***Sh’lach L’cha, Numbers* 13:1 – 15:41 לך שלח**

**Aliza Freedman, South Africa/Israel**

*Sh’lach L’cha* recounts the journey of the 12 scouts, one for each tribe of Israel, as they make their way into the Land of Canaan for the first time. The lesson of this *parasha* rests in the foresight of two men, Caleb and Joshua. Of the 12 scouts sent to reconnoiter, only these two men recognized the true beauty of the land bestowed to them by God and, through unwavering belief, had the vision to trust in the success of the venture.

My artwork concentrates on expressing the strength, wisdom, and compassion of Caleb and Joshua, who were confident in their decision to enter the Land of Canaan. It portrays them in contrast to the other ten men, who convey a mixture of doubt, anxiety, disagreement, and opposition, alongside the women of the community who had to build their own strength to face the difficulties.

The lessons of *Sh’lach L’cha* are timeless, and can be applied throughout history and our world today. We need to stand up for what we believe, no matter the consequences. We learn that what is popular is not always right, and what is right is not always popular. The ten men who resisted entering the Land of Canaan were in the popular camp, while the vision and faith of Caleb and Joshua were questioned and undermined.

**Reflections by the Artist**

I grew up with an ambiguous sense of Jewish observance in a small town in South Africa. Only after training as a graphic designer and working in advertising for many years, did I begin concentrating on producing work connected to Judaism. This coincided with my move to Australia and with the creation of my first piece of Jewish artwork, my own *ketuba* [Jewish marriage contract]. My primary form of Jewish creative expression was in the largely Eastern European tradition of paper-cutting, once a flourishing Jewish craft connected to the festival of Shavuot.

My interest in connecting my artwork to Judaism grew significantly when my three children attended the Jewish-affiliated Mount Scopus Memorial College in Melbourne. This interest was reinforced by my tenure as an artist-in-residence at their school. During this time, I supported the students in developing and deepening personal connections to their lives as young Jewish artists.

Today I combine my work in four-shaft weaving, painting, design, and paper-cutting, continuing to explore my relationship to Judaism, to traditional craft and to the joy of sharing this meaningful work with others.

**Professional Background**

Aliza Freedman is a Hebrew calligrapher, artist, and weaver with work showcased throughout the US, London, and Australia. Freedman made aliyah [immigration] to Israelin November 2014 and currently lives in Netanya, Israel. Her art is integrated into the Women of the Book's logo.

# *Korach, Numbers* 16:1 – 18:32 קורח

## Nava Levine-Coren, Canada/Israel

This piece engages with two stories in *parashat Korach*. The hidden story is that of a woman who plays a role in the *parasha*, but whose story is not recorded in the *parasha* text. The revealed Torah story is of Korach’s rebellion and God’s response, and the underlying theme of the struggle for balance between equality and hierarchy. One of my goals in creating my work for *parashat* *Korach* was to retell the story of the wife of Ohn ben Pelet, a woman whose story is revealed only in the Talmud, *Tractate Sanhedrin* 109b–110.

Ohn’s name is mentioned only once in the very first verse of the *parasha*, together with Korach, Datan, and Aviram, the key figures in the rebellion against Moses. The Talmud explains that this is because Ohn’s unnamed wife saved him from taking part in the rebellion. When he tells his wife he has already pledged his allegiance to Korach’s rebellion, she tells him: “Sit and I will save you.” She gives him wine, gets him drunk, and puts him to sleep inside their tent. She then sits at the entrance of the tent and unbraids her hair. She relies on the sense of modesty of the Jewish people. Anyone who approaches will quickly run away from her because of her loosened hair, including the rebels who are sent to collect Ohn.

In my artwork, the image of Ohn’s wife is printed over the text of the *parasha*. The text has been scribed in four columns, as if the sheet of parchment were a section of an actual Torah scroll. The text is partly seen and partly obscured by the image of Ohn’s wife, so that she merges with or emerges from the text itself. Although her story is not written in the text of the Torah, it is a part of the history of the women in the desert and emerges from the “white fire” — the spaces between the letters, the gaps in the story that are filled in by midrashic and talmudic accounts.

My pink text and the flowering wreath represent another theme in this *parasha*: the struggle to find a balance between equality and hierarchy, as expressed in Korach’s argument and God’s response. Korach argues, “The whole nation is holy.” His argument is that we all experienced the revelation at Sinai; why do we need a caste of priests who are holier than the rest of the nation? God responds by commanding Moses to gather the staffs of the princes of each tribe and have them write their names on their staffs and place them in the *mishkan*, the holy Tabernacle. God causes Aharon’s staff to blossom, showing that he is chosen by God to be high priest. Moses is commanded to keep this blossoming staff in the *mishkan* as a constant reminder to the people that there is a hierarchy mandated by God. The blossoming staff symbolizes hierarchy and separation — the opposite of the equality for which Korach argues.

The words of Korach’s complaint and God’s response are written in pink because Korach’s words resonate with me as an Orthodox Jewish woman. Korach’s desire for a world of equality is one with which I identify. It is an equality for which many contemporary women practicing traditional Judaism strive: equal access for men and women in Torah learning, ritual practice, communal leadership, and other aspects of Jewish life. The blossoming staff appears here not as a linear staff, but as a wreath, a symbol of hierarchy bent into a circle, representing a reconciliation of the notions of hierarchy and equality in the world to come, maybe even in my lifetime.

### Reflections by the Artist

When I was a young girl, I would accompany my father to shul and sit with him in the men’s section. My strongest memories from that time are of following the Torah reading with him. I sat, the *Chumash* in front of me, and my father would stand behind me, his arm over my shoulder as he pointed to the place with his finger. When he had an aliyah, I would go up to the *bima* with him. When I grew too old to sit in the men’s section, my father and I parted at the doors of the shul. I moved to the other side of the *mechitza* [separation curtain] and sat by myself in the women’s section. I watched the men in the congregation reaching out to kiss the Torah as it passed them, huddling around it at the *bima* for the Torah reading, but I could not reach out to touch it myself as I had done for years with my father. My only glimpse of the actual letters on parchment came when the open sefer Torah was lifted at the end of the service. My experience of having started out in such close proximity and then being separated has heightened my attachment and yearning to be close to the actual physical scroll. I experienced my separation in the women’s section not as a separation from the men in the congregation, but as a separation from the sefer Torah and all that it symbolized. I began to feel that my contribution to Jewish life was valued less than the contribution of those who were permitted to be near the Torah. The sefer Torah and its black letters with their crowns on parchment, became a symbol of something deeply beloved, holy, and at the same time mysterious.

