects that I can imagine they had a large team to work on all of them. His work was international and his fame renowned and everybody wanted him. He became celebrated for his stained-glass work, which appears in Israel at the Hadassah Medical Center, his stained glass beautifies synagogues all over the world and in churches/cathedrals large and small. My favorite is the intimate Rockefeller Church near Tarrytown, NY at the Chapel of Pocantico Hills where you can find nine of his windows along with a rose window by his good friend Matisse.

I read that Chagall had a hard time deciding whether or not to do stained glass windows for his only project in Germany at Mainz Cathedral. He had to think long and hard about working in and for Germany because of the Holocaust; he spoke many times to the pastor and finally decided to take on the project. It took quite a few years, about seven, to work on the project and he actually passed before the project was finished-- another artist finished. He made beautiful tapestries for the Israeli government building (Knesset) in Jerusalem, he made ceramics he wrote books and poetry. A poignant poem to artists who passed away in the Holocaust is inscribed at the Israel museum. The poem is attached as the last page to this project.

Chagall and his wife Vava explored various places to live in the South of France eventually deciding on the peaceful property in Saint-Paul -de-Vence where he spent the last 16 years of his life. It was not too far from the French museum dedicated to him and his work in Nice. He was very happy and productive at home and in his studio. He worked up until the day he died after spending a creative day in his studio. He was 98 years old. *He was a modest man but confident; liked a quiet lifestyle but ambitious; a Jew who loved color, love, the old world of his shtetl along with the emotions of the Hebrew Bible.*

AWARDS CHAGALL RECEIVED IN HIS LIFETIME

- Légion d'honneur: Highest French honor
- Venice Biennale: Grand Prix de Gravure (printmaking) 1948.
- Carnegie Prize: 1939 painting Les Fiancés.
- City of Jerusalem-Worthy Citizen
- Louvre Exhibition: 1977, major personal exhibition 90th birthday, rare honor for living artist
- Soviet Ministry Culture invited Chagall Moscow in 1973 major exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery, restored Yiddish Theater Panels
- French government opened Musée National Marc Chagall Nice 1973 biblical message series

LEGACY OF RESILIENCE

Putting himself, his wife, daughter and all his artwork in great danger, Chagall fled the Vichy Nazis from Marseilles by ship to NYC. He stayed in NY for eight years doing some of his best work, although in a dark mood. He tragically lost Bella and was depressed. He did find new love and had a son, who also

became an artist and writer. He made new contacts and acquaintances, was a great success at MOMA and the reopening of the French museum, and he did go back to France full-time, grateful to America for its love and protection. He was definitely courageous and resilient.

###

NOTES ON NEXT PAGE

NOTES

BURNING LIGHTS [CHAGALL, Bella](#) Published by Schocken Books, New York, 1946

<https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-bjpa9763>

<https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/movies/4027948>

<https://neakivaizdinisvilnius.lt/en/routes/vilnius-street-art/>

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<https://vilnacollections.yivo.org/Marc-Chagall-Reflections-of-a-Granddaughterhttps://vilnacollections.yivo.org/Marc-Chagall->

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<https://yivo.org/from-the-pages-of-yedies-11>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yfkxil5KVJw>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRurh3BD5_w

Marc Chagall. Published by Book League of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order, IWO, 1947. From the YIVO Library Collections. © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

[Marc Chagall: Reflections of a Granddaughter](#)

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/22260>

[Wilson, J. \(2007\). *Marc Chagall*. Schocken](#)

THE END

