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From Our President

The Second Commandment: A Graven Image

By Carol Kaufman Newman

This issue of the JOFA Journal is devoted to an examination of Orthodox women and the arts. It is a fascinating compilation of articles by women pursuing careers in the visual and literary arts. Each voice is different and each exciting.

Why has it taken Jews so long to participate fully in the world of the arts? Were outlets of artistic expression denied us? From earliest times we were discouraged, as Orthodox Jews, from pursuing the visual arts by the Ten Commandments—"Thou shall not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness of anything that is in the heaven above or that is in the water under the earth."

Rabbi Hertz's commentary on this commandment states: "This verse forbids the worship of the One God in the wrong way. Judaism alone, from the very beginning taught that God was a Spirit; and made it an unpardonable sin to worship God under any external form that human hands can fashion. No doubt this law hindered the free development of plastic arts…"

Reading this made me think of my maternal grandfather. I have one photograph of him, his passport photo. Except for that one time, he would not allow his picture to be taken—at least not knowingly. My Aunt Hilda told me that growing up in the Bronx, they lived in a building with two statues at the front. My grandfather, she said, scratched a mark in each of them. If he would see any kind of statue in his children's homes, for example, a lamp base, he would break a piece off so that it would have a "*moom*"—an imperfection.

And yet, the Torah itself presents a contradiction. Just a few chapters after the second commandment is found in Exodus, we are introduced to Bezalel. "Bezalel" means "standing in the shadow of God." According to Exodus 31:1-11, God gave Bezalel the intelligence, wisdom and skill "to create marvelous articles." He became the architect and sculptor of God's holy dwelling, the *mishkan*, as well as the designer of the holy garments for the *kohanim* who served in the *mishkan*.

For most of our history, this apparent contradiction was resolved by limiting Jewish artists to the creation of ritual objects, for the purpose of *hiddur mitzvah*—the beautification of the commandments. This was not art for art's sake.

The foregoing, however, does not explain the absence of secular literature by Jewish authors until very recent times. This absence is probably due to the prevailing belief that our time should be spent exclusively on religious study and learning. Any writing should be limited to commentary on our holy books. The "people of the book" should not create secular books. That is a waste of valuable time.

Artists play an extraordinary role in our lives, which are enhanced by their creative output. I came upon this quote by Rabbi Hertz in his commentary on the Torah:

"In all true art, there is a vital underlying *thought*, and artists have accordingly been among the great thinkers of mankind. An eminent painter of the nineteenth century has well expressed it:

'My intention has not been so much to paint pictures that will charm the eye as to suggest great thoughts that will appeal to the imagination and the heart, and kindle all that is best and noblest in humanity. I even think that, in the future, art may yet speak, as great poetry itself, with the solemn and majestic ring in which the Hebrew prophets spoke to the Jew of old, demanding noble aspirations, condemning in the most trenchant manner private vices, and warning us in deep tones against lapses from morals and duties'."

Jews have come late to creating art. We have also been slow to appreciate the work that has been created. The women who wrote for this Journal are experimenting and innovating. I hope that you, the audience, will take the time to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Editor's Introduction

We welcome this opportunity to showcase a variety of Orthodox Jewish female artists. In our modern age, sociological and economic factors have increased the available time and opportunities for women, including Orthodox women, to pursue their artistic talents.

The motive of *Hiddur Mitzvah* is very strong for many of the artists, who produce spectacular pieces of work in textiles, metalwork, and book arts. But much of the art that is produced by Orthodox Jewish women can also be seen as an exploration of Jewish identity for the artists—as women, as Jews, and as members of the Orthodox community—and of how the multiple identities may complement and conflict with one another. Many female Jewish artists today are inspired by their own personal histories and those of their families, and relate specifically to the Holocaust or to other events in Jewish history, as well as to Biblical and Talmudic stories, personalities and teachings.

But art is not only affirmation. There is a radical nature to artistic endeavor. Art can be iconoclastic, can serve as a challenge to the *status quo*, and provide new ways of viewing the world. Many female Jewish artists today work and create in order to explore tensions and conflicts within Jewish life, to make us look at things differently or take an unconventional approach to established facts or concepts. While this can be unsettling and cause us to feel uncomfortable at times, such art is particularly valuable in giving us novel ways of understanding the role of women in Orthodox society today.

As heirs to the women who made items for the *Mishkan*, we can see the strong connection between Art and spirituality. Art is one way of approaching God, one

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Truth is Not Stranger Than Fiction

By Naomi Ragen

When I started out wanting to be a writer, my plan was to show all the beauty of religious life as I had experienced and understood it. If, at that time, anyone would have described to me the books that I was destined to write, books in which religious men beat their religious wives; books in which rabbis' wives are raped and hide their shame; books in which communities encourage individuals to sacrifice their own well-being to maintain the fiction that all is right and perfect in our religious world, I would have been shocked.

There was even a time when I thought that, as an Orthodox Jew, I should avoid depicting fictional situations in which telling the truth would make the Jewish community look bad. For example, at the end of my first book "Jephte's Daughter," a triumverate of rabbinical judges grants Batsheva Halevi her divorce. If I had been as committed to the truth as I now believe I should have been, I would have written that ending very differently. Mrs Halevi Harshen would never have been given that *get*. She would have been blackmailed, extorted and abused as she struggled through the system, and she probably would have been too old to have children by the time she married David. However, I felt that the disgraceful state of the Jewish *get* in the Orthodox community is a *hillul hashem* (a desecration of God's name) and by depicting it, I would cause *halakha* to appear cruel in the eyes of the world, both Jewish and non-Jewish. For that reason, I had Batsheva receive her divorce, in what can only be described as fantasy fiction.

> "...exposure is the only way to break the wall of silence..."

I compromised the truth in "Jephte's Daughter," because I mistakenly believed it to be my religious obligation. I was influenced by the view that it is a desecration of God's name to expose any evil committed by religious Jews. It took me a while to fully understand how destructive this belief is, and how it destroys our ability to change anything for the better. I now believe that the act itself is the *hillul hashem*, not its exposure, however embarrassing, and that exposure is the only way to break the wall of silence and bring about a more decent and just Orthodox society.

I did not come to this conclusion without a struggle. I began my career as a writer of fiction with a story that was very close to my heart. My neighbor in Ma'alot Daphna, a young, beautiful *haredi* woman, took her little girl to the top of a hotel in Tel Aviv and jumped, killing them both. Hers had been a *shidduch*, an arranged marriage. Her husband was known to be an *illui* (an extraordinary Torah scholar). Only her closest friends and her psychologist knew that he was also an abusive spouse and father Pregnant with her second child, my neighbor felt she only had one way out to protect her children from her husband: to kill them along with herself. Because of the shame, her family had refused to help, as did the community. When I heard people say that she was crazy, everything inside me suddenly crystallized. I knew that I had to write a book about how a perfectly sane, lovely, intelligent, deeply religious woman was driven to the edge by the society around her. I wanted to defend her, to rewrite the unhappy ending of her life. I wanted, most of all, to tell the truth about what happened to her.

When "Jephte's Daughter" was published, people told me that it was like a bomb had hit the Jewish world. I was so naïve. I had thought that all my religious friends would hoist me up and put a laurel on my head. I was soon disabused of that notion. I gave a copy of the book to a very close friend, a fellow rebel and talented student of literature who had been brought up in an extremely Orthodox family in Jerusalem. I gave it to her in the hope of hearing gushing praise, which is basically the job of writers' friends. Instead what I received was a rather cold, almost angry rebuff.

"You weren't fair," she complained. I took her seriously. I was shocked at her criticism, and I searched my conscience. I began to think that perhaps my friend was right. Perhaps, despite all my attempts to "clean it up", "Jephte's Daughter" was not the right story to tell. It was too shocking, too tragic, too atypical.

In the decade since I engaged in all that soul-searching, I have become the lodestone for an outpouring of letters and phone calls from abused religious women. I have come to understand that my friend was wrong and that I was right. Batsheva Halevi's case was not a rare one. It was a story that had to be told. My only crime was being the first religious woman naive enough to publish such a story and not worry about breaking the taboo that condemns religious women to suffer in silence to maintain their social positions.

"Jephte's Daughter" was the little snowball that turned into an avalanche. In my opinion, only good has come from it. We can now all admit that that there are Talmud scholars who beat their wives. We can admit we need shelters for abused religious women, and guidelines for rabbis about how to handle this abuse. We can stop pretending that it does not happen in the Orthodox world.

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About a year after my first book was published and still smarting from the criticism, I came across an article in the Israeli newspaper "Maariv" in which a young *haredi* mother of six described her adulterous affair with a neighbor, an equally ultra-Orthodox married man. The facts of this particular story did not interest me as much as the ideas and the unanswered questions evoked. How was it that a girl brought up in a strict *haredi* family in the heart of Jerusalem found herself in such a situation? How was it that a deeply religious woman gave into her human desires and frailties in such a way and found so much joy? While I personally have never had much sympathy for women or men who cheat on their spouses, I could not help but feel compassion for this woman because of the horror of her public humiliation, and the injustice of how she was treated in comparison to the married man involved. It brought to mind the Biblical description of the *sotah*, the married woman suspected of adultery, who must undergo a biblically mandated public ordeal, whether or not she is guilty.

There was a much louder outcry against "Sotah" than against my first book. The "Jewish Observer," the official organ of Agudat Israel, became involved, impugning all kinds of evil motives to my work. It was at this point that I began to understand the reality of the situation. It was not the truth or falsity of what I was writing that was at issue, but rather that I had the *chutzpah* to address these subjects at all. Novels about religious life were meant to promote the fantasy that everyone in the religious world was a *tzadik* or a *tzadik*'s wife. So, in my third book, I finally stopped caring about what people would say. I finally decided just to tell the truth and let people deal with it.

In "The Sacrifice of Tamar," I describe a society built on the premise of denial. I believe that this idea of "what's not nice we don't show" began, as many social rules begin, with the good of the community at heart. You do not need to look very far back to see in the lives of our grandparents in the European *shtetl*, or in those huge slum dwellings where families shared apartments on the Lower East Side, why people wished to present a good face to the world. My mother-in-law told me that in Europe we were so poor, all we had was our self respect. And so we patched worn clothes and bleached them until they glistened white. We tried to hide our poverty in order to keep our dignity. And I can understand, too, the stance of some Holocaust survivors who choose to bury their past. There is nobility in the desire to spare loved ones; to preserve their self-respect by refusing to dwell on crimes committed against them, crimes born in the filthy imagination of beastly men; to hide the past in order to prevent it from tainting the present.

However, today, it is really necessary for us to expose and face unpleasant truths about ourselves as a society. I do not believe that God put us here on earth to pretend that all is perfect. If you believe in the Torah, which I do with all my heart, you must believe that it was written by God. And the Torah, among other things, is also a book of history - the collective history of our people- with all the sadness, the sins, the triumphs, and the failures. Even Moshe *Rabbenu*, who was probably the most godly man who ever lived, was not spared in that history. Despite all his good deeds, God does not leave out Moshe's failings. From this I learn, that the only way we can move toward godliness is to see the truth with all its complexities and even sordidness, and to try to make a change for the better.

"I do not believe God put us on earth to pretend that all is perfect."

I write as an Orthodox Jewish woman, who loves God and his gift to humankind, the Torah of Israel. I write because I am committed to the principles of Jewish law as outlined in the written Torah and its oral counterpart, the Mishnah and Talmud. I write in tribute to my teachers who gave me a deep knowledge and understanding of our Torah and Prophets, but most of all, who taught me that morality and social justice are at the heart of our religious beliefs. Without them, our service to God is meaningless.

"Be thou just because he is just: be thou compassionate because he is compassionate."

Fairness, compassion, justice, care for the weak, protection for the oppressed, these were the lessons which nurtured me. Jewish law demands social awareness to bring social equality. It is a law that demands that we all raise our voice to cry out for the voiceless, and for those who cry out against their oppressors and find no listening ear.

There are many people in the religious community who would dearly love to short circuit my word processor. I keep going, despite the constant criticism, the accusations of making money by exploiting the religious community and the accusations of airing dirty laundry in public, because I believe that we are not only the sum total of bitter realities, but also the yearning dreams of our hearts and minds to forge new lives, new hope, and new endings. In dreams begin the blueprint for our society and our individual lives, and possibilities limited only by our imagination and our courage. I keep going because as a religious Jew, it is my obligation.

***Naomi Ragen** is an American-born novelist and playwright who has lived in Jerusalem since 1971. This piece draws on the address that she gave on receiving the Leah Ain Globe award from* Mevoi Satum *in 2005.*

Editor's Introduction

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way of "*Avodat Hashem*". With the wonderful flowering of women's learning, and the opening of opportunities for women to study texts independently and reach intellectual heights of Jewish scholarship, we must not forget our emotional and spiritual needs and strengths.

In "*Orot Hakodesh*", Rav Kook wrote: "Each individual must know that he has been called upon to serve (God) according to his own unique understanding and feeling, based on the root of his soul, and that he will find the treasure of his life in this world which embraces innumerable worlds". More specifically, he wrote that, "Someone with a lyrical and poetical soul must understand his nature, his special yearnings and desires, the ways of his soul, and the special spiritual life like air for breathing". Thus, for many people, the Arts can play a major role in their connection to God. Art enables us all to appreciate God's creation, and one way that we can all seek to achieve our potential of being "*betzelem Elokim*" is to create and be creative in our lives. This is a challenge for Orthodox Jewish women, as we craft our lives and those of our families, institutions and communities.

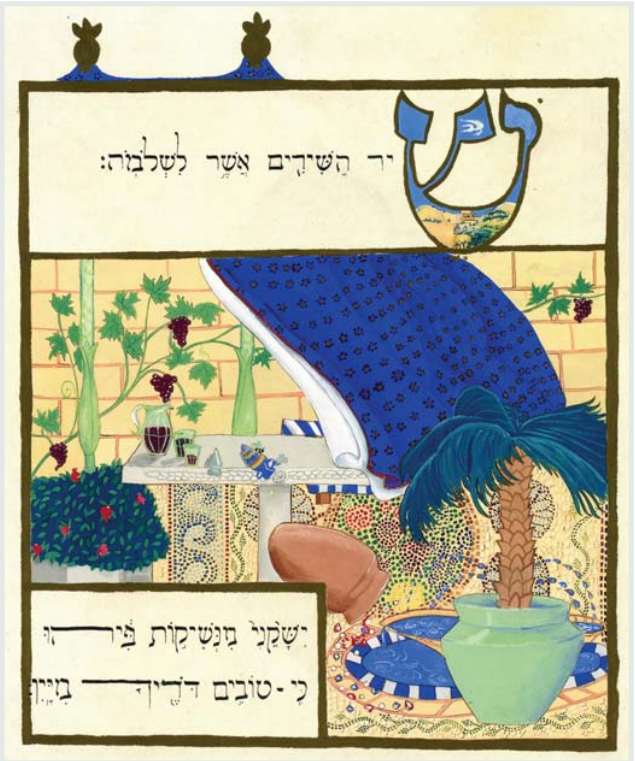
Manuscript Illumination: Bringing Light to the Page

An Interview with Debra Band

By Jennifer Stern Breger

Q: Your volume of *Shir Hashirim*, "The Song of Songs: The Honeybee in the Garden", was published in a popular edition by the Jewish Publication Society last year. A traveling exhibit of the original artwork is presently touring museums in North America. When did you start your work with Judaic illumination and calligraphy?