As an artist, I am drawn to the work of Marc Podwal and Ben Shahn, who have incorporated the letters of the Hebrew alphabet into their work. The work of Shirin Neshat, who combines Islamic calligraphy with images of women, and the work of Ghada Amer, whose work incorporates texts from the Koran that deal with women, resonate deeply with me. Their works mirror my struggle to incorporate the sacred texts of my religion into my experience as a woman within my tradition.

### Professional Background

# Nava Levine-Coren is an illustrator and Hebrew scribe originally from New York and currently living and working in Jerusalem. She studied illustration at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and learned *sofrut* [scribing] from master scribe, Dov Laimon, in Jerusalem. Levine-Coren writes and illuminates custom *ketubot*, *megillot*, and other Jewish documents.

# *Chukat, Numbers* 19:1 – 22:1 חוקת

## Janet Shafner, USA

## Janet Shafner has woven together significant and seemingly shamanic events of *parashat Chukat*: the red heifer — a cow brought to the priests as a sacrifice whose ashes were used for the ritual purification of an Israelite who had come in contact with a corpse; the death of Miriam and the consequent disappearance of the well which had provided water for the Israelites in the desert; and the copper serpent fashioned by Moses as an antidote for those bitten by the serpents an angry God had sent upon the Israelites for their complaints against God and Moses. Shafner takes these events and unites them in a midrashic tale of mystery and power. Shafner wrote about her work:

## *The image of the red cow in a fiery triangle, surrounded by flames, is contrasted with the image of Miriam in an adjacent triangle of water, surrounded by waves of water. Central to both triangles is the copper serpent coiled on a pole. The contrast of fire and water is most meaningful to me, so I painted the images in opposing hot and cool colors and bordered them with violet shapes, which are a combination of those hues.*

### Reflections by the Artist

In the late eighties, I came to the end of a series of landscapes that, inspired by a trip to Israel, had begun to look like biblical terrain. I had been working on them for two years, but they no longer interested me. I could find no inspiration until a friend suggested: Just start painting the simplest thing you can find. It was autumn and I went into my backyard, gathered some branches of my apple tree with its wormy apples, set them into Perrier bottles, and began to paint. With great gobs of oil color loaded on my brush, I painted the apples with their luscious shadows of violet and green, and found myself thinking of Adam and Eve. These same apples now in front of me were mysteriously connected to the apples that so seductively confronted our first ancestors. How to make the connection?

I remembered studying Romanesque church facades: how the entrance doors were surmounted by a lunette over the lintel that displayed a significant scene of a transcendent world. Those entering the temporal world of the interior of the building were reminded of the connection. By superimposing a lunette form on the main canvas, I could treat the two parts of the painting as two realms, one temporal and one transcendent, connected by a common idea.

I began to explore the Hebrew Bible. Although I live as an observant Jew, I never had a religious education. Reading through the texts for subject matter became my way of learning. I found that the dramatic lives of our biblical ancestors were strikingly contemporary, and I was fascinated by the connections. Everything that touches us deeply today has a parallel in the Bible. Family jealousy, sexual obsession, enduring love and sacrifice, murder, rape, incest, people’s inhumanity to others, even ethnic cleansing — it is all there. I began to read commentaries and associated texts, such as midrashim*,* which explore the inner meanings of the Hebrew writings. These readings became a profound source of inspiration for my paintings. The women of the Bible particularly fascinated me, and I made dozens of paintings of women who revealed their wisdom and power by taking actions that changed the course of history. I also painted the conflicts and visions of men.

Kindness and cruelty, family interactions, love and its perversions, and the overarching principle that God is watching our actions are cosmic themes that are difficult to put into words. I want to explore the deep significance that I find in the lives of our biblical ancestors and their continuing connection and message to us today. And I want to do it in paint. Using the interaction of multiple panels and subjects allows me to explore some of these themes from various viewpoints. Although the pictures reveal much of the stories, even more is merely suggested. I leave it to observers to bring their own sensibility to the work and connect to it from their own experiences.[[1]](#footnote-1)\***\***

### Professional Background

Janet Shafner, *z”l* [1931–2011], received a BA degree in art history from Barnard College and an MA in studio art from Connecticut College. Shafner taught and curated at the Lyman Allen Art Museum in New London, Connecticut. Her works have been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions, as well as in museums and private collections. Following her death in 2011, a retrospective of her work was held at the Hebrew Union College-JIR Museum in New York City.

***Balak, Numbers* 22:2 – 25:9 בלק**

## Susie Lubell, USA/Israel

On a first read of *parashat Balak*, we encounter a ruler who, fearing the reputation and growing numbers of the Israelites, asks the prophet Bilam to curse them. And, in what has become one of the Torah’s most quotable moments, instead of cursing the Israelites he blesses them: יִשְׂרָאֵל מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב אֹהָלֶיךָ טֹּבוּ מַה / How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel. It’s a colorful story, equal parts comedy, drama, magic, and gore. There’s a paranoid ruler, a prophet, an angel, a plague, a massacre, and a talking female donkey.

On the way to curse the Israelites, Bilam’s donkey stops when she sees an angel of God standing in their way. Bilam urges her to move ahead, as he does not see the angel, and when she refuses, he beats her. Finally, the donkey says to him in a voice that resonates both as his companion and his servant, “Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?” God then opens Bilam’s eyes so that he can see the Angel and heed God’s warning.

Bilam and his donkey are depicted here as a couple. Bilam is authoritative. He is holding his stick and has a grip on the female donkey, the “woman,” his property. She is demure. Fearful. Submissive. Domesticated. Beside her is a gloriously vibrant and twisted tree, a symbol of all that is feral and feminine. The tree is the memory of the Garden of Eden (and the incident of the serpent, the only other talking animal in the Torah), and it gently tugs at her, drawing her closer to her feminine strength, her unusual precious gifts, and her connection to the spiritual world. The Angel of God stands before them as a seagull, humble like the donkey she protects, winged like an angel and crowned to portray God’s power over Bilam. She is the Shechinah, the female incarnation of God.

