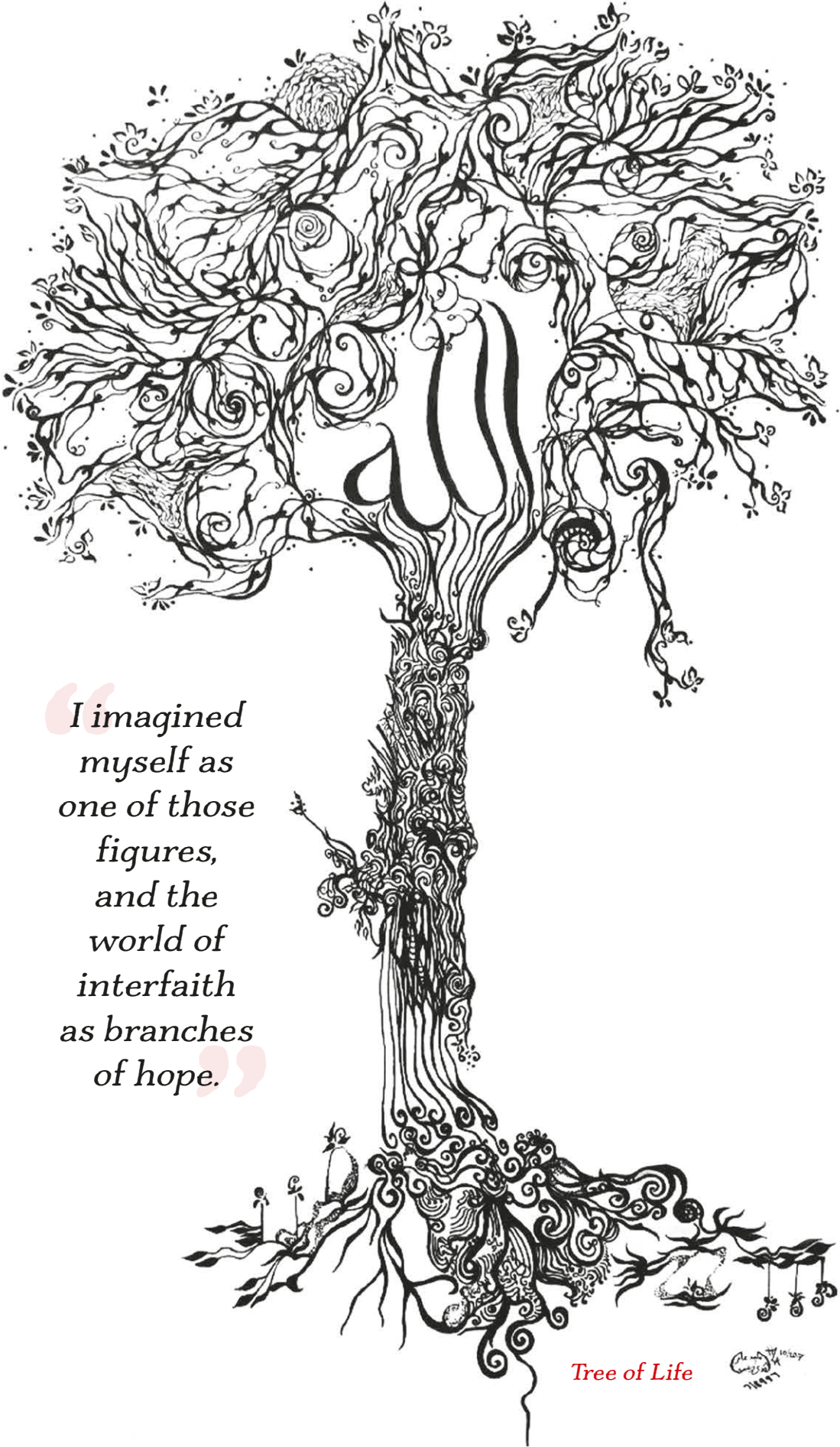




I imagined myself as one of those figures, and the world of interfaith as branches of hope.

Tree of Life

The Endless Dance

“Only from the heart can you touch the sky.”

Jalaluddin Rumi, 13th century poet and mystic.