A: I've been fascinated by manuscript illumination since I was a child and began to study the European schools of the art during college in preparation for what I thought would be a career in medieval Jewish history and art history. The way I actually became involved in doing Hebrew manuscripts was a pretty silly domestic story. When I was pregnant with my elder son, somewhat before the days of PCs and easy computer typesetting, I used Hebrew press-on-letters to prepare his birth announcement, and was thoroughly ashamed of myself for resorting to such an artifice. So, while pregnant with my second child, I began to study Hebrew calligraphy—just so that I could do his birth announcement (I had them ready for babies of both genders, just waiting to fill in the date and weight). Everything clicked at once; I discovered papercutting at the same time, picked up paintbrushes after a 10-year hiatus and soon afterward, my first pieces were on exhibit; shortly after that, I began to take commissions for *ketubbot* and other works.



Debra Band, Opening of Shir Hashirim
"The Song of Songs of Solomon:
May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth
For your love is better than wine"

Q: Were any members of your family artists? Do you ever think that this is the first generation of traditional Jewish women who are able to develop their artistic talents professionally?

A: My mother's mother, with whom I had a very special relationship, always prided herself on having taken all the school prizes in drawing as a girl in Liverpool. However, there's never been a professional artist *per se* in my family, and the women never worked outside the home with the exception of my grandmother's career as a full-time *rebbetzin*. I think that the arts are one of many fields in which women, and particularly family-oriented traditional Jewish women, have begun to flourish only recently.

Q: Did you ever contemplate a career in a different area of artistic endeavor?

A: From earliest childhood, I wanted to be either (or simultaneously) a book illustrator or a veterinarian. I've ended up illustrating, surrounded by my menagerie. Although I obviously love many arts, I've always focused on the visual interpretation of text.

Q: Did something in your Jewish background lead you to this area of artistic expression?

A: Hebrew manuscript illumination rings every bell for me. I'm from a 250-year line of orthodox rabbis in Britain and before that, Russia; the family traces back to the Berditchever Rav, and Jewish learning has always been the central family value. I read and wrote Hebrew before learning to read and write English in first grade. Although I had a pretty normal American upbringing, life revolved around the Jewish year and life-cycle. I began to study Jewish history in college, then married into a family of distinguished Hebrew language scholars. This was a completely natural evolution for me – the Jewish world is my culture, and that's simply what I work with.

Q: Do you think there is anything particular to your being a woman (or a Jewish woman in particular) that has led you to certain subjects, styles, or techniques?

A: For the most part, I don't think so. Hebrew manuscript illumination has been more the domain of men than of women and, even now, the most celebrated manuscript artists tend to be men. My focus on the woman's voice in *Shir Hashirim* has had more to do with the fact that most of the poems are in a woman's voice rather than any deliberate intent to emphasize a feminist aspect of the poetry. I tend to focus more on what I feel the text is actually saying—and the way centuries of scholars have regarded it—than on finding a particular feminine character.

Q: Have you found yourself inspired by particular artists, Jewish or non-Jewish, or by particular artistic schools and styles? Do you see yourself in the tradition of medieval book illumination?

A: For years, I've joked about living primarily in the 15th century. There are certainly many artists who have been remarkable inspirations for me. First and foremost, the 15th century Flemish painter, Van Eyck, has been a formative influence, not only because of his glorious paint surfaces and detail work, but particularly because of his extraordinary skill at capturing sophisticated religious messages in his work in so utterly natural a manner. Many other artists have been great

influences in other aspects of the work, and I certainly do see myself as being part of a venerable and ancient tradition of book illumination. I also can't omit mention of David Moss, to whom every current manuscript artist owes a profound debt because of his resuscitation of Hebrew manuscript painting in the twentieth century.

Q: What led you to illuminate and present *Shir Hashirim*?

A: Read the poetry and you have the first reason; it is glorious verse, and incredibly visual. Moreover, I'd already been working with passages from *Shir Hashirim* for years in *ketubbot* and other pieces of artwork, and grew intrigued with the notion of a consistent exploration of the poems. The challenge of finding a way to reconcile the literal and allegorical readings of the poetry became something of an obsession. I began the project, however, for my own indulgence, and had no thought of showing it to anyone other than personal friends, much less publishing it. It was only when I was finishing the work that I found people telling me that it needed to be published.

Q: What sources have you found most useful in your illustrations for *Shir Hashirim*?

A: I generally begin any large project by studying the basic text, then rabbinic *midrashim* and commentaries as well as secular academic biblical scholarship. Beyond that, for this book, *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* became the essential source. I also made a great deal of use of Israeli (and other) archeology for this book, to help develop an image of Second-Temple period material culture, and introduce imagery from across the spectrum of Jewish history. But I tend to pull all kinds of things into the work.

Debra Band, Illuminated page to illustrate Chapter 2:8-11 beginning:
The voice of my beloved, here he comes, skipping in the mountains, jumping in the hills. My beloved is like a deer or young gazelle He stands behind our wall, gazing through the window, peeking through the lattice.

Q: What are the contemporary influences on your work? Do science and technology and advances in these areas play a part?

A: I'm so glad you asked this question. I live more among scientists (my husband is an astrophysicist) than among artists. In the *Shir Hashirim* volume, I used modern physics and astronomy to convey certain aspects of the book, including the way that these poems have been read and loved across millennia of Jews. In the Psalms book that I'm working on presently, the cosmos and dawn are running themes in the illuminations, and I'm using a tremendous amount of astronomical imagery published by NASA.

Q: In your work, do you find that you relate to the Hebrew letters themselves as well as to the texts?

A: Of course, I relate to the letters as the visual embodiment of the Hebrew language and Jewish texts. Making beautiful Hebrew letters is not only a skill but, like almost all my work, it is part of my expression of my Jewishness. I do not, however, regard letters mystically. For me, letters are an evolving part of our history; that's where my emotional attachment to them lies.

Q: Can you briefly explain the title of your Song of Songs, "the Honeybee in the Garden"?

A: First, I've framed the poems as a series of daydreams of a pair of lovers within a walled garden, and of course bees belong in gardens. But beyond that, there's a little play on words in the subtitle. My Hebrew name, *Devorah*, means, of course, "honeybee"—hence, "honeybee in the garden." And then, there's a tiny honeybee hovering on each illuminated page.

Q:Each image in your *Shir Hashirim* comes not only with Hebrew text and translation (indeed with two translations), but also with an explanation of your choice of design based on commentaries. This is fascinating, but can the illuminations be understood without the interpretative apparatus?

A: Yes and no. The narrative aspect of each image can be immediately apprehended, and the emotional dimension is accessible without the commentary. The immediate accessibility of the image is essential, if only because without it there's no reason for the viewer to keep looking. However, following Van Eyck's lead, I am deeply committed to the communication of

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Interview with Debra Band ...continued from page 5

complex abstract ideas through the visual symbolism. If there are caper branches in a painting, there is a substantive reason for them. Since I often find my symbolic vocabulary in midrashic or biblical literature that is quite obscure nowadays, I am obliged to explain myself to the audience by means of the written commentary. Without the commentary, I can't expect the audience to catch the nuance of the image. However, if someone has seen those caper branches in my work before and know what they signify, the written commentary is much less necessary. That is a wonderful phenomenon! One of my overarching goals in my work is to broaden the contemporary Jewish visual vocabulary, so the broader the reader's sensitivity and knowledge, the less my commentary is needed.

Q: How have your professional life and your creation of *ketubbot* and book illuminations affected your own feelings about Judaism, Jewish tradition, beliefs and observance?

A: My work is a remarkably important part of my overall Jewish life. For example, I take the responsibility of working with often highly-assimilated couples very seriously. There are many instances where my design-related discussions, quite apart from the final *ketubbah* itself, have made enough of an impact on couples that it has affected the Jewishness of their new lives together. Contributing to the community in this way has become very important to me. Beyond the community impact, my constant work with the sources— biblical texts, Byzantine-period *midrash*, medieval poetry—continually strengthens my sense of immediate involvement with the historical community of Israel. Much of my work involves putting texts that are often obscure nowadays into a form that makes them easily accessible to today's community. Recently, in the course of a single day, I was swinging between a celebrated psalm, late-Byzantine era *midrash* on that psalm and other related texts and a glorious but little-known poem of Ibn Gabirol. I don't want to sound pompous or presumptuous, but I see my life's work as being intimately tied to the continuity of diverse Jewish traditions. On a family level, the fact that Ima's studio is always filled with Hebrew books and Hebrew writing and Jewish "stuff," and Abba is often proof-reading something or other or helping me look up a Talmudic reference, has had a real impact on my now-grown sons, who have seen Jewish work permeating every aspect of our home. The Jewish identification has always been a focal point in our family, but the fact that not only my personal life, but my professional life, is built around "*hiddur mitzvah*", Jewish community matters, and Jewish learning, has certainly had an impact on all of us.

Q: Do the words of the liturgy in synagogue have a heightened meaning for you because of your engagement with visual *midrash*?

A: Undoubtedly. I am far more keenly aware of much of the subtle nuance of expression in many of the *tefillot* because of my exposure to biblical and midrashic sources. I have so many images drawn from biblical texts, from *midrash*, and from Jewish history, that I automatically associate with various aspects of the liturgy, that my appreciation is greatly enriched. In particular, the *Shir Hashirim* book and the *Tehillim* that I am currently working with have given me a far more profound sense of sacred space and sacred time, of the "covenant" between God and Israel and how thoroughly our entire intellectual and spiritual system is imbued with the concept of covenant.

> "The broader the reader's sensitivity and knowledge, the less my commentary is needed."

Q: To what extent do you feel that your work is your personal connection with the Divine, your own "*avodat Hashem*"?

A: Each Friday evening as I complete the *berakhah* over the candles, the first private prayer I add (and my husband and sons think the length of time I take is quite hilarious) is a thanks to God for my work. Shabbat morning services are a major marker of the week, and preparing my house for Shabbat is a truly spiritual activity, but my work is unquestionably my most essential connection to my people, and my most profound expression of awe of God.

Q: Are you planning on illustrating other Biblical texts?

A: I've got at least twenty years of projects stacked up, apart from commissions, and am also preparing a two volume limited edition facsimile of the original artwork of my *Shir Hashirim* volume. At present, I'm working on illuminations of a collection of *Tehillim*, entitled "I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms," which the Jewish Publication Society plans to publish in spring of '07. As soon as that is completed, all being well, this summer, I begin a long-planned work illuminating poetry of Yehudah Halevi, collaborating with the wonderful scholar, Raymond Scheindlin, of the Jewish Theological Seminary. I had begun the literary research for a book on *Kohelet*, (Ecclesiastes) which was then relegated to the back burner by the Psalms and Halevi projects, but I'm aching to get back to it. I'm also interested in doing Esther and Ruth, and a book of women's prayers would be a wonderful project…the list goes on.

Debra Band, Papercut
introducing second chapter of Song of Songs
The work includes seven illuminated papercuts, as divisions between chapters.

Crossing a Threshold

By Anat Zuria

25 YEARS AGO

I was not born Orthodox but my quest for a Jewish identity led me there. As a young woman, discovering her path, I lingered a great deal before passing through the gates of Orthodoxy: I worried that crossing this threshold would mean relinquishing my independence. In other words, I assumed there to be an inherent contradiction between an Orthodox existence and a feminist one. At an early age, I had already developed a feminist consciousness, in part, because I was a third-generation feminist; both my grandmothers had fought for women's economic and intellectual independence and had been fortunate enough to live their own lives as educated and economically independent women.

Still contemplating whether or not to join the Orthodox community, I naturally asked questions that seemed to me essential. One of the questions I asked was whether or not Orthodox Judaism recognized individual female creativity. I searched for a stream in Orthodoxy that would recognize the need for such creativity, and I believed I had found it in Modern Israeli Orthodoxy. Here was a sub-stream that apparently grappled with the troubling questions that modernity poses, and it inspired in me the hope that I would find a way to combine my two identities.

15 YEARS LATER

After I crossed the threshold and began to live a religious (Orthodox) lifestyle, suddenly, "forbidden questions" began to haunt my world. The nature of these questions was elusive. They were concealed like a "forbidden city" far from the consciousness of Orthodoxy and Modern Orthodoxy, and buried beneath open official cultural and religious debates. The first forbidden questions which I came up against related to the laws of family purity that, at the time, were considered an absolute taboo.

I have to admit that nothing in my past had prepared me for entering the *halakhic* world of family purity. My reproductive system had turned into a mystical kingdom, ruled by a language that forced me to oscillate between states of impurity and purity. Although from the outset, I did not identify with the dichotomy that this situation forced on me, it took a long time before I dared to challenge rabbinic decisions by asking questions that would lead me first, to study, and later, to appeal rabbinic decision-making on the subject of family purity. In my view, such decision-making represents a reality in which male religious hegemony dominates female intimacy in the name of God.

But, initially, my reaction was denial. As a young religious artist, I turned away from the forbidden religious questions that haunted me, because I was not ready to confront my Judaism.

> "I decided to create critical and questioning religious cinema."

To a certain extent, I lived in an ongoing attempt to preserve my "wholeness" as an Orthodox Jewish woman, although it was difficult to uphold the promise of a synthesis between identities. I remember my artistic desire to paint my experiences in the *mikvah*. That desire quickly dissipated and I didn't even create one sketch. Later, I began to write stories that I kept in a secret place, hiding them, even in my own home.

It was a long time before I decided to embark on a confrontation, that is, to create critical and questioning religious cinema. I knew that, from the moment that I would try to present my questions, I would be taking a social risk.

Indeed, when I began to make documentary films, many people told me that even though they disagree with the *halakha* and have lost faith in much of the spiritual moral compass of rabbinic leadership, they still choose silence. Many were reticent; few were prepared to share their experience; even when they became characters on the screen, we still concealed the full intensity of their criticism. My films represent the tension between the revealed and the hidden. Much of what is *not* revealed is a function of a societal and religious reality that does not accept criticism.

In the first year after my film entered cultural and social debate, I was the target of strong criticism from the Orthodox world. My films were accused of one-sidedness, tendentiousness, hatred of Judaism, ignorance of *halakha*, lack of credibility and more. '*Tehora*' for example, became one of the most controversial films in Jewish communities, worldwide. Nevertheless, by the second year after the release of both '*Tehora*' and '*Mekudeshet*', the first hostile wave subsided, to be replaced by the emergence of serious conversation on subjects that were previously taboo.

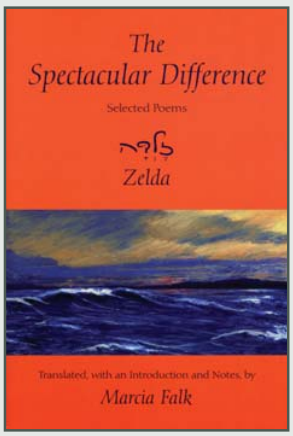
Unfortunately, I have to note that today the reality in Israel is only becoming more extreme. The Zionist Orthodoxy, with which I previously identified, has abandoned the path of synthesis. Modern Orthodoxy faces a dilemma as to whether to continue to be a side branch in an Orthodox society that is returning to extreme Messianic Hassidic models. Over the years that I have been a filmmaker, I have witnessed a religious movement toward extremism, alongside brave attempts to establish an independent female religious identity; attempts that are still at the boundary of the acceptable in religious society.

I continue to dream about a path of synthesis, and about the development of an independent Jewish female creativity, for the sake of a Jewish future of artistic and spiritual abundance.

***Anat Zuria** is a filmmaker who lives in Jerusalem. Her films,* Tehora *and* Mekudeshet, *have both won international prizes.*

SERAH BAT ASHER

According to the Midrash, Serah bat Asher was the first female musician in our history. It was Serah who, in music and song, told her grandfather Jacob that Joseph was still alive.



Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky (1914-1984) was known to her readers simply as Zelda. Born in the Ukraine, a direct descendent of the Lubavitch rabbinical family, she moved to Jerusalem in 1926. As a teacher in a religious elementary school in Jerusalem, she taught Amos Oz in second grade. Her first book of poetry was published in 1967, and was followed by five more. All were received with great acclaim by both religious and secular readers, and Zelda won the prestigious Bialik and Brenner prizes in Israel. Her poetry draws on biblical, talmudic, midrashic, kabbalistic and hasidic sources, but has a distinctly modern sensibility. A selection of her poems have been masterfully translated by Marcia Falk in "The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems of Zelda" published by Hebrew Union College (2005). The following poems are taken from that book.

לכל איש יש שם

EACH OF US HAS A NAME

לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Each of us has a name
שֶׁנָּתַן לוֹ אֱלֹהִים	given by God
וְנָתְנוּ לוֹ אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ	and given by our parents
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Each of us has a name
שֶׁנָּתְנוּ לוֹ קוֹמָתוֹ וְאַפֶּן חִיּוּכוֹ	given by our stature and our smile
וְנָתַן לוֹ הָאָרִיג	and given by what we wear
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Each of us has a name
שֶׁנָּתְנוּ לוֹ הֶהָרִים	given by the mountains
וְנָתְנוּ לוֹ כְּתָלָיו	and given by our walls
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Each of us has a name
שֶׁנָּתְנוּ לוֹ הַמַּזָּלוֹת	given by the stars
וְנָתְנוּ לוֹ שְׁכֵנָיו	and given by our neighbors
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Each of us has a name
שֶׁנָּתְנוּ לוֹ חֲטָאָיו	given by our sins
וְנָתְנָה לוֹ כְּמִיהָתוֹ	and given by our longing
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Each of us has a name
שֶׁנָּתְנוּ לוֹ שׂוֹנְאָיו	given by our enemies
וְנָתְנָה לוֹ אַהֲבָתוֹ	and given by our love
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Each of us has a name
שֶׁנָּתְנוּ לוֹ חַגָּיו	given by our celebrations
וְנָתְנָה לוֹ מְלַאכְתּוֹ	and given by our work
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Each of us has a name
שֶׁנָּתְנוּ לוֹ תְּקוּפוֹת הַשָּׁנָה	given by the seasons
וְנָתַן לוֹ עִוְרוֹנוֹ	and given by our blindness
לְכָל אִישׁ יֵשׁ שֵׁם	Each of us has a name
שֶׁנָּתַן לוֹ הַיָּם	given by the sea
וְנָתַן לוֹ	and given by
מוֹתוֹ.	our death.

פנאי

הָיָה לָנוּ אוֹצָר סָמוּי שֶׁל פְּנַאי
עָדִין כַּאֲוִיר הַבֹּקֶר,
פְּנַאי שֶׁל סִפּוּרִים, דְּמָעוֹת, נְשִׁיקוֹת
וְחַגִּים.
פְּנַאי שֶׁל אִמָּא, סַבְתָּא, וְהַדּוֹדוֹת
יוֹשְׁבוֹת בְּנַחַת בְּסִירָה
שֶׁל זִיו,
שָׁטוֹת אַט־אַט
בְּדוּגִית הַשָּׁלוֹם
עִם הָרֵחַ וְעִם הַמַּזָּלוֹת.

LEISURE

We had a hidden treasure of leisure
delicate as morning air,
leisure of stories, kisses, tears,
leisure of holidays.
Leisure of mama, grandma, and the aunts
gliding in a boat of light,
slowly floating
in the smaIl boat of peace
with the moon and the heavenly bodies.

The Arts and the Prophetess Miriam

By Faye Kellerman

Seasons are tricky business in the Jewish calendar. Traditionally, our spiritual year begins in autumn in the month of *Tishrei*, but a case can also be made that the month of *Nissan* is the first month of the calendar. Spring has always represented birth and rebirth. Nowhere is this rebirth more apparent than during the holiday of Passover when God liberated the Hebrews from their bondage in Egypt and turned a people into a nation.

For me, it is impossible to imagine spring without Passover. Though I have never felt that kashering a house for Pesach was a holy event, I can say that after years of maniacal cleaning, I find some innate satisfaction in the job. But of course, Passover really doesn't begin until *Seder* time. We assiduously follow the *Haggadah*'s order of service, but it is the round table discussions from which I draw the most meaning. As a person who makes her living by telling stories, the interpretations of the text gets my creative juices flowing.

The women of the bible have dozens of didactic attributes that teach us specific lessons. For example, from Sarah, we learn about kindness and the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*, how to welcome guests. From Rebecca, we are taught a mother's sacrifice for the good of a nation. When she and Jacob use guile to ensure Isaac's blessing, Rebecca is forced to send her beloved son into exile in order to escape Esau's wrath. According to the Midrash, Rachel and Leah illustrate the ultimate in sisterly love. Jacob had wanted to marry Rachel, but he was sure that his father-in-law was going to trick him into marrying Leah. Since veils were opaque in biblical days, Jacob had taught Rachel specific hand signals so that he could identify her at the altar. Rachel loved Jacob, but she abhorred the thought of embarrassing her older sister. With self-sacrifice, she taught her sister the secret hand signals.

There is much discourse about the mothers of the bible, yet there is a great deal to learn from biblical women beyond the Matriarchs. I would like to take a few sentences to address the primary woman of the Exodus, the prophetess Miriam.

The beginning of the book of Exodus explains how the Jews in Egypt went from temporary sojourners to slaves. Several paragraphs later, the *Chumash* segues into the birth of Moses, God's emissary in the Jewish redemption. Moses had help in his mission from his two siblings, Aaron and Miriam. His brother's help was evident during Moses' dealings with Pharaoh, but his sister's aid began even before Moses was born.

When Pharaoh issued his evil decrees, culminating in the murder of all Jewish male babies, the Midrash says that it was the Jewish women, specifically Miriam, a little, twelve-year-old *yenta*, who talked her parents into reuniting sexually. This action produced Moses, a child born with light radiating from his soul. Though it has been said that Moses never cried or fussed, his Godly essence lit up the family domicile, attracting the attention of the Egyptians during the dark, pre-electrical nights. These spiritual beams eventually became dangerous to his family's existence.

Eventually, it became necessary to cast the baby in a homemade ark upon the waters of the Nile to keep his existence a secret. Again, it was Miriam who ensured Moses' survival, waiting until the Egyptian princess found him. Then the young girl, imbued with amazing verve, took it a step farther by securing a wet nurse for her baby brother – their mother, Yocheved.

I have always found that I could relate to Miriam, starting with the fact that her name is part of my Hebrew name. As a fellow *yenta*, I admire her plucky spirit, her willingness to stick her neck out and her powers of persuasion. She was a multi-faceted woman: a devoted wife, daughter and sister, as well as a prophetess. It was due to her merit that the children of Israel were given water in the desert. Any one of those aforementioned attributes provides material sufficient for a thesis, but there is another aspect of Miriam that is often overlooked.

In Miriam, we have our first Jewish female of the arts.

When the Jews crossed the Red Sea, the men sang *Shirat Hayam* - a long and beautiful poem about God's abundance of kindness and mercy. This ode of praise is a specific type of poem, a spontaneous outburst of emotion from the heart. It was the essence of creativity because it was not rewritten nor was it edited. No forethought or deliberation interrupted the direct connection between what was felt and what was spoken or sung.

So what were the women doing while the men were singing? The biblical text says explicitly that Miriam picked up her tambourine and led the women in dancing. This was not a choreographed, step-by-step, tap dance routine, but spontaneous movement of joy, much like the dancing done by King David upon receiving the ark of the holy covenant. Nor was Miriam content to take a physical, but silent role in her praise of God. She sang her own *Shirah*, her own heartfelt ode to the marvels of *Hashem*.

As far as I can tell, Miriam was the first woman in the *Chumash* itself to communicate with God via song and dance. I find this amazing, and I find it inspirational. Though we are known as the People of the Book, we are also very much the People of the Heart.

I find that writing a novel is a wonderful combination between left and right brain, between conscious thought and creativity. Often language flows directly from my brain to my hands without my eyes seeing words. Essentially I could write blindfolded. I'm not saying that sight is not important. The feedback that comes from reading my words is ever so important in the editing process, but of little consequence when I first put thought to page. Writing a crime fiction novel depends on total integration of the brain. It includes logic, ingenuity, and more than a little faith. I say that because when penning mysteries, I often paint myself into corners. But experience, inventiveness and relaxation have taught me not to worry. After twenty years, I now feel comfortable letting ideas come to me rather than consciously think about *getting* the proper ideas.

I see my belief in Judaism much the same way I view the process of writing. It is a beautiful melding of art (ideas), law (grammar, sentence structure and syntax) and faith (the ability to incorporate art and law to create original thought). And no person exemplifies this better than the prophetess Miriam. She was a role model in her time and continues to be a role model for all future generations.

With more than 20 million books in print, ***Faye Kellerman*** *is the author of eighteen novels including the Peter and Rena Decker detective series. She and her husband Jonathan Kellerman live in Los Angeles and New Mexico.*

Art Should Make You Think

By Na'ama Batya Lewin

I was describing my new video/film to a man in the Orthodox community. I told him that I was working on a piece about *kashrut*—keeping kosher—in America. After I described some of the segments that I had already filmed, the people that I had interviewed and what I still planned to do, he replied with a plea that I have heard many times before: "I hope you are making a positive film about keeping kosher. It should look good. Don't make it look too difficult to keep kosher, or the people who see your film won't want to do it themselves."

I am an observant Jewish woman, a photographer, and a video artist. My artwork is often about religious observance and the roles that women play. My photographs reflect my own experiences: what I do, what I know, what I feel. Consequently, I find that members of the Jewish community who know me take it for granted that I will engage in Jewish public relations in my art. They expect me to show religion only in a positive light. Since I am on the "inside," I must tell the world how beautiful and how spiritual observant Judaism is.

My films and photographs do reflect the beauty of Judaism. But my artwork is also about reality—the reality a woman faces when she chooses to follow the traditional laws of religious life in today's modern society. This reality is not always simple and spiritual. Sometimes it is complex, sometimes it is time-consuming, and sometimes it is difficult to reconcile with the expectations of today's woman.

Shpitzl (Yiddish: yarn covering worn at the hair line under a kerchief) Clothing Store, Monsey, New York
From *"Ervah: Hidden Sensuality"*
by Na'ama Batya Lewin 2001

My film, "Cycle: The Mikvah," which screened at film festivals around the country, portrayed one Orthodox woman's honest response to the monthly practice of *mikvah* (the ritual bath). The video, which combined documentary footage and artistic imagery, explained how a religious ritual that is conceptually beautiful can become burdensome in the reality of daily existence. The piece was structured around the repetition of the menstrual cycle: from the time a woman is allowed to have relations with her husband, to menstruation, to counting her "clean" days, to washing her body, to immersion in the *mikvah*, and to, once again, having relations with her husband.

Before screening the piece, I was concerned about how it would be received by the religious community. I was describing a practice so private, that mothers do not discuss it with their daughters until they are of marriageable age. Was I being heretical because I was exposing something that is usually only discussed in hushed tones?

Some responses were negative. The piece was, I must admit, "earthy." Soiled women's toiletries represented menstruation, and an undressed woman actually immersed on screen in the *mikvah*, although no nudity was shown. Some Jewish viewers questioned my dedication. They questioned my observance. How could a devout, religious, modest woman who practices the mitzvah of "*taharat hamishpacha*" have the audacity to portray it realistically—let alone create a film about its difficulties? But I also received positive and supportive reviews, especially from other modern religious women. They had experienced what I portrayed—men's lack of understanding of a woman's feelings about the *mikvah* observance.

This response inspired me. I then created a photo essay titled "*Ervah*: Hidden Sensuality" about Orthodox women's hair-covering. I photographed myself as I visited different religious Orthodox Jewish communities in New York, dressed like the women of that community. In Boro Park, I wore a *sheitel* (wig). In Monsey, I wore a *shpitzel* (the yarn head covering worn at the hairline under a kerchief—particularly in the Satmar and Vishnitz communities). In Williamsburg, I wore a hat on top of my *sheitel*. In Flatbush, I pushed my hair into a snood. And in Manhattan I donned a stylish hat on top of my long, flowing natural curls. I tried to blend in.

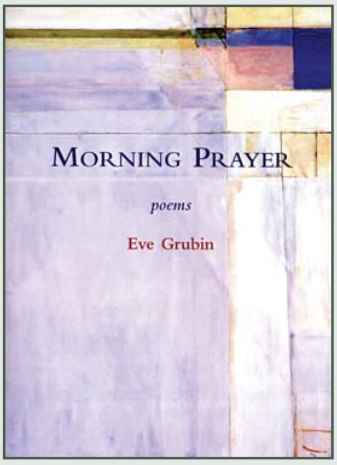
Red Wig
From "Ervah: Hidden Sensuality"
by Na'ama Batya Lewin 2001

"*Ervah*: Hidden Sensuality" was exhibited in a gallery in Washington D.C. and was shown, in part, at the 2002 JOFA conference in New York. It showed how hair-covering can display a woman's dedication to her Judaism and identify her affiliation. The irony is that a practice which is designed to preserve modesty is, in today's society, one of the most public display of religious observance and identification. Distinctive hair-covering not only identifies women in the Orthodox Jewish community, but divides them. "One of us" is readily distinguished from an "outsider" by how a woman covers her hair. The message is: "If she covers her hair differently than I do, she does not practice my style of Judaism." While I was creating the photo essay, I discovered that, in its own way, the religious community puts as much emphasis on a woman's appearance as does today's secular society.

At the exhibit, the general public viewed it as an interesting documentation of hair covering. But the curator told me that the photographs spurred a great deal of talk within the Jewish community. What most viewers wanted to know was: "Who is the artist? Is she religious? Does she cover her hair? How does she cover her hair? What are her views?" My viewers in the Jewish community needed to know who I was and where I fit in before they felt comfortable looking at, interpreting, or processing the photographs on display. Why? How much does one have to

...continued on page 21

Eve Grubin is a poet living in New York City. She is a fellow at Drisha, where she is learning part time in the Yesodot program. She teaches poetry at the New School and City College, and her poems have been published in the *American Poetry Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. She is the poetry editor at *Lyric*, and she has written for *The Forward*, *The American Jewish Congress Monthly* and *The Good Times Weekly*, and regularly writes pieces for *modestyzone.net*. The following poems come from her first book of poetry, *Morning Prayer* (Sheep Meadow Press, 2005).



YOU BREATHED IT INTO ME

I fail. Every morning shade drawn,
hair brushed, swaying, I can't

fasten to the words, Hebrew letters
breathe, young sparrows in my palm.

Yes, calm stands up in the coolness
of morning, light pushes, falls

from under the shade's edges.
A skittering stops me at each syllable. I turn,

check my hair in the mirror, the line of my skirt,
picture someone watching. I imagine being

observed by an admirer, my mind
startles from words my tongue makes

in the four minutes I give
each morning to speak to no human.

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL

Sometimes I just want to give in, become
the heroine in a great nineteenth-century novel,
an earnest and suffering young woman
who makes the decision that will ruin
the rest of her life.

Once the decision has been made
I want-in my white nightgown—
to unlatch the shutter, throw
open the window,
cry out into the rain.

If not Cathy could I at least be
Elizabeth Bennet living
on the precipice of vast disappointment,
on the edge of loneliness and family shame.
To dip just under the surface of the worst
and then be pulled out
just in time.