Meanwhile, Bilam looks off toward the Israelites, 38 years into their 40 years of wandering in the desert. Like the donkey, they are a people that have also been beaten into submission by an almighty figure. They act out; they, too, are punished. Torah scholars have said that the blessing on their dwelling places refers to the way they are set up facing away from each other, supporting the development of a private and modest society. But this far in their journey, they still falter, tempted by local women, engaging in sexual relations with other nations, causing God to unleash a terrible plague and the Israelite Pinchas to stab one such Israelite-foreign couple to death. Still, they are nearing the end of the wilderness journey. They are succumbing to patriarchal civilization, as conveyed by the primary image of Bilam and the donkey. They are moving into the suburbs, parceling out the subdivision and leaving the wilderness behind, for better or worse.

### Reflections by the Artist

I think of myself as a Jewish artist in the same way that I think of myself as a woman artist. Being Jewish is as much an integral part of who I am as a person as my gender. Both aspects largely factor in the art that I create and how I create it. Jewish liturgy and the physical landscape of the Torah have always figured prominently in my work, though I never intentionally set out to focus on these themes. It unfolded naturally as I began my career creating *ketubot* [wedding contracts] for friends and family. I felt a certain visual power emerge as I paired text with imagery.

Having grown up in an active Reform Jewish community in the United States, the stories and teachings from the Torah, along with our holidays and celebrations, are woven into the fabric of who I am at my core. Since we moved to Israel nearly four years ago, I feel even more connected to the physical and historical relevance of the Torah. I am drawn to the natural forms of Israel’s native species and topographies. Even my daily interaction with the Hebrew language serves as a muse for my work.

In the last years, I have shifted toward a more intuitive, organic style of painting, a process I feel to be deeply feminine. I start by asking for guidance in my work, so that I am able to see what I am called to paint. Using my fingers and palms, I make marks on the canvas with acrylic, pastel, and pencil. I collage bits of paper and ephemera to the canvas. I turn the work upside down. I spray it with water. I watch what happens. I notice. I look for clues. The beginning stages are chaotic as I hone in on what is taking shape. Many times, without my consciously looking toward Torah and Judaism as inspiration, they find their way into my work in subtle and sometimes obvious ways, much in the same way that they find their way into my daily life.

### Professional Background

Susie Lubell is a self-taught artist and illustrator. Her work has been included in galleries and private collections worldwide, including the Lucille Packard Children's Hospital of Palo Alto, which hosts the entire collection of her watercolor animal illustrations. She also creates lively *ketubot* for wedding and anniversary celebrations and whimsical illustrations for children.

# *Pinchas, Numbers* 25:10 – 30:1 פנחס

## Diane Samuels, USA

Having petitioned Moses to receive a land allocation upon the male census-based division of the land, Zelophehad’s five daughters — Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah — advocated for and succeeded in changing land ownership from a solely male inheritance. Zelophehad had not left male heirs and the daughters wisely argued that their father’s name would be lost should they not be granted a named portion. The five daughters were victorious, though toward the end of the Book of *Numbers* the members of their tribe protest. As a result, the daughters of Zelophehad must marry within their tribe in order to keep the estate. Still, we remember the daughters for their brave advocacy in a time in which such protest by women was rare.

I divided the parchment into 12 sections based in size on the number of people counted in each tribe. Zelophehad was part of the tribe of Manasseh. Using carmine red ink, I hand-transcribed the entire text of the *parasha* beginning in the center of the tribe of Manasseh and radiating out to cover the 11 other land allocations. When I completed the *parasha*, I hand-transcribed in sepia ink scholar Dr. Judith Hauptman’s commentary on *parashat Pinchas*. In between each wind of the spiral are tally marks in groups of five to represent the counting of individuals for the census. Each of the 12 sections is tinted a different color and labeled with the name of the tribe it represents. The spiral radiating from the center of Manasseh is meant to look both topographical and anatomical.

### Reflections by the Artist

In the early 1990s, I began to read Jewish folktales. I loved the stories. These tales taught me about family dynamics, the Jewish community and how it dealt with its problems, the importance of generosity to everyone across social strata, and the importance of words and letters. I learned that these folktales cross cultures and that the core stories exist in many different cultures around the world with details tailored to each.

There were two stories that particularly intrigued me. One is the golem tale, the story of transformation of earth to a living creature using the word *emet* [truth]. I love the story on many levels. Like the art process, it transforms materials into something that is beyond the sum of its parts. Intrinsic to the story is the understanding that once something is made, it can take on a meaning and a life of its own that requires attention, clarity, and responsibility — just like a work of art.

The second folktale that I love is the *alef-bet* story, the story of a man who cannot read or write. He can, however, recite the *alef-bet*. So he asks God to take his letters and form them into prayers. It is a story of giving with a full heart. It is also a kabbalistic notion about the importance of the letters of the alphabet as the building blocks of the world, since they form words that can be configured into expressions of good or evil.

Since my first introduction to these folktales, I have used text, letters, and often the stories themselves, as the foundation of my work. Other peoples’ words and handwriting serve as my literal and figurative raw material. I build works that accrete, layer by layer, from community engagements. These layers are formed, literally, from the words of interviews and other informal conversations shared with people on the street, in cafés, in their homes. They are layers made of places from castings, drawings, photographs, audio recordings, and maps. Other layers include archival documents, narratives of events, histories, memoirs, folktales, and literature.

### Professional Background

Diane Samuels is a visual artist with both studio and public arts practices. In both, she works collaboratively within communities to develop multi-disciplinary, text based works of intricate detail. Samuels holds BA and MA degrees from Carnegie Mellon University. In 2013, she was recipient of a Rockefeller Bellagio Residency in Italy and an American Academy in Jerusalem Fellowship.

# [42]

# *Matot, Numbers* 30:2 – 32:42 מטות

## Chava Shtraykher, Russia/USA

The work I have created is centered on the figure of Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, and the central figure of the Book of *Ruth*. In some Jewish traditions, it is taught that a woman should not place herself in the public realm. Not because she is worthless or spiritually low or second class, but precisely for the opposite reason. Her purpose is more hidden: to serve as the spiritual strength behind her husband.