Art had always been my refuge. As a teen, I would spend hours deep in thought and quiet drawing. I often drew “little people” in black and white. They were small figures with outstretched arms symbolic of idealism and connection. In “Voices for Peace,” I envisioned for them a dream world of peaceful coexistence, free from hate, free from warring imperialistic powers. Instead, the Yin-Yang symbol rested at the top, and Allah at the bottom, dictating a balance and a sharing of faith and energy to ultimately form one circle of peace.

Towards the end of high school, I visited Mecca. Dressed in white, I left the world with all its challenges and superficialities behind. I felt peace and tranquility. I tried to capture my experience through “Tree of Life.” Delicate figures intricately intertwining with Allah written in branches. Some of them bear flowers as they bring beauty to the world in their worship of their creator, the source of all beauty in the world. I imagined myself as one of those figures, and the world of interfaith as branches of hope.

Both drawings represented hope, love, and an idealist belief in humanity and peace.

The years went by. 26 years had passed since “Tree of Life,” and “Voices for Peace.” I barely drew at all. There was always someone or something more important than my art, myself, or even God sometimes. Until one day I found myself staring at a wall in a mental health center. It was an ugly wall. No art, no inspiration- just a grey wall with peeling paint and dusty corners.

The wall matched how I felt.

Depression is a horrible disease. A grey veil of shadows and darkness covers everything. I felt devoid of joy, hope, love, energy or connection. Gone were any ideals, dreams. I barely felt a Godly presence. Instead, I felt imprisoned by dread and panic, occasionally I felt numb. I had a vague memory of who I was once upon a time, and it seemed very very far away.

I began to draw again. The small human-like figures came back to me as they illustrated my thoughts. The figures

ruminated as repetitive spirals. They surrounded suppressed emotions as empty voids. I drew “Butterfly’s Transformation.” It showed the beauty of who I once was, my

deterioration into sand and stone, and hope of becoming again the person I once was.