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL II

I am the heroine
in a novel, and there are twenty pages left.
Someone is reading the novel, holding
the numbered pages in their hands, almost finished.
Every night, in bed, they read my story
with the novel propped on their chest.
I want them to read quickly, but they read
a page a night, without
urgency, as if there is no rush
before turning off the light.

Women Artists Inspired by Torah

By Sylvia A. Herskowitz

In the mid-nineteen seventies, a few years after the Yeshiva University Museum opened, Hebrew calligraphy was on the way to becoming a serious art-form, ceramic artists and metalworkers were designing and creating modern ceremonial Judaica objects, and a small handful of fiber artists had begun to fashion Judaic textiles such as Ark curtains and Torah mantles in a contemporary idiom. It was the beginning of a genuine awakening of the creative spirit among talented Jews from all walks of life, both in America and in Israel, who responded to the emergent call for more intimate and inspired forms of Jewish expression.

Many of these early creators were women—some, already experienced artists, who had been commissioned to create "something Jewish" for the first time, and were drawn to traditional Jewish sources in search of motifs and themes. This aspect of Jewish thought is expressed well by Adin Steinsaltz as follows:

"Modern Western thought is characterized by an extensive use of abstract concepts that exist and operate within a more general abstract system. Jewish thought, on the other hand, has, with very few exceptions, done without them... It is, of course, quite impossible to manipulate complex and abstract ideas without concepts, and Jewish sources do employ them. The concepts used, however, are not abstract but rather like metaphor or a visual representation. In other words, Jewish thought uses pictorial or imagery concepts instead of abstract concepts."

Adin Steinsaltz, "The Imagery Concept in Jewish Thought," *The Strife of the Spirit,* (Aronson,1988), p.63.

The growing area of advanced post high school Judaic studies for women also emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century. Drisha opened in New York City in 1979; Nishmat opened in Israel in 1990; Ma'ayan opened in Boston in 1992. In this new and accessible learning environment, female visual artists such as photographers, painters and printmakers drew on their Torah learning to create works of art that acted as visual *midrash*. Among these artists are three women who all have had their works exhibited in the Yeshiva University Museum, of which I am director.

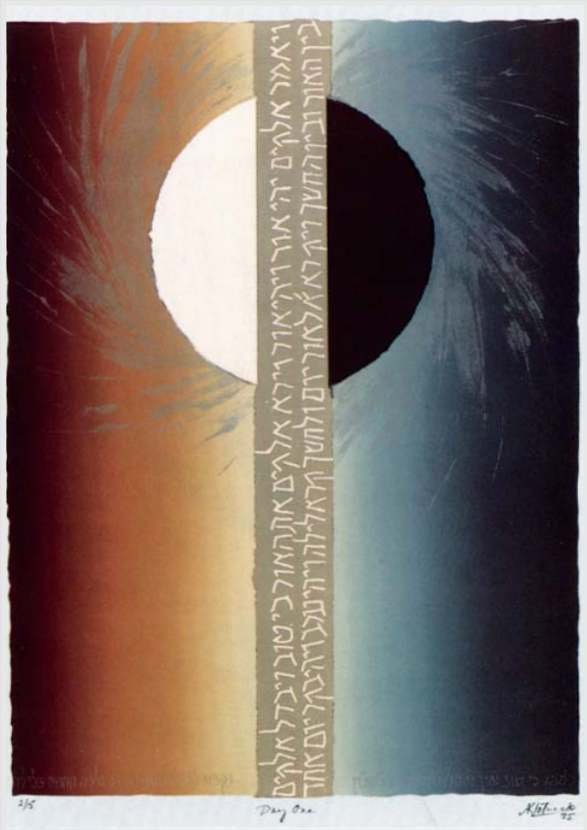
The first of these artists is photographer and printmaker, Alice Aaronson Zlotnick. She and her husband Dov, Professor Emeritus of Rabbinic Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, have recently made *aliya*, and she has relocated her studio to Jerusalem. Alice Zlotnick taught Mishnah at her synagogue, the Riverdale Jewish Center, for 25 years. Much of her inspiration comes from the Bible, the Talmud and the Midrash, as well as from her marriage of 52 years to a Talmud scholar.

In addition to many individual works, she has created two large series, both based on literary sources in the Talmud: the *Jerusalem Series* and the *Genesis Series*. The *Jerusalem Series* consists of nine works on paper, and incorporates a Talmudic expression found in Tractate *Kiddushin* 49b which conveys the reverence of the Rabbis for the beauty of Jerusalem. "Ten measures of beauty came down to earth; Jerusalem took nine, the rest of the world – one."

I have chosen to reproduce here an image of *Day One*, from *The Genesis Series*, which the artist hand-printed in an edition of fifteen over seven years. The images of this series are three dimensional constructions, employing etching techniques, rolled surface color, embossing and torn paper, and often involving printing on both sides of the artwork. The format of all the pieces was inspired by a statement in the Mishnah in Tractate *Avot:* "The world was created with ten sayings." Zlotnick makes the Hebrew text an integral part of the composition, as it "plays the role of Creator indicating what was created on each day." Every time the Bible states, "And God said," something new came into being. These words "*vayomer Elokim*" are a catalyst for Creation. This phrase actually appears in the text only nine times. Even though it does not appear before the words "In the beginning God created Heaven and Earth," Zlotnick considers that it can be implied because of the verse in *Tehillim* (Psalms 33:6) which states: "With God's speech, the Heavens were created" For Zlotnick, the Hebrew text (the word of God) becomes an integral part of her composition of *Day One* as it divides the light from the darkness.

The second of these artists is painter Janet Shafner, of New London, CT. With a B.A. in Art History from Barnard and a M.A in Studio Art with a concentration in printmaking from Connecticut College, she has an impressive and strong background in formal Art studies, and has been painting all her life. Here is how she explains her decision to concentrate on painting Jewish themes:

"In the late 1980's, after years of painting still life, landscapes and portraits, I began to be interested in how Torah could be approached through art. As I read, I was struck by how the lives of our Biblical ancestors parallel our own. Everything they experienced, we still experience: sibling jealousy, unhappy marriages, barren women, sexual obsession, murder, rape, incest, but also tender, enduring love, and ecstatic encounters with the Divine. These multi-paneled paintings allow me to juxtapose the ancient with the contemporary and bring the existential messages I find in

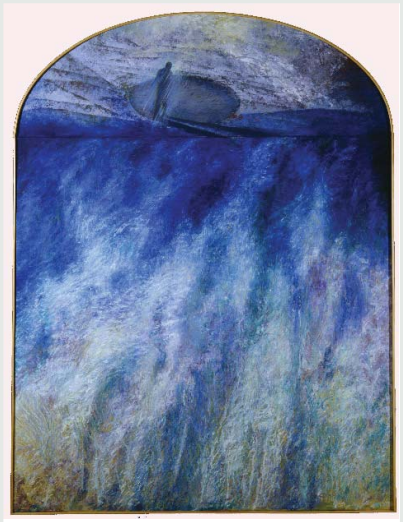


Alice Zlotnick, **Day One.** Genesis Series

the sacred writings into my own place and time."

Shafner's particular choice of multi-paneled canvases for her paintings enables her to present the Biblical or Midrashic narrative in the top half of the piece, in a lunette (half moon) shaped panel, attached to a rectangular panel below, with her interpretative version. Thus, for example, in her painting of Honi The Circle Maker, she re-tells the story of *Honi Hama'agal*, who lived in the latter part of the first century BCE, drawing on the text in *Ta'anit* (Babylonian Talmud, 23a).

"He was renowned for his righteousness and for having an extraordinary power of prayer. During a time of great drought in the land of Israel, the people asked Honi to pray for rain. Honi prayed, but no rain came. Honi then drew a circle in the dust and stood within it and said: 'Master of the Universe! I swear by Your great Name that I shall not move from here until You have mercy on Your children.' A mere trickle of rain came down, so Honi turned once again to heaven. 'It is not for this that I have prayed, but for rain to fill cisterns, ditches and caves.' Immediately the rains came in great torrents, flooding the ground and overflowing the wells. The people ran to Honi crying for him to stop the floods of water. Honi answered them, 'We may not pray on account of an excess of good. Despite this, bring me a bullock for a thanksgiving-offering.' Honi laid his hands on the animal and said: 'This people that you brought out of Egypt can take neither too much evil nor too much good. Please give them what they ask so they may be satisfied.' God sent a wind that blew away the rains, and the people gathered mushrooms and truffles.



Janet Shafner,
Honi, The Circle Maker

The extraordinary rain in the story of Honi has an even deeper meaning; it has been connected to the waters of the mist which we read about in the description of the sixth day of Creation. Rashi explains that the water that God used to mold the dirt for man's creation came from no ordinary rain, but from a unique mist which ascended from the waters of the impenetrable deep. In the larger panel of this painting, torrents of rain water are suggested - rising upward from the earth. The two humble elements of water and dirt which God used to create man are also the framing elements of this narrative. Although Man is ultimately earth and water, he can reach up to Heaven to beseech God and to demand of Him compassion and mercy."

The third artist, Chana Cromer, has been living with her family in Jerusalem since 1972, and is originally from Kansas City, Missouri. She studied art at the Bezalel Art Institute in Jerusalem, and textile design at the Philadelphia College of the Arts. Cromer also studied Biblical and Talmudic texts at Beth Midrash Ellul, and has taught art/text workshops and textile techniques at Pelech High School and Bruria and Orot Colleges as well as Bar Ilan University. Since 1989 she has worked in textile and surface design media, creating many textiles for synagogues. She also established the visual arts department at Ulpana L'Omanut (Torah Arts Academy), which served as a model for many other religious high schools that now teach art/text.

Cromer always begins her work with a close reading of the text. She records the associations, explores the visual imagery, and then researches the Biblical commentary.

Her fascination with the Joseph story began for two reasons. She had previously created works on the subject of Jacob's struggle with the angel. She points out that Joseph's story parallels his father's. They were both dreamers as well as younger sons who were hated by their elder brothers. In their stories, they both grow through struggle. The second reason she was attracted to Joseph's story is the centrality of fabric and clothing in the story.

Cromer received a grant from the Memorial Foundation of Jewish Culture to develop a series of mixed media works that would be a "re-weaving of the story of Joseph through the clothing and cloth that appear in it." The piece shown here is entitled "Skin/Light" and the artist describes the piece as follows:

"There is a *midrash* that relates that the Coat of Many Colors was passed down from Joseph's forefathers. I imagined that Adam's coat would be made of fig leaves, like the coats he and Eve fashioned for themselves, as well as have the qualities of skin and light. God fashioned coats of skin—"*or*"—when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, "as thin and fine as a second skin, as fingernails." A *midrash* says they were coats of "*or*" (skin, and/or light). Other commentaries speak of the special glow of light that came from Adam himself."

Chana Cromer, **Skin/Light**

The fabric chosen for this coat is a transparent metallic organza with a jacquard pattern of leaves. Onto this fabric are superimposed multiple silk screens of fig leaves using metallic pigments.

Over the years, Yeshiva University Museum has been a pioneer in displaying the works of emerging artists, as well as established ones. I am especially pleased that we are providing a forum for talented female artists to convey their personal encounters with traditional Jewish texts.

Sylvia A. Herskowitz *is the Director of Yeshiva University Museum in New York. The Museum was founded in 1973 and is now located in the Center for Jewish History. It presents interdisciplinary exhibitions on Jewish life, past and present.*

Art as Transformation

An Interview with Multi-Media Artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles

By Marisa Newman

Q: I was first introduced to your work with your pieces like *Hartford Wash: Washing / Tracks / Maintenance* when you washed the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum, and *Sidewalk Washing* outside A.I.R. Gallery in SoHo, These pieces both stemmed from your *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*, and brought values of caring from inside domestic life and projected them onto the public arena. In conceiving those pieces, were you also thinking about bringing Jewish domestic life into the public arena?

A: The Jewish sources of my thinking were really of a piece with the rest of my thinking. Jewish ideas are always part of my ideas in creating maintenance art. I intended to maintain the cleanliness of an area on the sidewalk in front of the A.I.R. Gallery on Wooster Street from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. on June 13, 1974, and said it would be "normalized" at 5:01 p.m. I made many photocopies of a quotation from Rav Kook, titled "On Holiness." Taping these together, I set up a boundary on one side of the sidewalk and down the other end, and I also covered the doors of the gallery with this text. These papers repeating Rav Kook's quotation became the surroundings and zone which I entered to take responsibility to make this place clean as an act of maintenance art. One part of the quote says:

> *"The contradictions between the holy and the profane exists only in the subjectivity of man who has not yet attained to spiritual unity and is unable, with his limited powers of understanding, to mediate between the two, In reality the main purpose in life is to raise everything that is profane to the level of the holy….. We are all coming near to Nature and Nature is coming near to us"*

Mierle Ukeles: ***Mikva: Place of Kissing Waters:*** **Installation.** Jewish Museum, New York. 1986

Q: Have you been influenced by other Jewish concepts regarding 'work'?

A: Another source of this notion of maintenance as unity and not separation from holiness is the image of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They are not commanded to sit passively in the Garden, but to take care of it. This gave them responsibility and power. Work was not drudgery, punishment or pain. From this vantage point, we see humans created in the image of God and God as the continual maintainer of the universe. Human activity likens us to the continuing creator. The essence of the idea of maintenance art is to "reveal the hum of living from breath to breath." The second Jewish idea connected to maintenance is the absolute opposite of the previous one. That is the idea of the strict separation between the holy and the profane. Maintenance is profane in the simplest sense, and Shabbat is seen as the escape from maintenance. Maintenance work is what must be done – this is Adam and Eve after the expulsion, maintenance becomes the punishment where one must work for survival. Work is seen as tedious and monotonous. Sabbath becomes a relief, and a glimpse of heaven that can make you free from the drudgery of work. The third Jewish concept about maintenance is the Zionist idea of working the land of Israel and keeping the land as holy or idealized labor, whether you see Zionism through a religious lens or as a secular Zionist.

All these ideas about maintenance fuelled me and gave me a kind of energy.

Q: Is your goal to bring all three ideas into your work?

A: Yes, that is the greatest challenge. But, I always need to say this; there is a tremendous amount of ambivalence in my work. A lot about work and repetitive work is limiting and drags a person down. A lot of necessary work shrinks one's creativity. I have found that in my own work, and in any repetitive work where you have to do something, even if it came from a great starting point. With Israel, I feel there is a holiness of the land. I feel that way about the environment as well. It is our job to take care of the planet: as hard as that work is and even if at times it can pull you down, it really can elevate you as well. As you know, I have been Artist in Residence (official and unsalaried) for the NYC Department of Sanitation for 28 years.

Q: Much of your work can be termed performance art. This has been defined many ways. How would you define it?

A: As opposed to a theatrical performance, performance art is real. It is art that contests the meaning of reality. My own performances are highly structured and thought-out, but they unfold in real time where the outcome is unknown and can be changed by the viewer or spectator. I also make sculpture, video and installation art. Virtually all my works are public art as this is the area where truly everyone can be inside the picture.

Q: Can you tell me about your *mikvah* projects? Were they directed at a Jewish audience?