In this same manner, there is a contemporary commentary that compares a woman to a sefer Torah. It is taught that the sefer Torah has a particular status of holiness. For this reason it is kept in a sacred place, uncovered only in celebration and ceremony so as to uplift and celebrate the community. So it is with a husband and wife. A modest and righteous woman is the subject of holiness for her husband alone. Ruth, the commentator teaches us, was the embodiment of this quality. This is why she became the great-grandmother of King David, from whose lineage the Messiah will descend. In my work, I have placed Ruth standing behind the group of soldiers who are doing the will of God, as they understand it, by fighting with the Midianites. She represents the hidden spiritual strength behind the physical power of men at war.

### Reflections by the Artist

Before leaving the Soviet Union, I was not involved in Jewish practices, even though we experienced a lot of anti-Semitism. To a large extent, anti-Semitism didn’t matter because, as non-conformists, we knew that we were beyond the classifications made by others. As an adolescent and young adult, the most important thing in my life was art. Being part of an underground artist group helped me to transcend the Soviet national mentality; we artists and visionaries placed ourselves outside the Soviet nation. My family home was a gathering place for artists and intellectuals, Jewish and otherwise. Once a week, we welcomed artists, poets, musicians, writers, journalists, and freethinkers into our home which served as an underground salon. We held our own exhibitions as part of our non-conformist activities, since we were closed out of all organized Soviet exhibitions.

Shortly before my family received permission to leave the former Soviet Union, I was afforded an opportunity to participate in a women’s exhibition. Nothing like this had ever taken place in Odessa. For some time, we had been fighting for female members of our non-conformist group to participate in an official public exhibition, without worrying that the KGB would show up. People were very excited about the possibility. Each woman was permitted to exhibit one piece of work. The selected artists, mostly well known in the art world, were expected to include a work in the style of Soviet realism.

I chose otherwise. I was working in figurative painting, but not necessarily realism. Though I had learned realism painting in my art school training and employed this style in commissioned work, it was not of interest to me in my own creative work. I never worked like that, for it would have made me a Soviet nationalist.

The Soviet officials asked the newly appointed Chief Counselor in Odessa to select one artwork from the women’s exhibition to become part of a State collection. He chose mine. The Soviets were not supportive of the choice because I was an unknown artist and not a member of an official Soviet art group. They managed to “convince” the Chief Counselor to change his mind and my work was replaced with that of another artist in the show.

We had been refuseniks for ten years before we left the Soviet Union and settled in Brooklyn, New York. In Brooklyn, we found ourselves in a spiritual void. No one around us had the same interests; there was no one with whom we could identify. We believed that what we had left in Russia was real spirituality, and nothing else was possible. For about a year, we felt as if we lived in a vacuum. After a while, we met American Jews, religious people who began to invite us for *shabes* [Shabbat]. At first, the invitation was once in three weeks; eventually it became every week. After a year and half, we started to become Orthodox. I began to think about everything in my life differently.

For the next ten years, as I made this transition, I could not produce my own work. Everything I had done previously felt like it had been idol worship. I took up work as a textile artist, earning money in prestigious companies in New York. But none of it was my work. Then one day, 15 years ago, I had an opportunity to work with the elderly who were desperate to learn art and to make something. I realized what a shame it was to have such a gift as mine and not use it. And so I began to paint again. This time it was my own work — meaningful and powerful from the inside out.

### Professional Background

Chava Shtraykher was raised in Odessa on the Black Sea and spent summers in the Carpathian Mountains. She attended the Theatrical School of Arts in Odessa, Ukraine, after which she started her 30-year career as a textile artist. Shtraykher’s paintings have been included in numerous group and solo exhibitions abroad and in the US, including the Amsterdam Whitney Gallery in New York City.

***Mas’ei, Numbers* 33:1 – 36:13 מעשה**

## Shoshana Ruerup, Germany \*

Engaging with religious Jewish texts is a vital practice in my personal and artistic life. Text study happens with a pen in hand, as I visualize ideas while I read. In this process, I am confronted with the limitations of my own consciousness. Therefore I often work in series, drawing upon one thought to the next. In creating for *parashat* *Mas’ei,* I reduced this process to a single work, beginning by reviewing the entire Book of *Exodus*.

Researching commentaries and traditional midrashim from *Exodus* helped me to clarify what is essential in the story and how I would approach this work as a whole.

*Midrash Tanhuma, Pekudei 9*, reads: “You find that when the Israelites suffered hard labor in Egypt that Pharaoh decreed that they should not sleep at home or have sexual relations with their wives.

Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta said:

“What did the Israelite women do? They would go down to draw water from the river, whereupon the Holy One prepared small fish for them inside their pitchers. They would sell some of them, cook some of them and buy with them wine and go out into the work fields to feed their husbands. After they had eaten, they took their mirrors and looked into them together with their husbands. The wife would say: I am better looking than you. The husband would say: I am better looking! And in this way they aroused their sexual desire and became fruitful and multiplied.”

I became intrigued by the repeated role of beauty and desire in Jewish texts, wondering where these issues lead and what their function may be. I am curious about the connections between beauty and structure in the travels of the Israelites and in building their society. Chaos is transformed into the beauty of structures, into orderliness, into attentiveness, into care. This plan — care for the land, its borders, and its people — is laid out in the text of *parashat Mas’ei*. Through this care, the land will flourish, fruitful, and beautiful.

### Reflections by the Artist

I am most deeply motivated by what connects us as human beings and less by what divides. I engage with Jewish texts through my artmaking with great respect and sometimes also with great uncertainty. There is so much tradition that guides my learning process. I find that there is a great deal with which to wrestle, both personally and conceptually, within the texts I encounter. Astute sensitivity is required. It is a continual process of unearthing. Delving into Jewish texts, wrestling with their meanings and looking for their place in today’s world, in my world, is tremendously influential to my art.

Being a woman informs how I learn and what I garner from this process. Learning through making art helps me to engage in the intellectual and emotional debate of our tradition and to find my own voice therein. I often feel as though I am sitting in a virtual *beit midrash* [house of study] side by side with my ancestors, past and present, whose own wrestling with these same texts helped to bring meaning into their lives and mine.

