

**Words, Color and Gold:  
Illuminating Jewish Values through Engaging with Jewish Art  
Debra Band**

**Description:** Hebrew illuminated books rich with color and intriguing imagery offer a means of conveying complex ideas of Jewish spirituality, history and thought to the reader through a joyful, yet intimate reading experience. In the four decades since the advent of a popular internet, as visual iconography has increasingly augmented the power of the written word, the power of Jewish iconography to convey Jewish values, thought and text becomes increasingly relevant in many aspects of Jewish life. In this slide presentation, Debra Band will discuss her development of a modern Jewish iconographic vocabulary drawn from midrash, archeology, science and general western culture in her books *The Song of Songs: the Honeybee in the Garden* (2005), *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms* (2007), *Arise! Arise! Deborah, Ruth and Hannah* (2012), *Kabbalat Shabbat: the Grand Unification* (2016), and *All the World Praises You!: an Illuminated Aleph-Bet Book* (forthcoming July 2018). The analysis of a series of illuminated pages will reveal their power to convey Jewish tradition and values to readers across the spectrum of Jewish life.

**Debra Band's** Hebrew/English illuminated books grow from her extensive studies of Jewish texts and research into medieval European and middle Eastern manuscript arts, and scholarly collaborations. The most recent of her five illuminated books are *Kabbalat Shabbat: the Grand Unification* (2016) and the forthcoming (July 2018) *All the World Praises You!: an Illuminated Aleph-Bet Book*, an adaptation of Perek Shira intended for young children, students and adults. Debra's work tours museums and galleries across the United States. She lectures and teaches frequently in diverse Jewish and Christian venues across the English-speaking world.

**Intro slide—all five books**

Hi! I'm so happy to be with you this morning to discuss the new Jewish visual iconography, *visual midrash*, that I've been developing for nearly 30 years. Words, color and gold fuse here into an iconography expressing our most profound Jewish spirituality and values in a way that *makes sense* to all of us who live our daily lives in the modern world. Many of us struggle to find personal spirituality without *abandoning* the empirical, science-based intellectual culture that we all inhabit every time we check the weather forecast, nurse a child's scraped knee, or turn on our computers. In the face of these side-by-side mindsets, one of my own deepest concerns—and I'm sure many of you share this—is the constant societal pressure of secularization, the shrinkage of expressly *Jewish* meaning in the lives of much of our community, despite the fact that many around us strain for connection with “something greater.” The illuminated books I'm about to share with you, infused with all the joy and intimacy of this essential Jewish cultural art, can *nourish* the souls of our adults and children who strive to inhabit both the secular and spiritual worlds with integrity. Their paintings convey our immutable

*values* in a sensually-pleasing, non-didactic way that readers can absorb at their own pace. I'm going to focus on how this visual midrash works in my three most recent books, *Arise! Arise! Deborah, Ruth and Hannah* (2013), *Kabbalat Shabbat: the Grand Unification* (2016), and *All the World Praises You!*, an illuminated adaptation of *Perek Shira*, organized as an *aleph-bet* book, that appears in mid-July.

**WONDER WOMAN** Let's start by looking at some *women* role models. Now, Gal Gadot *is* a wonder! And, in Jewish education nowadays, she's pointed out as a great role model for Jewish girls. But Wonder Woman, of course, is *utterly imaginary*—and *not even*, as are many of our comic book heroes, a product of the great early twentieth-century Jewish cartoonists. So let's look at a *biblical* wonder woman, one of the very earliest, most formative tales we have—Deborah. **DEBORAH SLIDE**

At right Deborah listens to the local farmers' and herders' anxious complaints—most likely begging for relief from Canaanite depredations on their crops and flocks. The clouds above allude to God's leadership of the people, the palm, drawing upon Psalm 92, apart from being the landmark for her court, symbolizes her righteousness. The lily draws upon a famous midrash in which the rabbis use a fragrant pink lily in a ruined orchard to represent the value of the Ten Commandments in the corrupt human world. We all know these plain clay jars from Israeli archeology, yes? Throughout the book, these jars serve as barometers of the people's mood. If all's well, the jar is upright and intact, but if the public mood has shifted to anxiety or fear, the jars are, like this one, cracking or broken, as you see this one, spilling its wine.