A: I have done four *mikvah* projects. The first, *"Mikva Dreams"*, had two manifestations. One was commissioned by Franklin Furnace which invited me to do a performance work. It was a love poem to the *mikvah*, because I found going to the *mikvah* a magical experience. I honored the notion of not talking about it and I wouldn't discuss it with anyone except my husband, yet I also had a desire to share it. *"Mikva Dreams"* was a performance with a text in which I spoke about the *mik-*

Mierle Ukeles: ***Mikva: Place of Kissing Waters.***
The Double Doors of Transformation
Installation Jewish Museum, New York 1986

vah and then I chanted a word poem at the end where I repeated the words 'Immerse Again' 210 times, because that was my calculation of how many eggs I might have in my fertile life. It was a kind of prayer that I would be able to have that life of fertility. I covered myself with a sheet to preserve an aura of sacred mystery and privacy, and I spoke the poem, hidden from the audience and not seeing it. This was for a diverse art audience and was very well received.

The second piece used the same text along with a photograph of a woman (who happened to be me) draped in a sheet facing the flowing Hudson River, seen from the back. This piece was published in the feminist art journal, "*Heresies,*" and I was part of a collective made up of many different kinds of feminists. I was apprehensive about the piece being accepted by the collective, because there was a lot of anger against patriarchy in Judaism and in religion generally. But it was also very well received.

In my next pieces, I spoke directly to a Jewish audience. First I made a *mikvah* installation in a project called "*Mikva: Place of Kissing Waters*" for a show called "Jewish Themes-Contemporary Artists" at the Jewish Museum in 1986.

Q: Was that a performance piece or a sculptural work?

A: A sculpture. I did a huge amount of research. I crawled around a *mikvah* with the region's best *mikvah* maker. I wanted to know all about the material, the proportions and the rules. With a sculpture, one has to become very physical. I came across a world of original Jewish ideas embodying great halakhic creativity.

First, the *mikvah* is a place of rebirth. Maimonides says, and Rabbi Soloveitchik elaborates on this, that in the *mikvah* you stand directly before the Divine. You cannot do it by proxy. The person who emerges is reborn a new person. The *mikvah* is the place where you can start over again. This is really the theme of all my work- our unlimited powers of transformation that I see as the essence of Judaism. All my work from trying to change the degraded identities of service workers—the housewives of the City—to the restoration of ravaged landscapes relates to this. This is why I have worked on the transformation of three closed landfills, including Fresh Kills in New York City.

The second idea is the idea of the *bor*, the collecting pool. The *bor* has to be grounded, becoming part of the place, and cannot be a removable object. As a person interested in earthworks, this is an essential earthwork. To me, it represents taking a risk; Jews who build a *mikvah* are saying that they intend to stay in that place and to belong to the place.

The third idea is about the pipes that bring God's water, in the form of rain or snow, from the roof. The joints of the pipes must be open. We can direct the water, but not possess it, which is a classic environmental idea. We may benefit from the water, but it is God's water. I grew up in Colorado where my father was an Orthodox Rabbi. I remember that they used snow from the Rocky Mountains for the *mikvah*, and my father, a tall dignified man, would stand on the roof of the *mikvah* shoveling it down the pipes.

The fourth idea is one of the great original ideas in Judaism. The rabbis did not say, "Stop. Wait for the rain!" until they had enough water for the *mikvah*. They did not put life on hold. As long as there was a certain portion of water from God — rain or snow — you can mix it, and the halakhic words are you 'seed' the water or 'kiss' the water with plumbing water, water from human systems. This water becomes as holy as God's waters. The rabbis figured out how to make life continue, and this is such a loving concept. Judaism extols the human creativity involved in designing water systems. One thinks of Leonardo da Vinci's designs for water systems as great art.

As an artist, I was also amazed that some materials were considered kosher and others not. With the pipes, some materials do not contaminate the water, so the water can flow through these materials and stay pure. Other materials like copper make water impure. Incidentally, there is much ambivalence about copper in Judaism. Copper was the material of the mirrors that the women donated for building the *mishkan* (sanctuary) in the desert; even though impurities adhere to copper, the copper became the basin, which the priests used to purify themselves. The magical back and forth about the material is fascinating to me as an artist.

Q: Can you describe your Jewish Museum *mikvah* installation?

A: My *mikvah* is a two story installation made from contemporary French tiles, with stairs of clear plexiglass—each step turning in another direction because going to the *mikvah* is about turning from one state to another, and one must make a choice at each step. The *mikvah* is entered through double doors of transformation. The right door is the one that the individual enters out of free choice, when he or she is ready to be reborn. The left door is the one that the community representative opens when the community is ready to receive the individual. I called the work "*Kissing Waters*" to underline the idea that life does not stop.

Q: What was the fourth *mikvah*?

A: In 1986, I created a performance piece for the Jewish Museum called "*Immerse Again Immerse Again*." This related to the *mikvah* as the site where a person converts to Judaism. It was the time of the first wave of immigration of Ethiopian Jews, who had been loyal Jews for centuries. They walked hundreds of miles and finally made it to Israel. When the rabbis told them that they had to convert, they responded that either they would commit suicide or would walk back to Ethiopia. To see the classic Jewish image of walking through the African continent into the land of Israel reversed was unbearable. This was the most uncreative response by the rabbis to this miracle.

I realized this is the first time in history that all Jewish communities are in touch simultaneously with one another. Until now,

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Ukeles

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Jewish communities developed separately in different places. There was some communication through *she'aylot* and *t'shuvot* (questions addressed to rabbis and their responses), but generally communities developed on their own. Now that all communities are in simultaneous contact, all our differences become more glaring. My response to this situation was that we should all go to the *mikvah*, and start again. I created this performance artwork—*"The Universal Jewish Immersion Project."* In this way, we all start as Jews from the same beginning.

In my performance artwork, I had forty people holding rectangles of clear blue plexiglass that symbolized the *mikvah* water. The people had to work together to join the plastic to create a "river". There was also a path of beautiful, golden light. They then raised the "river" over their heads as if they were immersing in the waters all at the same time. I had many people as "witnesses" speaking about Jewish unity. I specifically invited people of different ages and from different parts of the Jewish community to participate. Some believed in Jewish unity and others did not, but it was up to them to share their thoughts.

Q: What was the response to these two projects that were directed at Jewish audiences?

A: Almost all my art is public art, which means I hardly ever sell anything. When I received a Guggenheim and NY Foundation for the Arts Fellowships, I took all the money that was meant to support me as an artist and used it to make a piece with direct Jewish content, addressed directly to a Jewish audience – "to bring it home." And what happened was nothing. There was absolute silence.

Q: Do you think it is because *mikvah* gets designated as a woman's sphere that *mikva'ot* in general have not been given enough attention and are not made with any aesthetic concerns?

A: I thought I was trying to deal with all of those things. All the materials were kosher, as were the proportions. I adhered to the halakhic requirements of a regular *mikvah* and I thought there would be an appreciation of that. I tried to make it as beautiful as I could, and as personal and accessible as possible. Indeed, I would really like to build a real *mikvah* in the future as a spiritual haven. At first, I thought the silence meant a negative response so I was waiting to hear the negative criticism. But, it was silence and it was the silence I found so shocking.

Mierle Ukeles washing the sidewalk:
***Soho Sidewalk Wash:* In Front of the old A.I.R. Gallery:** 1974

With the *"Immerse Again Immerse Again"* performance work, I had a video projection behind "the river of light" of my husband immersing about 75 times, because I wanted to underline that *mikvah* is not, and never was, only for women. I wanted to open up the subject. It was so disturbing to me that there was no dialogue about the piece in the Jewish community.

Q: Do you think that the prohibition of graven images has limited the number of artists in the Orthodox world?

A: The art world is filled with Jews-artists, gallery owners, critics, theoreticians, writers, curators, collectors, and so many are indeed women. So why so few Orthodox artists among them? It is as if we have a dead culture. A culture without art cannot survive. We are not engendering any **living** culture. Why? That is the question I continue to ask myself. We should have a rich, thick, phenomenal culture: positive, negative, sweet, intimate, big, furious. Whatever the artist wants to make as a free being! We need to welcome that freedom.

Marisa Newman *is the co-owner of Newman Popiashvili Gallery in Chelsea in NewYork City. She received her Master of Art in art history from Columbia University.*

Women in the Performing Arts

Orthodox women artists today are carving out a place for themselves in the visual and literary arts. Many of these women work independently and are able to balance their professional lives with religious observance, family needs, and community life. What about performance artists?

JOFA would love to hear about women who balance a professional career in the performing arts with Orthodox Jewish life. What is the effect of a woman's religious observance on such a career and the way she develops her talents? How does her professional life affect her life as an Orthodox Jewish woman? Does it restrict it or make it more meaningful? Is it possible to pursue a career as a professional musician, actress or dancer and to advance in that career in the context of a modern Orthodox lifestyle? How have women dealt with issues of *tzni'ut* and *kol isha?* How are they coping with issues of scheduling, travel needs, and Shabbat or holiday observance? It seems that there has been a recent growth of "women's-only" performances in the Modern Orthodox world, as well as in the *haredi* world. Where do the talents cultivated in children and teen classes for music, song and drama lead in professional terms?

We are clearly in an era of transition in the performing arts, as more doors in America are opened to women, including Orthodox women.

Please write to jofa@jofa.org to share your experiences and views on this topic.

Orthodox Israeli Women Novelists

By Rochelle Furstenberg

Until the mid-nineteen eighties, modern Hebrew literature was dominated by men. There were some fine women novelists in Israel, but their works were generally considered minor. Veteran author, Amalia Kahana-Carmon, once said, "Just as Jewish women were exiled to the balcony of the synagogue, Israeli women novelists were relegated to the peripheries of Israeli literature."

But in the last two decades, a revolution has been taking place, which has affected Orthodox women writers. Female writers have come into their own. In fact, they might even be perceived as dominating Israeli literature today. Their artistic outpouring is a consequence of socio-psychological changes within the country.

From its beginnings in the nineteenth century, Hebrew literature struggled with collective issues, revolving around the fate of the Jewish people. Indeed, literature was a primary force in crystallizing the Zionist agenda. During the pioneering period and in the early days of the State of Israel, Hebrew literature projected a new image of the Jew as farmer and soldier. Writers of the sixties, like Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua, attempted to retreat from the collective and focus on the individual. But they could not disengage themselves from national issues, and the individual was often used to symbolize the larger nation.

During this time, women writers were perceived as sensitive observers of domestic psychological situations, not relevant to the debates in the public realm, and they remained on the sidelines.

However, in the 1980's a change took place in Israel. People began to thirst for works about the private realm. Young Israelis became weary of the constant involvement with nation-building. They wanted to concentrate on personal interactions, rather than collective ones. Women's literature, with its traditional emphasis on emotional relationships, was celebrated in this new milieu. It emphasized female autonomy.

Much of this striving for autonomy and self-knowledge is evident in the writing of observant or traditional-minded Israeli women novelists, such as Esther Ettinger, Hannah Bat-Shahar, Michal Govrin and Mira Magen. In the works of each of these writers, the search for autonomy is played out against the background of an Orthodox family, community, or ideology. There are writers like Shira Horn and Yehudit Rotem who came out of *haredi* lifestyles, and write critically about this world, or use their backgrounds to create sensationalistic novels. But this is quite different from the approach of the writers under consideration in this essay, whose fiction grapples with the tensions between tradition and autonomy with depth and honesty.

> "Female writers have come into their own"

"*Peleh Laylah*," ("Night Wonder") a recent novel by the poet Esther Ettinger depicts the "coming of age" of a religious adolescent in Tel Aviv. There are many autobiographical elements in the work. Ettinger's parents came from Eastern Europe before the war, and lost many relatives in the Holocaust. They were part of the Yiddish-speaking business community in Tel Aviv in the nineteen-fifties. The line between Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox was not clearly drawn at that time, and she was sent to a Bais Yakov school.

In her novel, Ettinger juxtaposes the Bais Yakov education of the protagonist Atara Henig with the girl's attraction to the music, movies and fashion of Tel Aviv. Her teacher, Raizl, is a very pious survivor of Bergen-Belsen who espouses the teachings of the founder of Bais Yakov, Sara Schneirer, in an attempt to cleanse the young women of "foreign influences". Ettinger cleverly weaves passages from Sara Schneirer's writings into the novel, and depicts the tension between home and school, on the one hand, and Tel Aviv, on the other.

Ettinger contends that the conflict between art and religion in James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" served as a model for her. It percolated many years," says Ettinger who is married and has four married children.

In spite of the tension between art and religion, Ettinger claims that the language of religious texts serve her well. "The language is very much part of me, and becomes an organic part of my writing. It's true that religious education inhibits the writer, but it also enriches her work. I feel freest when I write, but the writer must impose internal aesthetic limits on the work." Realizing this, Ettinger also accepts the religious limits she imposes on her writing. "Yet there are literary ways to accommodate these limits, through "*drash*, *pshat*, and *remez*," she explains.[1]

In contrast to Esther Ettinger, Hannah Bat-Shahar has, until recently, retained a strict division between her work and her personal life. The daughter of a well-known rabbi and wife of a *rosh yeshiva*, Bat-Shahar wrote under a pseudonym. Only recently has she revealed her identity in the media. Her many short stories and novels are beautiful, densely written works, depicting the seething, internal world of a female protagonist. The language itself projects the sense of claustrophobia of a woman seeking to break out of a closed world. Certain patterns repeat themselves in Bat-Shahar's work. The woman often has romantic longings for a man who is inappropriate for her. At the same time, the long shadow of a father-figure hovers over the protagonist throughout her life.

In the three novellas that make up "*Sham, Sirot Hadayig*"("Look, the Fishing Boats"), Bat-Shahar moves from depictions of her tightly closed internal world to portray wider social interactions in religious circles. She depicts an upper class ultra-Orthodox world where the men are, by and large, businessmen constantly crossing lines between America, Europe and Israel.

In general, there is often real doubt about the credibility of Bat-Shahar's female narrators. They are romantic to the point of being crazed in their judgments, frozen in a circumscribed world from which they yearn to flee. Bat-Shahar's work, however, should not be perceived as a realistic depiction of the whole *haredi* world, but as a literary, psychological vision of a certain type of neurotic woman in this milieu.

Michal Govrin, the most conceptually oriented of the writers discussed, has also created a beautiful, densely written novel, "*Hashem*", artfully translated from the Hebrew by Barbara Harshav as "The Name"(New York: Riverhead Books, 1998). Instead of portraying the inner world of a *haredi* girl, she has succeeded in getting into the head of a young *ba'alat teshuva*.

The very title "*Hashem*" bespeaks daring. It means "The Name" but it is also an almost intimate appellation for God, referring to a mystical-erotic relationship to God felt by the book's protagonist, Amalia. In the highly secular Israeli literary scene, Govrin has written a novel in what might be called the

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Israeli Novelists

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liturgical mode, addressing God regularly. She has structured her narrative around the counting of the *omer*, between Passover and Shavuot.

In contrast to the predilection in recent Israeli literature for everyday street language and realism, "The Name" abounds with allusions to Jewish sources. Govrin's work is written in the spirit of the earlier works of A.B Yehoshua and Amos Oz, in which the fiction is a symbolic structure driven by conceptual concerns.

The charismatic Govrin, a lecturer at the School for Visual Drama in Jerusalem, has published two volumes of poetry and short stories, as well as "The Name." Her second novel, *Hevzekim*"("Snapshots") which is now being translated into English, deals with an Israeli woman confronting her father's Zionist ideals. Govrin's father was from a *kibbutz* with strong Labor pioneering ideals.

Govrin has also called upon her own biography in writing "The Name". Her mother was a Holocaust survivor. "I had childhood memories, the trauma of learning that my mother had a child before me that didn't survive," says Govrin. "But growing up in Tel Aviv in the nineteen fifties, there was no way of absorbing and digesting these experiences. Zionism and the State of Israel provided an official way to think about the Holocaust. But it didn't leave any private space, either for personal pain or for memory. Everything was devoured by the machinery of nation-building."