### Professional Background

Shoshana Ruerup studied fine arts in Germany and in the Netherlands. Her work is deeply influenced by traditional Jewish texts and Jewish philosophers such as Edmond Jabes and Emanuel Levinas. Ruerup sees her work as a form of Jewish study, connecting the past with the present and the future.

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This work is dedicated to Susi Rosenberg, *z”l* [1959–2015], a gifted artist from Munich in her own right.

***D’varim, Deuteronomy* 1:1 – 3:22 דברים**

## Mira Zelechower-Alexsiun, Poland

“At first glance, Mira [Zelechower-Alexsiun]’s simple paintings seem to be communicating seemingly inexpressible things. They are full of fantasy; symbolic because they depict inner life… . Portents of future catastrophes and reminiscences of bygone ones emerge out of her canvases. These paintings also feed on very strong emotions of rapture as well as peril… conveyed in a very human way. Mira’s paintings emanate hope…. Can you actually paint hope? Apparently yes.”

— Malgorzata Baranowska, Polish writer, critic, and literary historian

*Deutoronomy*, the fifth book of the Torah, is the record of Moses’s reiteration of the Commandments presented earlier in the text. He fears that the Israelite nation will not honor the rules of the Laws given at Sinai. Rabbi Jill Jacobs writes:

“According to the Bible, at the moment of revelation, ‘[the people] stood underneath the mountain.’ According to the traditional interpretation of this strange biblical locution, God uproots Mount Sinai from the ground and holds it over the people, saying, ‘If you accept the Torah, fine; if not, here shall be your grave.’ (Talmud, *[Tractate Avodah Zarah,](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.2b?lang=he-en" \t "_blank)* [2b](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.2b?lang=he-en" \t "_blank)) The implication seems to be that the Jews accepted Torah only through coercion. The Rabbis eliminate this possibility by insisting that the people said, ‘ונשמע נעשה / We will do and we will hear’ before the Revelation.”

In reality, Mount Sinai is no different from any other mountain, but the mountain in my work is ablaze with embers and Moses, arms uplifted, is visible on the heavenly mountain as well as the earthly one. One is reminded of the teaching בשמיים היא לא / The Torah is not in heaven (*Deuteronomy* 30:12).Its teachings are not out of our reach. They are for us to decipher, interpret, and put into practice here on Earth. In her work, Zelechower-Alexsiun attempts to show how what we do in this world reflects the higher world. She sees it is an enormous responsibility.

### Reflections by the Artist

Reflecting on the global collective of Jewish women artists participating in Women of the Book, the artist states:

*Every one of us thinks she is alone. I think about myself as I’m maybe the last Jew in Wrocław. Can there be other artists? All women artists? It’s strange…. It seemed to me a crazy idea.*

For most of my life I considered myself to be a non-practicing Jew. I never knew my father. In 1939, my parents escaped from Poland to the Ukraine and lived near Rostov. The Nazis killed him only two months after I was born in 1941. For 50 years, the communist regime in Poland did not discuss the Jewish Holocaust and my mother never educated me about it. She did not want me to be overshadowed by sadness. It was only over time that I began to understand who my ancestors were and that I had escaped enslavement by the Egyptians and later enslavements as well.

My life took a fateful turn in 1987 when my mother received a letter from my father’s family in Israel inviting me to visit them in Jerusalem during Pesach. This became a time during which my bonds with Judaism were awakened. After my visit to Israel, the subjects of my paintings began to change. When I later showed those new works in Jerusalem, a woman there asked me, “Aren’t you from Poland? Why is there nothing about the Holocaust in your paintings?” There were more questions like this and I determined that I had to respond to this question in my work. I plunged into my universal heritage: Judaism. I started to read, learn, and think about Jewish culture and religion.

### Professional Background

Mira Zelechower-Aleksiun graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Wroclaw, Poland in 1966. She has participated in over 80 individual and group exhibitions including the Galeria Kalambur, Wroclaw, and the Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw. Her paintings have been collected by the Vatican Museum and as well as by private collectors in Poland, Europe, and the US.

# *Va-et’chanan, Deuteronomy* 3:23 – 7:11 ואתחנן

## Sherry Camhy, USA

Long before graphite and paper were invented, precious metals were used to make finely detailed drawings on specially prepared surfaces such as parchment and vellum. Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci created exquisitely delicate studies using metalpoint. Those images have stood the test of time and grown more beautiful with age. This rendering of “Moses” on parchment is drawn with silver and gold in that same, ancient technique.

Metalpoint is a slow and difficult medium. The image must be built with unyielding even lines. The darks and lights are not easily developed or erasable. Metal marks are invisible on paper but appear like magic on certain surfaces. The secret is in the formula for the preparation of the surface that makes the drawing visible, the lines permanent and long lasting. The image of Moses will evolve into more subtle glowing nuances as the years pass, just as the life of Moses as a model has endured and grown in the hearts of the Jewish people and the history of the world.

### Reflections by the Artist

My fondest memories of childhood are the Saturdays when, I would walk to synagogue with my grandfather — just the two of us sharing our special time together. At synagogue, I would sit upstairs with the women where I felt special, too. I was surrounded by women who shared a warm world in which they were honored as daughters, wives, mothers, and grandmothers.

My grandmother reigned supreme over our family affairs. Passovers were always particularly memorable to me because I was the youngest child surrounded by my grandparents, my parents, my aunts, uncles, and cousins. Although my grandparents had fled Europe with very little, everyone in the following generations became doctors, lawyers, optometrists, teachers, artists. All were respected members of their communities.

When I was a child, my grandfather gave me a replicated tablet of the Ten Commandments at a seder and its emotional and spiritual imprint has never parted from me. I have often pondered the meaning of those words, which have influenced societies around the world, while imaging what Moses, the receiver of those mighty tablets, might have looked like — so wise, so burdened, so caring, so human.

Hearing about Moses and his leadership, despite hardships along the way, and the importance of following the Ten Commandments that he had received on Mount Sinai, I knew I was expected to follow those basic tenets of Judaism and to become the best person I could be, while giving my full effort at whatever I chose to do. I chose to be an artist.