At left, this *real* Wonder Woman, assisted by her general, marshals her rag-tag bunch of farmers and herders, probably armed with little more than primitive bronze sickle-swords and knives, against Sisera's 900 heavy, technologically advanced, iron chariots. Picture this! For the first time since entering the Land, someone—a *woman*—has put together a force uniting multiple tribes—she *already* had better creds than her general, Barak. She waited for just the right the moment— *and I believe that this was early winter*, when she could gamble that the rains might begin. Hoping for a flash-flood, she drew Sisera and his heavy chariots to chase her band into a wadi. Her bold gamble paid off—in a miracle compared to the parting of the Red Sea, the rains began with a rush, so all those iron chariots were suddenly mired in a sea of mud...and Israel's farmers and herders could use their sickles and knives to pick off the mighty warriors of Hatzor. Deborah even had the *hutzpah* to celebrate her—and Yael's—victory with an epic poem, the first recorded full Israelite woman's epic, indeed, one of the very most ancient chunks of Tanakh that we have. At left we see the flood—trapped soldiers and horses sink under the waves, the eagle reminds us of God, who rescued us as though “on wings of eagles” (there's great midrash about the eagle here), and shooting stars show us how “the stars fought from their courses.” Deborah is a *genuine* Jewish role model

for our girls and all of us—for her careful and imaginative planning, courage and leadership. As the fused text and visual midrash show us, Deborah’s qualities are an integral part of our *actual Jewish culture*, not a modern fiction.

**RUTH SLIDE** Let’s move on and look at Ruth and Naomi, and discuss some other daily values modeled for us by our biblical women. We’ll see how the iconography in the paintings reveals the subtleties of their tales.

Look to the left. *Megillat Rut* begins in personal tragedy. The three women are devastated and impoverished by the deaths of their men. I painted their emotions much as I saw the scene around me in the first moments after cancer took the life of my first husband in our family room-turned-home hospice—a kaleidoscope of broken shards. The flies, the screams, the weapons, the decaying wall, however, allude to *these* men’s selfishness and irresponsibility—wealthy landowner Elimelech has abandoned Yehudah in its time of famine, and fled to nearby Moab, leaving his own people to ruination.

At right, “Entreat me not to leave you, nor from following after you, for wherever you go I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge, your people will be my people, and your God, my God.” Naomi slumps on the stone, exhausted, the rabbis tell us, as the *ashes of the ashes* of sacrifice, yet Ruth’s devotion, defying all common sense, gives her courage. The palm tree speaks to both women’s *tsedek*, the crane, the *hasidah*, symbolizes Ruth’s *hesed*. The plants and feathers embedded in the painted mosaic allude to the subtle values of the women’s love for one another. In midrash on *Shemot*, roses symbolize humility, in *Shir haShirim*, beauty. The caper blossoms that you see in two corners draw upon a little passage in the *Bavli*, in which the caper plant—the same weedy stuff we see growing out of the *Kotel*—embodies Israel’s ability to persevere and flourish through adversity with nothing more than God’s unseen support. The lily we discussed a moment ago, the wheat is obviously sustenance, and the feathers again allude to God’s rescue of us, as though “on wings of eagles.” You begin to see now how I use this iconographic vocabulary over and over again, always explaining it in commentary materials, always building and adding with each project, always adding layers of subtle meaning to the narrative message of the illumination and its text.

**HANNAH 2, 6 SLIDE**. Hannah’s tale may come to us from a generation before the establishment of the Israelite monarchy, a couple of generations after Ruth, it may be another step in the founding of the monarchy, but its themes of personal depression, the discovery of private prayer, recovery, gratitude to God for surviving trauma, and finally, the passing on of family values, speaks to *our everyday* concerns and values. In the painting at left, at the beginning of her story, Hannah is lost in her own greenish bubble of depression. Crushed by the second wife’s taunts, she cannot perceive her husband’s love. Now, in his paraphrase of the biblical tale, the first century writer, Pseudo-Philo,

has Peninah compare herself to a full, fruiting olive tree, *always* a symbol of nobility. She ridicules Hannah as a withered, leafless tree, and we see those two different trees arching over each woman—Hannah sunk in depression, Peninah reveling in her many children. Now, you can probably *already guess* that those eagle feathers prefigure divine rescue! As we know, while her husband makes the sacrifices at Shiloh, Hannah enters the shrine, sinks down into a seat and rocks back and forth, murmuring her own silent prayer to God—inventing our tradition of silent prayer that has outlasted animal sacrifice. At right you see the words of Hannah’s prayer rising, like scent, from a perfume flask between Hannah’s hands—Shir haShirim Rabbah compares sweet perfume to the fragrance of the sacrifices that so please God, and we can extend this metaphor to the words of our prayer.