The heroine of the novel, Amalia, turns to religion as an alternative to this secular Israeli life. Govrin herself became interested in Judaism in Paris when she was working on her doctorate in theater. "But I never reached the realms of ecstatic experience which Amalia enters," she declares.

According to the *Kabbalah*, evil is perceived as "a shattering of the cosmic vessels" and it is man's goal to repair the brokenness of the universe through *tikkun olam*. Govrin depicts Amalia's attempts at reparation after the Holocaust, helping God mend the break, by weaving a curtain for the Ark of the Torah during the forty nine days of the *omer* between Passover and Shavuot. The *omer* symbolizes the ascent of the Jews from the state of bondage in Egypt to spiritual freedom, culminating with the revelation at Mount Sinai. On the personal level, Amalia feels herself ascending to spiritual heights, ultimately, to become one with God. But she also perceives this fusion with the Almighty as an act of self-annihiliation.

Ultimately, Amalia backs away from the suicide option. "She claims more and more of the human dimension," explains Govrin. "She accepts the fact that there are fissures in the universe. Instead of a mystic union with God, she becomes more tolerant of human limitations. She serves as a catalyst to bring different types of people together," explains the author. "Israelis are often afraid to cross borders."

In this respect, Govrin herself is very much like Amalia; a bridge between different groups. Coming from a secular Zionist home, she is married to an observant French–Jewish mathematician, and has two daughters. She does not see herself as belonging to any defined group. "I prefer to move from one to the other. And I hope the book leaves that kind of open space to readers to do the same, to find their own answers."

> "...this existential doubt.... gives these works the tension and depth..."

Mira Magen also prefers not to be pigeonholed as religious or secular. Magen, who is *shomeret Shabbat*, prefers to straddle the fence, depicting the various options that Israelis from religious backgrounds might choose between. She grew up in an observant family in Kfar Saba, was for many years a nurse in Hadassah, and has written four novels. In an early novel, "Al *Takeh B'Kir*" ("Do Not Strike the Wall") she traces the emergence of a young woman from a religious *moshav* to the big world. Her love for a young widower on the *moshav* leads her to delve into the exotic life of his dead wife. But it culminates in marrying the widower, who is himself grounded in tradition and a connection to the land. In her later work, "*B'shachvi U B'kumi*" ("Love, After All"), Magen moves farther away from the religious framework. In this novel, Zohara Shiloh is a single mother, an unmarried nurse, who has left behind the religious *kibbutz* where she grew up. She is a "Jewish mother" in the sense that her concern for her son Evyatar dominates her life, until she falls in love with Mishael, a sophisticated high-tech businessman. In choosing Mishael, she opts for a more adventurous lifestyle. In Magen's family chronicle,"*Malachim Nirdamu Kulam*" ("Her Angels Have All Fallen Asleep"), five siblings wrestle with their religious upbringing, each taking a different direction in his or her life.

For the authors discussed in this essay, the options of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," are ever present in their writing, as they are in the life of many Orthodox men and women. Some might see this as undermining the veracity of religious life decisions. Yet, it is exactly this existential doubt with which the contemporary religious woman struggles daily, realizing the contingency of all life choices. It is this that gives these works the tension and depth that are often absent from the works of many secular Israeli women novelists, who generally depict an everyday life with less metaphysical struggle.

***Rochelle Furstenberg** is a Jerusalem–based writer and critic. She has written extensively on Hebrew literature in a variety of books and periodicals, and has a regular column on Israeli life and culture in Hadassah Magazine.*

[1] *Drash* would seem to imply the use of allegory in a story, while *remez* can be understood as evocative or suggestive writing without describing a situation naturalistically or graphically. *Peshat* would seem to mean a simple, minimalist narrative.

The Defiant Muse

The best introduction to Hebrew poems by women from biblical times to the present–day is the bilingual anthology, "The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems From Antiquity To The Present," (The Feminist Press at the City University of New York,1999). This anthology contains more than a hundred poems by over fifty poets. The selection of poems, the excellent translations, many by renowned poets, together with the introduction, and the biographical and bibliographical notes, make accessible to the reader the richness of the voices of female poets through the centuries.

Chava Pinchas-Cohen, a well known poet in Jerusalem, has been the editor of "*Dimui*" a religious arts magazine since 1989. "A Mother's Morning Prayer" was published in Hebrew in *Masah Ayala (Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Hame'uchad*, 1994).The translation is by Rochelle Furstenberg and Jules Harlow and was included in "PRAY TELL: A Hadassah Guide to Jewish Prayer"(Jewish Lights, 2003). The poem can be seen as a modern *tekhine*, a domestic prayer. Note how she compares her preparation of her family's breakfast to the sacrifices made in the Temple in Jerusalem. Other poems by Pinchas-Cohen are translated in "Dreaming the Actual: Contemporary Fiction and Poetry by Israeli Women" (SUNY Press, 2000).

A MOTHER'S MORNING PRAYER

At this time as I stand cooking oatmeal,
Remove all sorts of alien thoughts from me
And when I touch the baby's back and take his temperature
May all sorts of problems disappear,

May they not confuse my thoughts.
And give me the strength to scrub my face
So that each one of my children
Can see his face in mine
As in a mirror washed for a festival.

And the darkness sunk within
My face-cover it with light
So that I don't lose my patience, and I won't be hoarse
From coarse, insistent screaming.
May I not experience weakness
Before the unknowable
And may it never end, even for a moment,
The touch of flesh upon flesh, my children's and mine.

Give me so much of Your love
That I can stand at the door and hand it out
With the simplicity of someone slicing bread
And smearing butter every morning.
Renew the sweet offering of boiling milk bubbling over
And the smell of coffee hovering above
The thanksgiving sacrifice and the daily sacrifice
That I never learned how to give.

תְּפִילָה לָאֵם בְּטֶרֶם שַׁחֲרִית

בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁאֲנִי עוֹמֶדֶת לְבַשֵּׁל דֵּיסַת סֹלֶת
הָסֵר מִמֶּנִּי כָּל מִינֵי מַחֲשָׁבוֹת זָרוֹת
וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי נוֹגַעַת בְּגֵו הַתִּינוֹק וּמַדָּה חֻמּוֹ
שֶׁיֵּלְכוּ מִמֶּנִּי כָּל מִינֵי טְרָדוֹת
שֶׁלֹּא יְבַלְבְּלוּ מַחְשָׁבוֹתַי.
וְתֵן לִי אֹמֶץ לְזַכֵּךְ פָּנַי
שֶׁיְּהוּכַל כָּל אֶחָד מִיְּלָדַי
לִרְאוֹת פָּנָיו בְּתוֹךְ פָּנַי
כְּמוֹ בְּמַרְאָה רְחוּצָה לִקְרַאת חַג

וְאֶת הַחֹשֶׁךְ הַמְשֵׁקֵע מִפְּנִים
פָּנַי-כַּסֵּה בְּאוֹר.
שֶׁלֹּא תִּפְקַע סַבְלָנוּתִי וְלֹא יֵחַר גְּרוֹנִי
מִצְּעָקָה מִתְחַבֶּטֶת וּמִתְעַבָּה
שֶׁלֹּא יִהְיֶה לִי רְפְיוֹן יָדַיִם
מוּל הַבִּלְתִּי נוֹדָע
וְשֶׁלֹּא יִפָּסֵק אַף לֹא לְרֶגַע
מַגַּע בָּשָׂר בְּבָשָׂר בֵּינִי לְבֵין יְלָדַי

תֵּן בִּי אַהֲבָתְךָ שֶׁיְּהֵא בִּי דַּי לַעֲמֹד בְּפֶתַח הַבַּיִת וּלְחַלְּקָהּ
בְּפַשְׁטוּת בָּהּ פּוֹרְסִים לֶחֶם וּמוֹרְחִים חֶמְאָה כָּל בֹּקֶר
מֶחָדָשׁ נִיחוֹחַ חָלָב רוֹתֵחַ וְגוֹלֵשׁ וְרֵיחַ הַקָּפֶה מְכַסִּים
עַל קָרְבַּן תּוֹדָה וְקָרְבַּן תָּמִיד
שֶׁאֵינִי יוֹדַעַת אֵיךְ נוֹתְנִים.

Tanakh and Art: An Interdisciplinary Program

The Pelech School, Jerusalem

By Naomi Lawson

Over ten years ago, two Pelech educators, Michal Irshai, head of Arts and Humanities, and *Tanakh* teacher, Rabbi Shmuel Afek began a dialogue. They discussed how they could bring their students closer to the *Tanakh* through a creative, religiously-spiritual, personal experience. The goal was to develop biblical themes through art, music, theater, creative movement and creative writing. Such creative interpretation would be used to complement regular serious study of the text and commentary with the aim of reaching a deeper, more complex understanding.

This unusual program at Pelech, the pioneering experimental religious High School for Girls in Jerusalem, is implemented every year in the eleventh grade over an intense six-week period. Because of Pelech's broad religious educational philosophy, this program has been officially recognized by the Ministry of Education as an innovative unit within the national *Bagrut* examination in *Tanakh*. At Pelech, the program is compulsory for all students taking the five point *Bagrut* in *Tanakh*. Thus, approximately 90% of the girls in eleventh grade take this course.

Initially, students are introduced to the process of expressing abstract ideas through artistic media. They meet a number of professional artists who take the inspiration for their work from religious themes. This year, the students met with Chana Cromer, a sculptor and artist who specializes in works of religious content. They also met with Chava Pinchas-Cohen, a poet and writer renowned for her literary works on contemporary religious issues.

A major biblical theme or character such as *Akedat Yitzchak* (The Binding of Isaac) or the prayers of Hannah is presented to the students as an example of the work process they will be expected to follow. The text is studied with the *Midrash* and traditional commentaries followed by contemporary research articles accessed through the internet and academic journals. The resulting interpretation is then presented through all the different media: art, music, theater, creative movement and creative writing. Within a short period of time, the girls must choose the subject that they wish to research. For teenage girls, having to make this decision can be the hardest part of the course!

The research process begins as each student seeks to reach as deep an understanding of her subject as possible through studying all the sources available. It is only when she has reached this crucial point that the artistic process can begin. Guided by teaching specialists in each of the media, the students then work intensively to produce an artistic interpretation of their chosen subject.

The process itself is dynamic, as the academic study and artistic interpretation complement and complete one another. This process may take unexpected turns leading to a unique, innovative conclusion. In all the years that Pelech has run this program, no work is identical. For the girls involved, the experience is a deeply personal process of identification and self-discovery, uncovering the complexity of the text and its meaning for the individual student.

In evaluating the progress of the ten-year old program, the Pelech staff stresses the following aspects:

- The process of profound, individual study expressed through the arts succeeds in achieving a deep, personal identification with the subject.
- The program enhances the traditional study of women's sources by describing the lives of the female characters of the Bible with their dilemmas, compromises and complexities. These include biblical episodes, involving women, that are degrading by modern standards: Dinah in Genesis, *Isha Sota* (the married woman acused of infidelity in Numbers 5:18-24), and *Pilegesh b'Givah* (the concubine of Givah in Judges 21).
- The artistic process clarifies and sharpens the conflicts described in *Tanakh*. Many of these themes including love, jealousy, and ambition continue to trouble our modern world and may be discussed and depicted with contemporary significance.
- The program provides an unusual opportunity to analyze and express abstract religious and philosophical ideas such as *emunah* (faith), *ahavat hashem* (love of God), sin and punishment.
- The biblical characters are humanized. The major biblical players such as Avraham, Moshe or Shmuel for example, can be described within a day to day context. Shadowy figures, that may appear in "one-liners", who scarcely seem to exist in *Tanakh* such as the wife of the prophet Ezekiel or Michal, daughter of Saul and wife of David, can be brought to life.

> "The Tanakh and Art program marks one of the highlights of the school year."

When assessing the impact of the program on the girls at Pelech, one must remember that the art curriculum at the school is taught as part of an interdisciplinary program combining contemporary history, literature and Jewish philosophy. Freshmen take two hours of art weekly. Sophomores and juniors may take an art elective, comprised of practical art and art history for five hours weekly, the seniors for seven hours weekly.

The *Tanakh* and Art program is not in itself a "feminist" course. Throughout high school, the girls have a panoply of opportunities to focus on *halakhic* and *hashkafic* views relating to their role as young Jewish women, as well as the role of women in general culture. This is a natural part of the Pelech philosophy. For example as regards *Kol Isha*, the school takes a carefully considered view of the subject within *halakha*. It is studied with all its complexities as part of the *halakha* curriculum. As much as possible, we look for sensitive, creative solutions, such as replacing a solo vocal performance with a duet. The school offers music as an elective, and a musical ensemble performs for the school and parents several times a year. If there is any *halakhic* doubt, Rabbi Benny Lau, Pelech's school rabbi, is consulted.

To give another example, the Pelech theater program is very focused on women's roles and their unique feminine identity and portrayal. In the eleventh grade, each student taking the theater elective prepares a woman's monologue and presents it on stage to the entire school. The program emphasizes the need for a profound analysis of the chosen role before learning the technical aspects of appearing on the stage.

In the *Tanakh* and Art program, the girls are free to choose their own project and are not required to focus on female characters or on themes relating to women. Nevertheless, approximately seventy percent of the annual projects do relate to female biblical characters. One girl focused on Hannah separating from her son Shmuel. Her portrayal was based on photographs of mothers and sons on the day of induction to the IDF (Israel Defense Forces). Another student chose the Rape of Dinah as her topic, and explored the time-worn myth that women bring rape upon themselves. Her installation comprised a path strewn

with items of women's clothing, and newspaper articles describing incidents of rape were juxtaposed with the different commentaries on the relevant biblical verses describing Dinah's ordeal. A project of the figure of Batsheva and her relationship with David, her husband Uriah, and Natan the prophet used ice and glass as basic materials. For the student, the use of water served as a metaphor for Batsheva's passivity, as understood from the *Midrash*. In the portrayal, Batsheva's lips are prominent because while she may have had the ability to speak out in protest, she remained quietly passive, allowing events to take their course. These are just three examples of recent projects.

The *Tanakh* and Art program at Pelech marks one of the highlights of the school year. An exhibition of the artistic works is presented to parents and friends at a festive event at the school. Students who have chosen music, theater, creative movement or creative writing perform their work for the audience. The evening is more than a show: for spectators and participants alike, it is a moving, religious, cultural experience not easily forgotten.

***Naomi Lawson** is the administrative director of the Pelech School in Jerusalem.*

Art Should Make You Think

...continued from page 10

Shopping at Jeanie's Dream Hat Store
From "Ervah: Hidden Sensuality" by Na'ama Batya Lewin 2001

know about Monet, Modigliani, Cindy Sherman, or Diane Arbus before being able to enjoy the artist's creation?

In the Jewish community, we expect one of our own to portray Judaism positively to the rest of the world. If a religious artist raises questions about traditional practices, viewers become confused. How can she both genuinely practice religion and criticize it at the same time?

But there is a difference. I am not hostile. My work is not a rejection of religion. I ask questions to better understand the practice. My art poses questions that are otherwise difficult to express. Art does not have to be beautiful. Art can be challenging. Art should make you think. Art should help you see things from a different perspective. And if in my art, I am expressing the frustration felt by me and perhaps by other women about particular aspects of Judaism, I would hope that I am adding, in some minor way, to the healthy debates that have historically facilitated the development of our tradition.