I am still surprised, today, that so much of my artwork relates to the Orthodox environment of my childhood which ended abruptly when I was eight years old upon my father’s death. With my mother’s remarriage, my Orthodox world was replaced by a very secular one. However, the imprint of my early years and the lessons of *parashat Va-et’chanan* remained a powerful part of me.

### Professional Background

Sherry Camhy’s work is in the permanent collection of the Israel Museum, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Telfair Museum of Art, and the New York Public Library. Her work has been reviewed in *ArtNews* and *International Artist.* She is the author of *Art of the Pencil* (Watson-Guptill, 1997) and a reviewer for *Fine Art Connoisseur*. Camhy is on the faculty of New York University and the School of Visual Arts, New York.

# *Eikev, Deuteronomy* 7:12 – 11:25 עקב

## Gilah Yelin Hirsch, Canada/USA

*Parashat Eikev* deals with a host of significant issues as the Israelites are midway between Egypt and the Promised Land. Much like a father meting out “tough love” to his teenaged child who has transgressed, Moses has been charged with reprimanding his people after the debacle of the Golden Calf, giving them incentive to reform. If they heed the commandments of *Elohim* [name for God], they will journey beyond the many hardships of the desert to realize the abundance in Canaan. The splendors of the land of “milk and honey” are clearly delineated. After so many years of a sparse, dry diet, a colorful smorgasbord of seven life-enhancing, ripe, redolent, and delicious foods are stipulated and assured. (*Deuteronomy* 8:8)

Although I set out to represent *parashat Eikev* in a figurative manner, thinking to illustrate aspects of the narrative and text, it appeared ordinary. Instead, I chose to focus on the seven promised foods and first painted a more representational version of the foods. But this, too, seemed mundane. Focusing on the seven promised foods as referenced in the text, I elevated the physical nourishment into a spiritual realm. In noting the primitive quality of the belief system of the Children of Israel, who were so easily distracted to worship idols, I began to transpose each of the seven life-giving foods into deities, each a specific, different Shechinah, the female aspect of God, the creative spirit who nourishes on all levels.

It is through this process that the current image for *parashat Eikev* was born. As I added layer over layer of textured surface, the bevy of seven Shechinot became animated, alive, and conspiring in anticipation of the feast to come. Preparing to welcome and nourish the Children of Israel, each is clothed in crusty garments of the color representing, from left to right, dates, olives, figs, pomegranates, wheat, barley, and grapes. I see the galaxy of Shechinot, ancient palimpsests, totems, Venus of Villendorf-like icons, marking time and history, as if they were ancient goddesses newly discovered and inscribed inside secret, crumbling cave walls.

### Reflections by the Artist

Although I am not observant, my relationship to Judaism, Torah, and Kabbala is deeply engrained and expressed in my work. I stem from seven generations of rabbis from Bialystok, Poland, on my father’s side. My great-grandfather, Rav Aryeh Leib Yellin, wrote the last commentary to be included in the Vilna editions of the Talmud, *Yefeh ’Enayim* [Beautiful Eyes, referring to perspective]*.* My grandfather, Rav Benjamin Yelin, came to Montreal and became *Rosh Yeshivah* [head rabbi] of the *Mitnagdim* [opponents of Hassidism]. Although he was an atheist, my father, Ezra Yelin, was a scholar and teacher of Talmud. His cousin, David Yelin, immigrated to Israel and was responsible for establishing Hebrew as the *lingua franca* in the new state. My mother, Shulamis Yelin, a renowned author and poet in Montreal, Canada, focused her life and work on Jewish culture and was instrumental in establishing the first Reconstructionist synagogue in Montreal.

When I was eight years old and studying *Chumash* in Montreal, I read the text in Hebrew, but commented in Yiddish. Perplexed, I asked why we speak of God only in masculine terms, as the pronouns in the Hebrew text are both masculine and feminine. My male Orthodox teacher, ruffled by my challenge, hurried down the aisle, grabbed me by my hair and threw me out of the class — forever. I learned, some years later, of the injunction against *kol isha* in which the singing voice of a woman is forbidden in a man’s presence, so as not to distract him from his learning or arouse his desire. I, however, was determined to be heard.

At ten, I wrote Albert Einstein and asked how he could reconcile being the greatest scientist in the world and still believe in the God of the Old Testament who created suffering, illness, and war. His response arrived within a week: “Always form your opinion according to your own judgment. You have shown in your letter that you are able to do so….” While he died a week later, his words remained the guide of my questioning life.

From the age of five to 16, I attended a Hebrew speaking summer camp in eastern Canada. Early on, I was the artist who annually created immense *shlatim* [painted banners]using Hebrew letters to form uniquely designed images. In the first of these tall columns, I used the words *kadosh, kadosh, kadosh* [holy, holy, holy]. The letters themselves appeared to be gateways into states of mind.

When asked where the images in my paintings come from, I sometimes answer that they are the products of lovemaking between *Ruach* [spirit/wind], the masculine aspect of God, and Shechinah,the feminine aspect of God. My role in this almost voyeuristic venture is to have no preconceptions, to be patient, to allow for the unknown to be realized in its own time, and to be alert to the whispered call or trumpeted request of the developing image. Perhaps this process can be seen as a visual version of paradigmatic Jewish inquiry, text, and commentary building upon itself.

### Professional Background

Gilah Yelin Hirsch is an award-winning interdisciplinary artist, writer, filmmaker, and scientist whose work spans the fields of art, psychology, philosophy, psychiatry, medicine, anthropology, and architecture. In her book *Cosmography: The Writing of the Universe* (1995), she developed a theory about alphabets and their similar natural scientific origins. While Hirsch holds the position of Professor of Art at California State University, Dominguez Hills (Los Angeles), and resides in Venice, California, her far-ranging work is sourced in both solitary wilderness sojourns and exploration of world cultures.