**Hannah 15,9 slide** We know the story—Hannah bears her first child, “*God has heard,*” raises him to the dawn in triumphant celebration. Those clay casks are full and upright and perfect as Hannah heals, having given birth to this remarkable man. The micrography you see in the border is part of a fabulous poem by the late bible scholar, Tikva Frymer Kensky, that compares the struggle of childbirth to early Israel’s wars. Finally, let me point out an element of the story that I’ve never before seen discussed—and that is, how Hannah passes on her family’s values of Jewish leadership to young Samuel. *Look at the little shirt in the corner of the painting at right.* The end of the tale tells us that Hannah made a little robe for her firstborn every year and gave it to him when they met during the annual sacrificial season at Shiloh. Now, when Tanakh mentions clothing, especially, the passing on of clothing, something important is always happening. Think here of Aaron’s ceremonious passing the priestly garments on to his son before his own death, passing on not only linen, but far more importantly the priestly tradition—and that’s just what’s happening here. Through each year’s little shirt, Hannah passed her and Elkanah’s values of devotion and leadership to Samuel to clothe him as he grew into Israel’s great leader, just as we all strive to pass our Jewish values on to our children and students.

**Shir HaMaalot Slide** We’ve looked a bit into how the values expressed the iconography manuscripts can illuminate our ancient spiritual relationship with the community of Israel— now let’s look into values relating to our love of the land. This is *Shir Ha’Maalot* from my last book, *Kabbalat Shabbat: the Grand Unification*, a partnership with Raymond Scheindlin, from JTS, godfathered, if I can say that, by Art Green. My challenge in this work was to show through the the visual midrash, how one can *live* the mystically-based traditions and liturgy that welcome our Shabbat *without* setting aside the concrete mindset of our equally-God-given real-world lives molded by daily activity, technology and science.

The psalmist conjures up the experience of the long dreamed-of return from Babylonian exile, from the standpoint of someone who flourished following the building of the Second Temple. We, of course, now experience this poem 70 years after another, nearly two millennium exile! These paintings are *full* of imagery expressing our history on the land, drawn from archeology, midrash and mysticism, but let me draw your attention just to the two semi-circular paintings. Both paintings use the same landscape—a spot on Kibbutz Yotvata, in the now-fertile Negev. At right, the mourning woman Jerusalem from *Eikha* traipses away from a scene of destruction, and she *can't* see that behind her water has begun to flow, and that seeds from the bag she drags have begun to germinate in her wake. At left, we flash to modern agriculture, where in our restored Jewish State, farmers with tractors work the farms, drawing bounty again from our sacred land.

We feel amazement watching the rebirth of our land, wonder at its beauty, but we feel *no less* wonder in all the environments that we in the Diaspora encounter every day. **ATW COVER** Surrounded as we are by harbingers of environmental damage, it's crucial to teach our kids and adults, not only anxiety, but a sense of *wonder* at the beautiful world we inhabit, to *build* their Jewish environmental ethic through love. Heschel found the roots of Jewish spirituality in “radical wonder” at the beauty of our world. It's exactly this wonder that I have conveyed in my forthcoming book, *All the World Praises You!*, a whimsical adaptation of the delightful little medieval classic, *Perek Shira*. Wonders of the natural world—beetles, lightning, trees, elephants and so on exclaim biblical praises of God, in the format of an illuminated *aleph-bet* book, that appeals in different ways to my toddler grand-daughter and Jewish educators of 75, and every age in-between. The back of the book offers short commentary for each letter, focused on discussion questions for parents to begin conversation with very young children. In web-based enrichment materials, I've unpacked the often-complex symbolism and meanings of each painting for 3 different age groups—elementary-school age, bar/bat mitzvah age, and day-school high-school age through adult readers. Everything is completely accessible regardless of Hebrew proficiency, and completely *non-denominational*. Let's look at the values expressed in a few paintings. **PEREK SHIRA 1**

Let's start with *bet*.