***Na'ama Batya Lewin** is a photographer and video artist who is on the faculty of the Corcoran College of Art and Design in Washington DC. Her work has been exhibited in galleries and museums in New York, Washington, Chicago and California. Ms. Lewin lives in suburban Maryland.*

JOFA's Synagogue Practices Grid Now Being Compiled Send us Your Shul's Info Today

JOFA is in the process of compiling information about Orthodox synagogue practices relating to women, which will be published on our website **www.jofa.org**. A preliminary Grid can be accessed on the site now.

The goal of this Grid is twofold:

a) To serve as a reference for Orthodox shuls considering incorporating innovations pertaining to women into their synagogue practice.
b) To serve as a resource for individuals seeking to join a synagogue.

To ensure that this "Shul Practices Grid" is as extensive as possible, we invite you to respond to the questions below that pertain to your shul. Please be as thorough and detailed as possible.

Synagogue Information:

- **Synagogue Name, Location, Rabbi**
- **Women in Leadership Positions (president, board, religious mentors or rabbinic type position)**
- **Women Speaking from the *Amud***
- **Women's Ritual Participation (passing Torah to women's section, women saying *birkhat hagomel*, prayer for *agunot*, mother's names in *misheberach* or *aliyot*)**
- **Women Reciting *Kaddish***
- **Women's Tefillah Group, Women's *K'riyat HaTorah* or *Megillah***
- **Celebration of Life Cycle Events (life cycle events for women such as *Bat Mitzvah* or *Shalom Bat*; Inclusion of mothers in celebration of son's life cycle events)**
- **Women's Participation in Holiday Rituals/Services**
- ***Mechitzah* Structure**
- **Childcare Available During Services**
- **Other**

Responses may be sent to jofa@jofa.org.

We at JOFA recognize that it is not only specific practices that create a welcoming environment for women in shul; rather, it is an overarching value of being as inclusive of women as possible. It is the assumption that women are equal participants in Judaism, and the reflection of that assumption in the culture of the synagogue in both tangible and intangible ways. It is this value we strive for as much as the incorporation of any particular practice.

Bringing the Arts to the Community

By Rena Fruchter

I am an artist; artistic in the ways that I integrate and decode the world into my mind and soul, and in the ways I share it with others. That includes my relationship with God and Torah, my identity as a woman, and my approach as a Jewish educator. When I am presented with a topic, an idea, a Biblical personality, a ritual or *halakha*, something inside me converts it to an artistic process or experience. Almost as soon as that internal commentary is stirred within me, I am already making plans to express the concept and share it with others through some artistic venue. I do not want to sound pretentious, but I feel that this is my function in the universe, and especially in the Jewish community. I have been blessed to have found some venues within mostly traditional frameworks to express myself both artistically, and as an Orthodox woman. Dealing with the challenges of *halakha*, such as the concept of *tzni'ut*, can be part of the creative process, and modern Orthodoxy has widened the Orthodox woman's arena for expression and presentation. I believe that modern Orthodoxy is stretching, for women like me, to embrace our legitimate needs for spiritual fulfillment and self definition, as confident and creative Jewish women.

My own creative approach leads me to engage in virtual intimate dialogue with our ancestors—particularly with the women who preceded us—as I do when I use bibliodramatic techniques in my teaching and in my own meditation during Torah study. Interacting intensely and passionately with others and their stories is part of who I am, and how I live. This encourages me to think creatively and imaginatively, about the "white fire" around the "black fire" of our Torah text, in the same way as I do about the "negative space" around images and objects in a work of visual art. I imagine that this is what led great writers of commentary and Midrash to fill in those spaces that were beyond the Book. For example, I put myself in Sarah's place, and find the everywoman components that I share with this biblical foremother as I ask her in my mind: "What was it that made you laugh when you heard that you were to give birth? When you were in the tent, listening to Avraham's conversation with the three visitors, where exactly were you and what was going through your mind?" This internal dramatic interplay is the way that I process stories.

The process itself is the art form, both for me and for my students. An art product of such a process might be a theater presentation. It is a misconception that art is only the product of the artistic process. Instead, the journey toward the play, poem, dance or painting is in and of itself a creative art form. The Jewish people are directed to remember and celebrate their collective journey toward becoming a nation. We remember the steps that took us to Egypt, then from Egypt, through the desert, to Sinai and beyond, as well as the changes that took place within us along the way. Similarly, experiencing the art processes enables a person to focus on the rich background layers of the product, thereby elevating the ultimate experience.

I use my art to enhance my relationship with God in many ways. As a result of my participation in women's *tefillah* groups, I have been able to find my voice to sing out and express the yearnings, praises, complaints and heartbreaks that I want to share with the Almighty. In this way, I can also help to inspire other women in their *tefillah*. It is a special and expressive opportunity for me, and I help to create a different congregational experience for those *davening* with me.

I also use visual art strategies to facilitate a creative and memorable experience in preparation for more meaningful *tefillah* both for myself and my students, as we try to balance the tension between the fixed regularity of the prayer text—the *keva* and our inner direction—*kavannah*. For example, I focus on the idea of layers of prayer made up of the multitudes of memory and experience that can enrich the words that we say daily, if we work to become focused and directed (*b'kavannah)* on those thoughts. The abstract concept of layers can be visually reproduced by using transparent acetate overlays. On the background paper is drawn the Hebrew word or phrase from liturgy (the *keva)* that we want to enrich with meaning (*kavannah)*. Each transparent sheet piled onto that background is illustrated and designed with oil pastel, collage, and permanent marker, creating visual commentary, words of association and personal connections. The experience remembered, as well as the finished product, is intended to serve as the *kavannah* motivator, as that *tefillah* is recited again and again. The nature of the slow, contemplative and hands-on process, the decision making about medium, composition, texture and color can lay the groundwork for a more thoughtful prayer experience in the future.

I have also participated in the physicality of dance and movement to immerse in the body language experiences that can feed the energy and intent that I bring to Jewish ritual—from the embracing of *kedushat Shabbat* (the holiness of Shabbat) as I move my arms and hands responding to the aura of the candles, to the enacting of the abstract and the grounded text of a "simple" *berakhah*—feeling at once its contrasts and its unity as a Jewish prayer structure. This creates a "body memory"; a kinesthetic, spiritual connection that will be part of future *kavannah*, even when I stand silently, recalling it.

Several years ago, I was on the planning committee for the Washington JOFA conference. It was very important to me that there be an experiential part to the conference, not just as a diversion, but as an integral part of the day's activities. I spoke at the end of the conference, sharing the artful writing of the Elizabeth Ehrlich novel, "Miriam's Kitchen." The drama and rhythm that flowed and escalated in her impassioned monologue spoke to me. The words that she chose made me smile, grimace and nod, as they carried her message about her relationship to Shabbat responsibility versus *menuccha* (rest), and I transmitted this message to the conference audience. It was a satisfying collaboration, and, through it, our group became a virtual community, a sisterhood sharing stories. I loved the experience, and women, who heard me speak that day, still recall it, several years later. Exploring ideas and shared feelings through the arts are my tools for building Jewish community as an Orthodox Jewish woman and as an artist.

God, the Artist of all Artists, endowed me and others like me, with a desire to make creative connections, sometimes a little bit "out of the box", in order to more fully experience His world. As I integrate art experiences in my own life, and in the lives of my students and my own children, I understand that this is a unique way to learn and to experience Torah and life, and to contribute important perspectives to our God-given world. I believe that it is vitally important for us all to integrate the arts into our Jewish lives, and as Orthodox women, we must encourage forums where the arts and Judaism can be explored together.

***Rena Fruchter** is Resource and Arts Consultant at the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning of Greater Washington. From 2002-2005 she was the Director of the Deborah Lerner Gross Jewish Cultural Arts Center of the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy in Rockville, Maryland, where she continues to act as Programming Consultant.*

The Year in Review: JOFA Events 2005-2006/5766

REGIONAL CONFERENCES

Chicago Regional Conference
January 14 & 15, 2006
"Women and Men in Partnership"

Sessions Included:
- Women in Synagogue: Access and Participation
  Sara Hurwitz
- *Mikvah* and Sexuality: Reconciling Law and Desire
  Shuli and Ben Sandler
- Rabbis Panel – Should Rabbis be Instigators, Innovators, or Responders?
  Rabbi Asher Lopatin, Rabbi Josh Feigelson, Rabbi Shlomo Levin
- Films screened: *Mekudeshet*: Sentenced to Marriage, and *Sheva Brachot*: First Night

Co-sponsored by Anshe Shalom B'nai Israel, Fiedler Hillel Center at Northwestern University, Lake Park Synagogue, Lake Shore Drive Synagogue, Levine Hillel Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob

St. Louis Regional Conference
February 26, 2006
"Women and Men in Partnership"

Sessions Included:
- Rituals Around the Shabbat Table: *Kiddush*, *Motzi* & *Zimmun*
  Devorah Zlochower
- *Ani l'Dodi v'Dodi Li*—Innovations in *Kiddushin*
  Rabbi Dov Linzer
- Where Have You Come From and Where are You Going? The State of Feminism and Orthodoxy Today
  Dr. Idana Goldberg
- Musical interlude by the St. Louis Jewish Women's Choir

Co-sponsored by Bais Abraham Congregation, Nishmah, Traditional Congregation

CONTINUING LEGAL EDUCATION SEMINAR
March 9, 2006

Topics Included:
- Rabbinic Courts: Rules & Procedures
  Rabbi Yona Reiss
- Laws of Arbitration in Rabbinic Courts: Dangers and Pitfalls of Divorce Agreements Arbitrated in Rabbinic Courts
  Esther Macner, Esq.
- The Constitutionality of the *Get* Laws: Their Uses and Misuses
  Saul Edelstein, Esq. and Abe Konstam, Esq.

Co-sponsored by NYLAG – the New York Legal Assistance Group

FILM SCREENINGS WITH PANEL DISCUSSION

Mekudeshet: Sentenced to Marriage
A film by Anat Zuria

Columbia/Barnard Hillel–October 10, 2005
Dr. Susan Aranoff, Josh Ross
Moderator–*Audrey Trachtman*
Co-sponsored by Yavneh, Israel Vaad, Lalechet. Women's Tefillah

University of Pennsylvania Hillel–November 13, 2005
Michelle Greenberg-Kobrin, Josh Ross
Moderator–*Audrey Trachtman*
Co-sponsored by OCP Scholar in Residence, Hillel Education

Washington DC JCC–December 6, 2005
Dr. Susan Aranoff, Josh Ross
Moderator–*Audrey Trachtman*
Co-sponsored by the Washington Jewish Film Festival

JCC in Manhattan–March 6, 2006
Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Michelle Greenberg-Kobrin, Dr. Beth Kolevzon
Moderator–*Dr. Giti Bendheim*
Co-sponsored by the JCC in Manhattan

Museum of Jewish Heritage–March 22, 2006
Rabbi Yona Reiss, Bronya Shaffer, Anat Zuria
Moderator–*Dr. Susan Aranoff*
Co-sponsored by the Museum of Jewish Heritage

University of Maryland Hillel–March 29, 2006
Dr. Susan Aranoff, Josh Ross
Co-sponsored by Kedma, JLI

Brandeis University–April 26, 2006
Prof. Sylvia Barack Fishman, Dr. Lisa Fishbayn, Rachell Maidenbaum Gober, Sigal Landesberg
Co-sponsored by the Hadassah Brandeis Institute, shown as part of JEWISHFILM.2006, the National Center for Jewish Film's 9th Annual Film Festival

Hebrew Institute of Riverdale–May 7, 2006
Rabbi Yona Reiss, Naomi Klass Mauer, Rivka Haut
Co-sponsored by the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

Women and Synagogue Textiles

The beautiful textiles that are made today by Jewish fabric artists are part of a long tradition. The contributions of the skills of women to the *Mishkan* (sanctuary) in the desert and the Temples in Jerusalem are documented in texts. In the description of the setting up of the *Mishkan*, we read:

All the wise-hearted women spun with their own hands, and brought in the form of spun yarn the blue, the purple, the scarlet and the fine linen. And all the women, whose hearts had stirred them in wisdom, spun the goats' hair (Exodus 35:25-26).

In the Talmud, reference is made to women weavers who worked on the repair of the curtains in the Temple. (B.Talmud *Ketubbot* 106a)

Although much embroidery was executed by men through the ages, we know that particularly in Italy from the Renaissance on, Jewish women did make synagogue textiles such as *parochets*, (ark curtains), desk covers, and torah mantles and binders. Many museums today contain pieces with inscriptions that show that women from very prominent families, such as the Ottolenghi, the Meshullami, the Finzi and the Montefiore, made and donated exquisitely embroidered textiles to the synagogue. One Torah curtain in the Jewish Museum was made especially for Shavuot for the synagogue of Pitigliano in the nineteenth century by four young girls, one of them a member of the Modigliani family. In order to do their embroidery in an atmosphere of holiness, the four women embroidered each morning while fasting.

Further evidence comes from the *Mishaberach* Prayer that was said in Italian synagogues

מִי שֶׁבֵּרַךְ אִמּוֹתֵינוּ שָׂרָה רִבְקָה רָחֵל וְלֵאָה
הוּא יְבָרֵךְ אֶת כָּל בַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁעוֹשָׂה מְעִיל
אוֹ מִטְפַּחַת לִכְבוֹד הַתּוֹרָה וְהַמְתַקֶּנֶת נֵר לִכְבוֹד
הַתּוֹרָה הקב״ה יְשַׁלֵּם שְׂכָרָהּ וְיִתֵּן לָהּ גְּמוּלָהּ
הַטּוֹב וְנֹאמַר אָמֵן״

May He who blessed our Foremothers Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah, bless every daughter of Israel who makes a Torah mantle or wrapper in honor of the Torah and prepares a candle in honor of the Torah. May G-d pay her reward and give her recompense, and let us say Amen.

The fact that these items were signed, dedicated and dated by the women who made them gives us a window into the talents of Jewish women of the past. One Torah curtain was donated for the dedication of the Sephardi synagogue in Vienna in 1887. The inscription lists by name fourteen individual women from one family who worked on the embroidery of the curtain.

It is likely that through the generations, countless unsigned textiles for synagogue and domestic ritual use were also made by women.

NEW LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN ARTISTS

Drisha Institute is accepting applications for Arts Fellowships for September 2006. Women who are professional artists will learn in an open and dynamic *Beit Midrash*, and develop skills to interpret classical Jewish texts. Visual artists, creative writers, filmmakers, musicians, and dancers are invited to apply, especially those interested in serving as educators and role models in the Jewish community. **Deadline: July 21, 2006**.

Download an application at www.drisha.org, or call 212.595.0307 or email dweiss@drisha.org

New Post High School Religious Arts Program in Israel— *Emunah V'Omanut*

In September, over twenty girls will join Emunah College for Torah and the Arts for the inaugural year of the *Emunah V'Omanut* overseas program. This new program offers high school graduates from Orthodox Day Schools across North America a year-long experience encountering Torah, Israel and the Arts. The seminary program will provide high level Torah classes in the morning and evening, and academic art classes during the afternoon, combined with a full range of trips all over the country. Students will be able to learn in the overseas courses taught in English, and join the Israeli students as integral members of their art courses. Torah studies will teach text skills and art courses technical mastery. Several elements of the program will specifically address the integration of Torah and the Arts. These include an integrative studio where art projects will center on Torah themes, and a Torah and Art seminar in which students will study *halakha* as it applies to the artistic enterprise. They will meet and work with a host of religious artists who combine Torah and art in their lives and everyday practices.