# *R’eih, Deuteronomy* 11:26 – 16:17 ראה

## Andi LaVine Arnovitz, USA/Israel

*Parshat R’eih* is a very literal, legalistic *parasha*. Israel’s contract with God is laid out in black and white. Each case has its ruling, its consequence. There are many blessings and many curses. The laws of *tzedaka* [charity], which follow the contractual “agreement,” seem softer and more sensitive than what comes before. Jews are commanded to be giving — “you shall surely open your hand” — to help the needy. I have always loved this *parasha* precisely for these detailed concepts of giving. As an artist searching for the text’s most graphic statement, I honed in on the passage that serves as the basis for the fundamental laws of *tzedaka* in Jewish practice:

“If , however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kin in any of your settlements in the land that your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kin. Rather you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need.” (*Deuteronomy* 15:7–8)

I worked in layers, symbolic of the many layers of understanding and interpretation that exist in the Torah and in life in contemporary Israel and, more specifically, the city of Jerusalem. I have used the image of the *hamsa* [the hand, literally “five” in Arabic], so prevalent in Jerusalem in both Jewish and Arab culture, to represent the hand open in giving. I have sewn each one, but left the tops open so that they could actually hold money. Hanging from these hands are all the categories of obligation by which an individual is required to give charity, as enumerated in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, a principal work outlining the basic laws of traditional Jewish practice. We are obligated to give to the orphan and widow, the poor of Jerusalem, the captive, and the schools. All require our generosity.

**Reflections by the Artist**

I am Jewish, female, Orthodox, a mother, a grandmother, a daughter, sister, and wife. I am also an artist. There is no separating these various aspects, and so when I make art — whatever I create, the outcome or the piece — is informed by all of these voices. My worldview, the lens through which I observe the world, is focused by my spirituality, my gender, and my vocation.

Living in Israel has provided me with a constant, intensely Jewish experience. Concepts and traditions are lived visibly, daily, and vibrantly on the streets of Jerusalem. Unresolved points of religious tension, situations where religion and politics or religion and real-life collide head-on, are front and center and impossible to ignore. Choosing to be religious, choosing to live in Israel require of me to be particularly sensitive to these dramas. Thus, my art reflects my own personal struggle to reconcile conceptual Judaism with the nitty-gritty reality of the Jewish State.

### Professional Background

Andi LaVine Arnovitz was born and raised in the United States. She earned her BFA degree from Washington University in St. Louis and immigrated to Israel in 1999. Her work has been shown in Europe, Israel, Canada, China, the United States, and Eastern Europe, as well as part of many collections including the Library of Congress, the Israel National Library, museums in the United States and Israel, and foreign ministries, foundations, and private collections.

# *Shof’tim, Deuteronomy* 16:18 – 21:9 שופטים

## Judith Serebrin, USA

I have wrestled with trying to understand injustice from an early age. Growing up learning about the persecution of Jews made no sense to me. I questioned how people who did not know me could hate me and want to do me harm simply because I was born a Jew. I knew I was a good person; I knew my people were good people. For me this not only produced feelings of fear, but it also made me wonder if this could be true for all groups of people. What if the “other” — whom I was sometimes encouraged to fear or judge — is also good? What if false judgments, lack of knowledge, and misinformation is an excuse for hatred?

I’ve come to believe that this is true: that our biases, based on lack of information and misinformation, distort our approach to justice and peace. If we could collectively shift this paradigm, what would justice and peace look like? In this artwork, I wanted to explore and promote restorative justice as an alternative to harsh punishments, which perpetuate violence and do nothing to further our understanding of the mechanisms of mistreatment, and which do not provide long-term healing for victim or perpetrator.

The omission of women’s voices in the Torah re-enforces the notion that women — including their thoughts, actions, and existence — are unimportant beyond their role in bearing children and caring for them. It appears that many of the stories of women in the Torah describe their having been drawn into either violent or manipulative schemes by men. Feminine ideas of justice can be of great value and can be differentiated from the male-dominated “norm.”

In my art, I present a different attitude about justice and judgment that examines the value of all life forms, including animal sacrifices to atone for our sins or as offerings to God. I was struck by the reasons given in this parasha to excuse men from fighting in wars. If anyone is “afraid and disheartened,” he may, according to some commentators, be excused from fighting lest those soldiers demoralize the rest of the troops because of the contagious nature of cowardliness. I propose that the person who feels deeply, who can see the humanity in “others,” is a courageous person and deserves respect from the community. What if this non-judgmental way of viewing compassion were the standard by which people operate — with open hearts and refusing to take life?

I’ve internalized the idea of questioning authority in our tradition, which has led me to question a great many things, including a patriarchal, supernatural God and the male dominance related in the Torah, both inside our culture and outside it. I wrestle with the authority of the Torah and “the word of God.” I realize that I have wrestled with many of these things silently as a woman. I’ve taken the opportunity with this project to re-imagine ideas of justice in *Shof’tim* from my feminine 21st century point of view.

### Reflection by the Artist

I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the western United States. With few Jews, the small Jewish community that existed seemed to surge toward upward-mobility. My broken, working-class family did not. As a result, I felt outside both the Gentile and the Jewish communities.

When I was six, in the years before my parents divorced, my father took me to synagogue with him for Yom Kippur, the most solemn day of prayer in the Jewish year. My memories were of being captivated by the stained glass windows high up in the tiny synagogue and of my father’s unpleasant breath due to his fasting. I took in the sights and sounds, but I had no understanding of what was going on. To this day, my only connection to the Torah itself is as a symbol of our people and a fascinating object with great influence emanating from its written word. Remarkably, these memories have profoundly influenced my connection to objects that hold writing and ideas. My work invariably culminates in some form of codex or scroll.

The only religious holidays we consistently celebrated while I was growing up were Passover and Chanuka. Passover was a significant event and exposed me to the ideas of liberation and oppression. I found many of the symbolic rituals held meaning beyond the holiday and my Jewish identity. Having compassion for the suffering of one’s enemies by dipping fingers into a glass of wine and dripping it onto our plates as a symbol of the plagues and our identification with suffering was particularly touching to me. The Haggada, as it is used in contemporary seder ritual, has impacted me deeply, bringing to light not only the Jewish people’s journey from slavery into freedom, but also serving as a model to view the struggles for justice by others. The idea that we should use our minds to imagine ourselves enslaved, to put ourselves in the shoes of our ancestors, helped solidify my sense of empathy for the suffering of all life. This awareness drives my intention in the world and in the work I produce as an artist.