הברק אומר: מַעֲלָה נְשָׂאִים מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ, בְּרָקִים לְמִטֵּר עֲשָׂה, מוֹצֵא-רוּחַ מֵאוֹצְרוֹתָיו:

“The lightning says: He makes the storm clouds soar from the ends of the Earth; He makes lightning for the rainstorm; He releases the winds from His vaults.” The compiler of *Perek Shira* placed this verse from Psalm 135 into the mouth of *lightning*. So we have *Bet, Barak, Lightning!* In the illuminations we appreciate God's power revealed in

the\the rush of wind and rain, and in the sharp shocks of lightning—as in the ancient notion of the God of Storms in Psalm 29—but just visible behind the rainclouds we have another, far more modern, image of God’s all subsuming presence and power, a view of the deep sky adapted from a famous Hubble Space Telescope image that takes our view back close to the moment of creation known in astrophysics as The Big Bang. Each level of the Diving Deeper Enrichment Materials lays out all the meaning and symbolism in each verse and painting for each age level.

Moving from the greatest to the smallest now, for *Daled*, we match the grass under our feet with this ecstatic verse from the Psalms’ great paean to the balance of Divine Creation, Psalm 104—“The grass says: May the glory of the Lord last forever, May the Lord rejoice in His own deeds.”

The fact that the original compiler of *Perek Shira* matched this grand verse from Psalm 104 with something as lowly as grass provokes a certain tension. Biblical texts often treat grass as a great blessing, while others, such as Psalm 37, regard it as insignificant and impermanent: “<sup>1</sup>Do not be troubled by evil men; do not be incensed by wrongdoers; <sup>2</sup>for they soon wither like grass, like verdure fade away.” This contrast between great and small, between transient and everlasting, suggests that even the smallest among us can sense and praise the God that enables and suffuses all Creation.

## PEREK SHIRA 2

Moving to *Tet*, we have *Tal*—dew—dripping from that lily that we recognize, which always alludes to the value of the Ten Commandments and all Torah. In this verse from Hosea’s prophecy, God promises to be gentle with Israel as the cool dew drops, to help the returning nation flourish like the blooming lily, and to enable it to sink strong, deep roots into its precious land.

I also added some modern concepts that the original tenth century compiler never knew, for instance, the cell, that smallest integral life form common to every animal and plant. Our *aleph-bet* ends with *tav*, for *ta’im*, cells, paired with the culminating verse of the Creation story “God saw all that He had make, And it was indeed very good. There was evening and there was morning a sixth day.”

Children of all ages can nourish their Jewish spirituality with *radical wonder* at the world that God—however you wish to understand the acts of Creation—brought into being. And finally, just for fun, there’s a hidden letter puzzle...but you can see that, along with all the other letter paintings, in the book, which you can preview in NetGalley or Edelweiss.

**Kiddush Slide** Ultimately, what many of us work to convey to our children, students and communities is how Judaism, in all its forms and cultures, channels God’s Wisdom into our daily world. In my paintings of Friday night Kiddush, we contemplate the fusion of flowing divine energy with the foundation of modern mathematics. The reader finds that the world of our daily life and the world of our souls are indeed one.

The message begins with the micrographic border winding through both paintings, presenting the passage from Proverbs 8, in which Wisdom describes herself as God's earliest companion, "since the beginning of His course, as the first of His works of old," . At right, the 10 wine cups remind us of the wine fountains that many of us use, but there's much more going on here. Ten cups— ten *sefirot*, right! Each is painted in a color associated with it in the Zohar. A 12<sup>th</sup> century kabbalistic writer I love describes the wine as a symbol of divine wisdom—and as it nears the human sphere, that wine transforms into flowing water, that necessity of human life that, throughout our sources, symbolizes the Torah. And that shapes our daily lives as Jews. But the pyramid form itself has *deeper* meaning. The ten wine cups are organized in a Pythagorean pyramid, alluding to the origin of western mathematics and geometry. The *mystical* nature of God, and *mathematical* nature are one...and divine wisdom flows into our *material world* as we make Kiddush.

**FINAL SLIDE** So, I could go on for hours, but I hope you see how words, color and gold can fuse in imagery pregnant with the whole panoply of our Jewish history, traditions and values...and inspire our communities' daily lives. Thanks!

More information about the books and artwork referenced above is found at <http://dbandart.com/books/>. All work herein copyright © Debra Band 2018.