For further information about this program, visit www.EmunahTorah.org

Upcoming JOFA Events

LA REGIONAL CONFERENCE

Tentatively scheduled for September 10, 2006
Gender and Jewish Education

JOFA'S TENTH ANNIVERSARY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON FEMINISM & ORTHODOXY

February 2007 • New York City

JOFA firmly believes that feminism and the challenges it raises—questions of leadership, participation, power, equality, education—provide an opportunity for the Jewish community to explore and wrestle with our belief systems. Orthodox feminism asks us to make deliberate choices instead of passive ones about our observance. This conference will explore how to cultivate individuals who are empowered and passionate about their Jewish life, paying particular attention to the role Orthodox feminism plays in reinvigorating the Modern Orthodox home, school and synagogue.

Be sure to check our website www.jofa.org for further information on these or other upcoming events!

Female Jewish Writers

While celebrating the work of Orthodox poets, novelists and essayists of the present, it is important to remember their predecessors throughout Jewish history. Some of their writings have miraculously survived. Among poets, there exists a Hebrew poem, found in the Cairo Geniza by the wife of the famous Spanish poet Dunash Ben Labrat in the tenth century. We do not know her first name, but her lyrical poem expresses her distress when her husband was forced to leave Spain, as well as her love for him. There are also poems in Arabic by Qasmuna of Granada in the eleventh or twelfth century, thought to be the daughter of Shmuel Hanagid, and a poetic prayer in Hebrew by a woman called Merecina from Gerona probably in the fifteenth century which is prefaced by the line, "This song was made by a woman of virtue, the lady Merecina, the Rabbiness from Gerona", and draws on biblical and rabbinic sources with an acrostic forming her name from the first letters of each line.

Among many educated women in Renaissance Italy, two stand out. Deborah Ascarelli, who lived in Rome in the sixteenth century, translated many Hebrew liturgical and rabbinic works into Italian, and wrote her own poems in Italian including one relating the story of the apocryphal heroine, Susannah. Sara Sullam was a scholar and poet in seventeenth century Venice who knew Hebrew. Latin, Greek, Spanish and Italian by the time she was fifteen. After she married, she held a literary salon in her home, and was involved in scholarly polemical debates. Her Italian poetry included many sonnets.

Perhaps the most renowned female Jewish poet was Rachel Morpurgo, who lived in Trieste in the nineteenth century. She came from the famous Luzzatto family, and wrote poems in Hebrew on both religious and secular themes, many in sonnet form. Married with four children, she was said to have only been able to find time to write her poetry at night or on *Rosh Hodesh* which was considered a semi-holiday for women. She was highly acclaimed in Jewish scholarly circles as a Hebrew poet. Her last poem was written before her death aged 81, and was left unfinished.

In Central Europe, many women wrote poetic prayers and prayerful poems (such as Hannah Katz in Amsterdam, Toibe Pan in Prague, Roizel Fishels in Krakow). One famous 17th century scholar in Prague, Rivka Tiktiner, besides writing *Menkat Rivkah* a book of ethics in Yiddish, also wrote a special and sophisticated song for *Simhat Torah*.

Although on the whole, literacy rates were lower in non-European communities than in the West, there are also a few surviving poems written by women in Kurdistan, Yemen and Morocco and Tunisia. In the sixteenth century, Asenath, the daughter of a rabbi in Kurdistan, wrote a long poem of petition and lament, in the form of a rhymed letter. Another woman, Freha Bat Avraham, was born in Morocco at the beginning of the eighteenth century and moved with her family to Tunis where she wrote poems in Hebrew. Especially among the women of the Ladino communities, there was also a strong tradition of oral poems and songs through the centuries.

How many of our foremothers had the time to keep a diary or journal or write an autobiography? The most famous one to have survived is that of Gluckl of Hameln, a woman of the seventeenth century. Born in Hamburg in 1646, she wrote in Yiddish about her life, her marriage at age fourteen, the death of her husband, how she carried on in business by herself, her efforts and successes in marrying off her children, and her far less successful second marriage and widowhood. In the book that she started after her first husband died, there are wonderful details about Shabbetai Zvi and many others that give an intimate and vivid portrayal of this deeply pious, yet adventurous, woman and her times.

Famous as a novelist, essayist and translator in her native England as well as in America, was the nineteenth century writer Grace Aguilar. Before she died at the age of 31, she had devoted her life to educating young women in religious matters and the Jewish faith and tradition, both by helping her mother to run a school for girls and by her voluminous writings.

Tarnished Holiness: On Viewing *Mekudeshet*

By Nessa Rapoport

On March 23, 2006, I atypically left my husband, son and daughters at home, on a weeknight, to attend a screening of *Mekudeshet*.

I watched this documentary portrait of three *agunot*, women 'chained' to husbands unwilling to give them a Jewish divorce, with my blood beating unnaturally and a growing physical revulsion. To force myself to stay until the movie's end, I had to remember that all I was being asked to do was *watch*—for a single evening—what these women and so many others have been enduring for years or even decades.

As an observant Jew in love with Judaism, whose children are third-generation students in Orthodox day schools, I was raised with what I have called elsewhere a patrician pity for those Jews who did not understand the beauty of this path. After seeing *Mekudeshet,* and for the only time in my half century of life, I felt a sentiment I had read about but never experienced: an unbearable shame on behalf of every Jew who loves *halakha.*

I thought I knew, but I did not know.

Anat Zuria's camera took me inside the rabbinic court and compelled me to watch and to listen to what is done in the name of *halakha*, a uniquely pernicious *hillul hashem*—not one that contradicts the most essential principles, as murder does, but one that uses the instrument of *halakha* itself to commit spiritual murder and make a mockery of our oft-uttered claims on behalf of Jewish marriage, sexuality, and the privileging of family life.

Why are we who love *halakha* able to tolerate the intolerable travesty of *agunot?* Why are helpless apologetics by rabbis for the technical difficulties—which no one is deemed learned enough to understand or resolve—acceptable to a people and its leaders who can give eloquent speeches about how the word *tzedek,* justice, is repeated in the commandment that we pursue justice because *tzedek* is the foundation of Jewish law and life?

If we learned about another religion that placed the constraints of its legal system above the worst kind of injustice imposed on its adherents, wouldn't we feel a secret triumphalism about how much more enlightened our own tradition is? This tragedy is our disgrace.

Every rabbi, and every person who is contemplating becoming a rabbi, must watch *Mekudeshet.* Because if it is up to the rabbis to resolve this betrayal of justice at the heart of *halakha*, then each rabbi should understand that the title and honor are bound to an august responsibility: Every day that you are a rabbi and are not fighting with all your powers to redress this wrong is a day that you have no right to stand at a pulpit, beneath a *huppah,* or at the head of a table in a *beit midrash* to proclaim the righteousness of the Jewish way.

As for those of us who are not rabbis, it is our responsibility to be unrelenting in our revulsion and unyielding in declaring our Creator both infinitely just and infinitely merciful. The cry to heaven of even one *agunah* is unbearable to such a Creator and a desecration of the Name.

More pertinently, as people who believe in *na'aseh ve-nishma*, as people who must *live* justly, we should not give a penny of *tzedaka* to any rabbi or organization that has not made this link between *tzedek* and *tzedaka* explicit and active. Every one of us can pursue this policy and teach it to our children until no one can find a living *agunah* and the issue is a footnote in scholarly histories.

Agunot are not a feminist problem or a woman's problem. They are a Jewish problem, one that mocks our piety and scorns our virtuous proclamations about the nobility of Jewish life.

Many centuries ago, our rabbis found *halakhic* solutions to what had been economically unbearable although inscribed in the Torah itself, amending the law that forgave debt whose consequence had been, prior to rabbinic intervention, the inability of the poor to borrow. Do we want to say of ourselves that when money was at stake, we found *halakhic* paths that were acceptable to everyone, but when women's and children's lives were at stake, we found only impotence and "we're so sorry"?

And when the issue of *agunot* is resolved, future generations of Jews will rightfully judge every Orthodox rabbi in our day for his tolerating this defiling of *kedusha*. The One to whom we are so devoted, Judge of all, is judging rabbis at this moment, declaring what a righteous, merciful Lord must declare: "Face to face with this desecration of my Name, you did not act."

If you cannot get to a screening of Mekudeshet, *you can buy a copy to watch and then circulate it privately, as I am. It is available from Women Make Movies, Inc. at www.wmm.com or 212-925-0606.*

***Nessa Rapoport** is the author, most recently, of the family memoir* House on the River: A Summer Journey. *Her column,* Inner Life, *appears in New York's* The Jewish Week *and is available on thejewishweek.com.*

RCA Reaffirms its Commitment to Preventing *Agunah* Tragedies

The Rabbinical Council of America, at its recent convention in Newark, New Jersey, reaffirmed its commitment to preventing future instances of *iggun,* in which a husband refuses to grant his wife a religious divorce even after their marriage is dissolved according to civil law. The organization adopted a resolution insisting that no member Rabbi officiate at a wedding unless a proper prenuptial agreement has been executed. This has long been advocated by JOFA and its Agunah Task Force. We welcome this move by the RCA and applaud the rabbis involved.

Rabbi Haskel Lookstein of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, the resolution's author, explained that he wanted to strengthen the hand of those Rabbis who regularly use the RCA's prenuptial document, but occasionally encounter resistance on the part of a couple.

The prenuptial document currently used by the RCA and its affiliated Beit Din of America was formulated by Rabbi Mordechai Willig of Yeshiva University, together with Rabbi Zalman Nehemiah Goldberg of Jerusalem, who attempted to find a mechanism that would prevent husbands from withholding a *get* from their wives, once a marriage has been dissolved. Rather than use a form of conditional marriage statement, or inject new language into the *ketubah*, the RCA document simply requires the husband to continue to support his wife until the get has been executed, stipulating a dollar figure per day. An optional additional document serves as an arbitration agreement, specifying a Jewish court of law, or *beit Din*, at which the couple agree to settle any related issues. Approved by leading *halakhic* authorities in America and Israel, the prenuptial agreement is in wide use among Rabbis with RCA affiliation. Recently reissued, it can be viewed and downloaded at www.rabbis.org. Additional information is available from the Orthodox Caucus at www.ocweb.org.

JOFA Letters to the Editor

JEWISH ORTHODOX FEMINIST ALLIANCE

DEAR EDITOR,

I read with interest the article in the recent JOFA Journal on Congregation Interns. As a Rabbi of a Synagogue (United Orthodox Synagogues) with a female intern (Sara Wolkenfeld) I would like to share some thoughts with you.

Our internship program is unique in that we are in Houston, so Sara has to fly here from New York once a month to be with us. Despite the distance, this program has been a resounding success.

Sara's main focus is in teaching *taharat hamishpacha* at monthly classes held on Sunday morning. Some of these classes were specifically for our *mikvah* attendants and others were open to the entire community (women only). Sara is articulate, well prepared and passionate when it comes to her teaching. Some of the obvious results are that there is more *talmud torah* going on and that more women now have a better understanding of *taharat hamishpacha*. Sara (together with me) has also been able to revamp *mikvah* procedures. An unknown benefit has been an increase in the questions regarding *taharat hamishpacha* that I am receiving. I attribute this increase directly to Sara's classes and the greater emphasis put on serious study of this subject in our community.

In addition, Sara has also made her telephone number and email address available to the entire community in case there are women who would rather ask her questions directly.

Aside from *taharat hamishpacha*, Sara serves as a teacher to prospective converts. She has also given *shiurim* and led discussions for the entire shul community (men and women).

Sara serves as a wonderful role model for the women and young women in our community of the level of knowledge and mastery of primary halakhic sources that a woman can achieve. Giving Sara a position of honor in our community serves to highlight the fact that she has achieved a certain level of knowledge allowing her to be a teacher of *torah*.

In terms of understanding of expectations, both the community and Sara were very clear on this and I think this is why we have had such a wonderful experience.

All the best,

Rabbi Barry Gelman
United Orthodox Synagogues
Houston,Texas

DEAR FRIENDS OF JOFA,

Last December, I sent you a translation into Spanish of the JOFA Hanukah *d'var Torah*. Several friends met in my home for Hanukah, and we read and commented on the *d'var Torah*. Some women after the discussion decided to have their own Hanukah lights at home from now on.

Last February, I finished the tractate *Berakhot*. As far as I know no other woman in Catalonia, and probably in Spain, has ever done this. I felt very happy and told the rabbi, but he did not say a word about a *seudah* or congratulate me. He just asked: "What tractate are you doing next?"

I answered, "Tractate *Shabbat*."

"When?"

"Now I feel I need a rest. I shall start in a few months."

"People who love *Torah* don't stop."

That was all.

I met the President of the Community Board and explained to him that I had finished *Berakhot* and I was having *nahala* (sephardic word for *yahrtzeit*) for my mother so I would like to have a *seudah* and give a *shiur*.

The President congratulated me, agreed and approached the rabbi and the *gabbai* and requested the *seudah* and the *shiur*. The answer was:

"She can speak only to women."

The President was very upset, but felt it was not the right time to fight the rabbi and the *gabbai*. He offered me the opportunity to give a lecture on the hall of the third floor, but I did not accept because I wanted a *seudah* and a *shiur*. So I invited some friends to my home on a Sunday afternoon, we ate and I gave my *shiur* on *Berakhot* 15a.

If any man (as far as I know since year 1492 no man, except the rabbi, in Barcelona and all Catalonia has ever finished a Talmud tractate) would achieve such a thing, he would receive an *aliyah*, all the community would sing and praise him in the synagogue and he would get, of course, a *seudah* and he would give a *shiur* to all Jews, men and women. I got just silence. Every *Shabbat* morning, the rabbi says the prayer for the congregation including a blessing for the members, their wives and children. I am excluded-I have no husband, and all women without a husband are in the same position.

Yesterday, I spoke with the man in charge of *Talmud Torah* who is very angry with the rabbi's behavior to me. He told me that he will devise a way for me to give a *shiur* and asked me to start a *bat mitzvah* program with him. So, let's go on…

To read JOFA Journal is a need and a pleasure for me. I don't feel so isolated. Sharing is so good. Thank you for all you are doing.

Miriam Massons
Barcelona, Spain

DEAR EDITOR,

I was very excited to see Malke Bina and Matan given such a prominent place in the last JOFA Journal about Women in New Roles in the Jewish Community. My mother, Judy Hurwich, z"l, took great pride in the fact that its beginnings saw fruit in classes that Malke led around our dining room table. As Matan got its name and grew, my family were all partners in the excitement that it generated.

Allow me to comment that, since the article is appearing in a primarily American publication, I am sorry that it did not reflect the warm ties Matan has always had with Drisha in NY. I remember my mother saying that before any program was started she would call David Silber to ask his advice. She said that the school, the scholars' programs, adult learning, and other initiatives were modeled on Drisha.

It is a great tribute to my grandparents, and to my grandmother in particular, that their three daughters enthusiastically exercised their deep commitment to learning by taking active roles in the foundation of what would become trail blazing institutions in the study of *Torah le'shma* for women on both sides of the Atlantic.

As women possess a special creative power, I pray that such fruitful cooperation will continue to rise and flourish for many years to come.

Yeshar Koach to Matan and to Drisha on the exciting work they have accomplished and the dreams they still seek to fulfill.

Sincerely yours,

Ariel Braun
Jerusalem, Israel

Mission Statement of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance

The Alliance's mission is to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and political opportunities for women within the framework of *halakha*. We advocate meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues, houses of learning, and Jewish communal organizations to the full extent possible within *halakha*. Our commitment is rooted in the belief that fulfilling this mission will enrich and uplift individual and communal life for all Jews.

☐ **COUNT ME IN!** I want to support JOFA's work and have an opportunity to be part of a community striving to expand meaningful participation for women in Jewish life.

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All contributions are tax deductible to the extent permitted by law. Thank you.

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