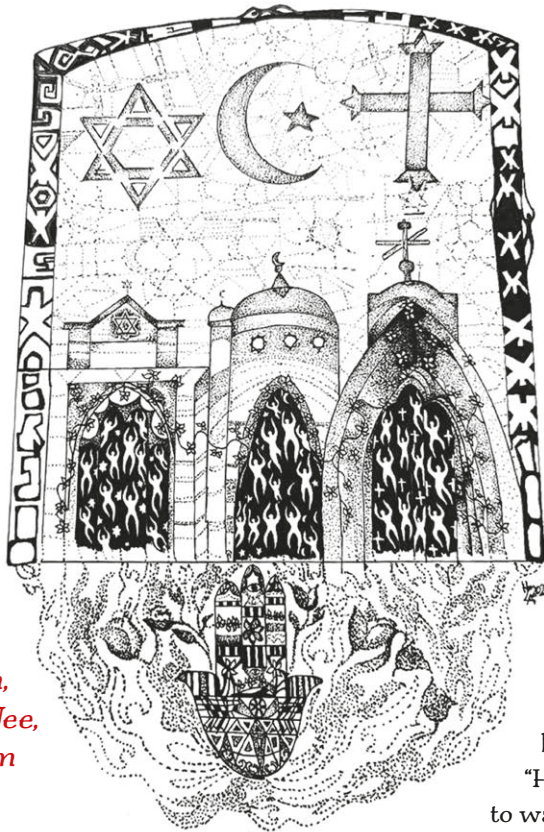


Voices for Peace

Butterfly’s Transformation



*Salam,
Ir-EE-Nee,
Shalom*

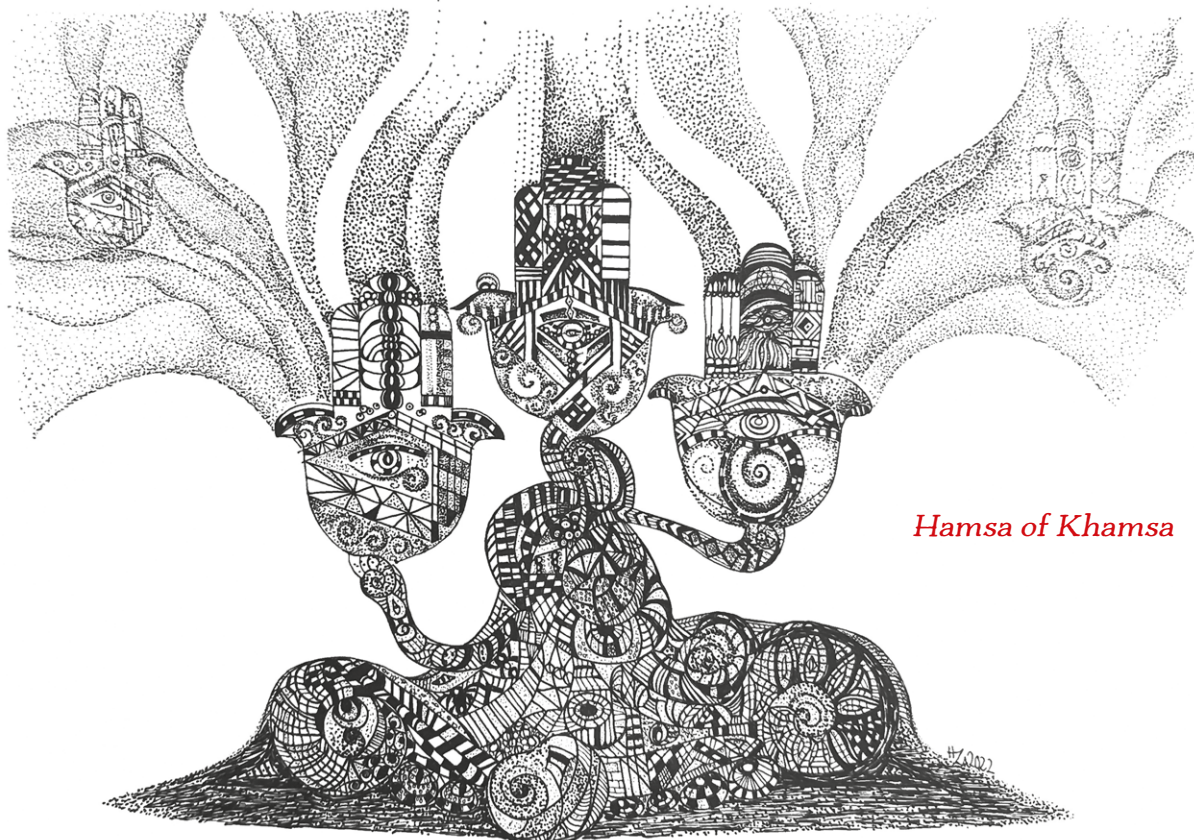


My art became my therapy, in tandem with CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) and medical care.

I began to search for my lost ideals. In the background of the horrific scenes coming out of Gaza in 2023, I visited a historic site where an ancient mosque, church and synagogue stand upon the remains of a Roman temple. Here I saw an example of the three faiths together, side by side. I drew “*Salam, Ir-EE-Nee, Shalom*.” (“Peace” in Arabic, Greek, Hebrew). The three houses of worship lean onto each other, framed by an imperfect border. The same figures enter through arched gates representing gates to heaven. I too was entering those arches, and I wasn’t alone. I felt hope in humanity again.

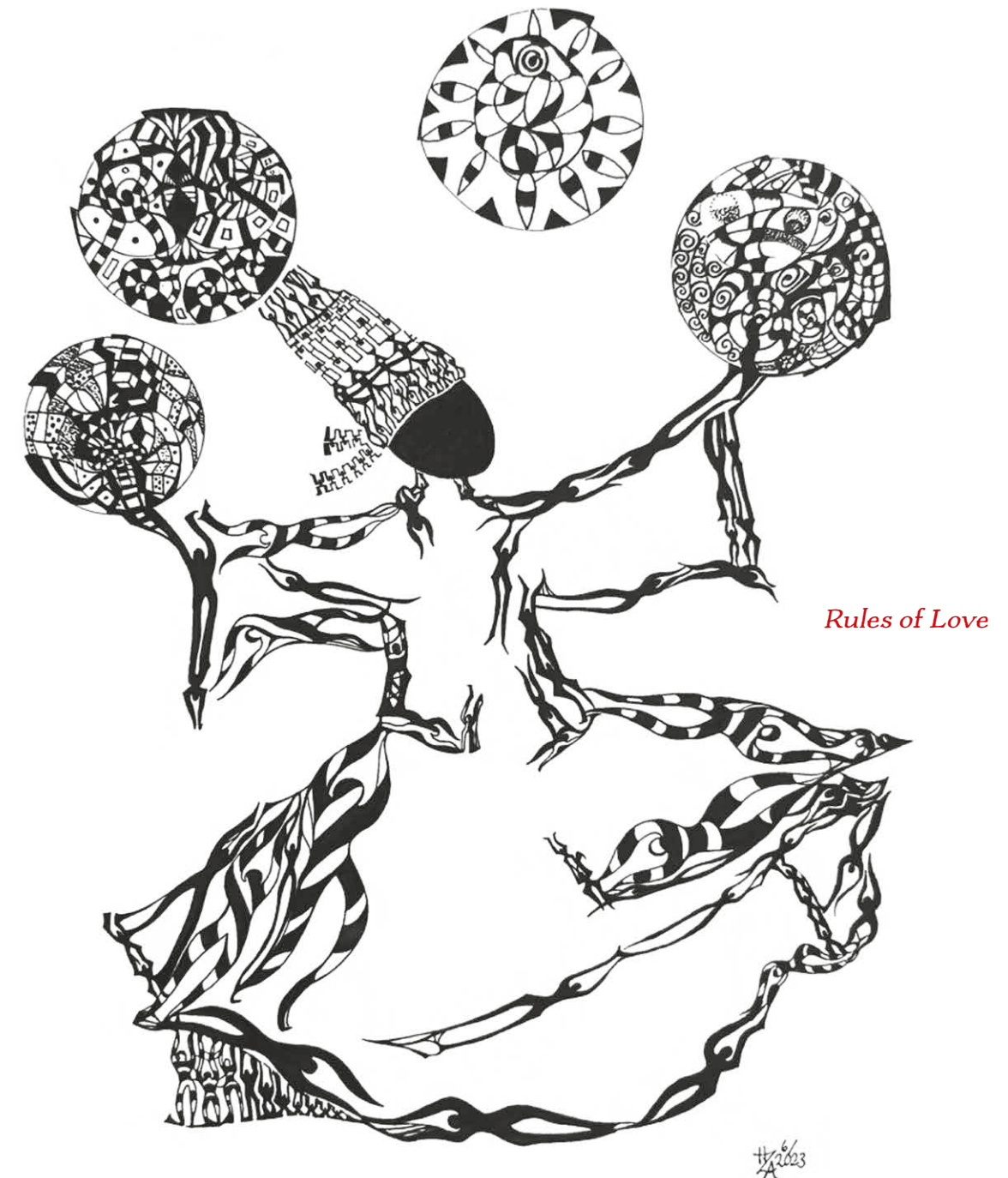
I drew “*Hamsa of Khamsa*.” Hamsa means “whisper” in Arabic, and khamsa means “five.” The Khamsa sign is an example of how different faiths and cultures converge in their desire to ward off evil and choose goodness. For Muslims, it represents the five pillars of Islam; for Jews, the five books of the Torah; Levantine Christians call it the “Hand of Mary” (Kef Miryam). I felt a part of that desire, to ward off the darkness in my heart and in the world.

I had a vague memory of who I was once upon a time, and it seemed very very far away.



Hamsa of Khamsa

As my spirituality and faith strengthened, I began to draw scenes of serenity, symbols of renewal, of rebirth.



Rules of Love

I began to integrate what I was learning in CBT into religious practices. I practiced mindfulness by admiring the beauty of God’s creation, and I used relaxation techniques before *salat*. What CBT called “radical acceptance,” I experienced as *Ridā*, a calm acceptance of Allah’s decree. As my spirituality and faith strengthened, I began to draw scenes of serenity, symbols of renewal, of rebirth.

I drew “*Rules of Love*.” In it, the figures and I partake in the dance of a whirling dervish, symbolic of leaving worldly desires for a connection to the Divine presence within our souls. It is an endless dance that will continue lifelong, much like my mental health journey. One day, the dervish will release the drums skyward. On that day, with His presence, His love, we will touch the sky.