### Professional Background

Judith Serebrin’s book art and sculptures have been widely collected and exhibited internationally by libraries, museums, and individuals, and have been featured in books about artist’s books and contemporary ceramics. She is a member of a Jewish/Palestinian Living Room Dialogue and teaches at the San Francisco Center for the Book.

# *Ki Teitzei, Deuteronomy* 21:10 – 25:19 תצא כי

## Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov, USA/Israel

The discussion of the laws of wartime spoke to me immediately when considering my piece for this collaboration, as I am currently the mother of three soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces. With pride at their responsibility and leadership, I pray for the wholeness and health of their bodies and souls.

I am the mother bird, who needs to fly away from the nest before the eggs are taken. (*Deuteronomy* 22:6–7) Perhaps I am also the foreign female prisoner of war who shaves her head and weeps (*Deuteronomy* 21:10–14), as at times I feel imprisoned by the reality of unending conflict, its demand for patriotism and sacrifice, and by my own failure to search for a peaceful alternative.

My children swore to defend our country, even at the cost of their lives, at a ceremony that included holding a *Tanach* [the Hebrew Bible] in one hand and a gun on the other. The two joined in an act of salute. The female figure enacting that moment brings to mind the *parasha’s* prohibition against the wearing of male attire by a woman and vice versa (*Deuteronomy* 22:5), raising questions about the meaning and the price of gender equality. Seeing the Torah joined with a gun reminds us that its words have the power to both give life and death and to promote love and violence. “Search in it and turn it, for everything is in it.” (*Ethics of the Fathers* 5:22)

### Reflections by the Artist

At times, I feel the call to consciously explore the relationship between Judaism and art in my work. One of my first attempts was a self-portrait with my hand covering my eyes, as is customary when reciting the *Shema* prayer, which begins with the words, “Hear, O Israel” (*Deuteronomy* 6:4). Thus, the work brought to the fore the tension between hearing and seeing, between word and image, and between the spiritual and the visual. The fact that the painting portrayed a woman praying felt so natural to me that I didn’t consider its significance while working on it. This early effort characterized my subsequent work: seeking out points of conflict or complexity, alongside the consistent inclusion of a female presence, often on a less than conscious level.

Over the years, I have continued to ponder the mystery of Judaism and art. Some works juxtapose ancient texts relating to idolatry and prohibit representation with painted imagery. Other paintings rework and reinterpret Jewish ceremonial imagery. My series, “Paintings and Words,” provided a platform for a dialogue between Judaism and Islam. In yet another series, “The Painter and the Hassid,” I present an imaginary encounter between two historical figures who perished in the Holocaust, but whose hidden work survived.

At other points in my creative process, I have put aside these issues to work on observational painting. More recently, I have concentrated on my own relationship with the history of art as a member of a universal community of painters, ostensibly without the weight of Jewish and female identity on my shoulders. I now feel comfortable playing with the various facets of my identity, with my fears and dreams, and with my Judaism and femininity freely entering and exiting the imagery and feeling of the work.

### Professional Background

Ruth Kestenbaum Ben-Dov fuses observational and conceptual painting. She has a BFA degree from the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, and is pursuing graduate studies in art history at the University of Haifa. Her work has been exhibited in galleries, museums, and private collections in Israel, the US, and Europe.

# *Ki Tavo, Deuteronomy* 26:1 – 29:8 תבא כי

## Lilianne Milgrom, France/USA

We are introduced in *Ki Tavo* to the fundamental necessity for balance in our lives and in our interconnected universe. This *parasha* talks about the ritual of *bikurim*, the harvesting of the first fruits, bounty of God, and the reciprocal commandment to give back — to make an offering from those same first fruits.

This idea of giving and receiving (also embodied in a yoga *mudra,* or gesture, in which one hand is open for receiving and the other lifted in preparation for giving) spoke to me deeply. In order to live in harmony with others and with our God, there needs to be an inherent balance. The *parasha* dwells on warnings and curses, while reminding the Jewish people of their blessings — yet another type of duality which needs to be finely tuned.

The hands in the illustration are my own, and the fruit is a pomegranate. (My family name, Milgrom, means pomegranate in Polish.) I wanted the image to convey an ambiguity as to whether the hands were in the act of receiving or in the act of giving. The background was designed to give a sense of the Dawn of Time and the wonder of nature that produces a marvel such as the pomegranate.

### Reflections by the Artist

As far back as I can remember, the first question posed to me when meeting new people has been “Where do you come from?” My physical features have led strangers to identify me as Syrian, Persian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Italian, Israeli, Greek, or Hispanic. I was born in Paris to a Czech mother and a Polish father, both Holocaust survivors. I grew up in Australia, and divide my time between Israel and the United States. I have a slight accent in all the languages I speak. So what am I and where do I come from? Am I French, Australian, Israeli, or American? The answer is simple: I am Jewish.

Being Jewish encompasses all of the above variations and even makes sense of the seemingly conflicting and confusing data. When I finally respond to their question, “I am Jewish. Where are you from?” people nod knowingly as if it is universally understood to mean a unique race of people that transcends nationality and geography and owes its cohesion to a loosely shared faith in one God. It places me squarely as a member of the “tribe,” one of the chosen people.

That is my external Jewish identity. My internal identity as a Jewish woman is a complex and elusive combination of Shabbat candle-lighting: a deep commitment to my Jewish heritage; a sense of obligation to pay homage to my parents’ Holocaust experience; the tears that well up in my eyes when I hear “Hatikva,” the Israeli national anthem; the joy of making my children’s favorite foods for the *hagim* [Jewish holidays];and the smile on my lips when I hear Yiddish.

My childhood home was observant. I belonged to Bnei Akiva, an Orthodox youth movement, but I never received a formal Jewish education. My years in Israel transformed me into a secular/traditional Jew, attending synagogue only on *hagim* and having little connection with Torah in my daily life. However, certain principles of Judaism are at the core of how I strive to act towards my fellow human beings and all living creatures. I identify with a description of Spinoza as a Jew who is not an adherent of a doctrinal religion but who is nonetheless indissolubly fused to that community’s heritage.

I am inspired by universal human concerns that influence my artmaking. Nonetheless, occasional biblical references, long-forgotten stories from the old country, and Hebrew words and letters hover on the periphery of my artistic vision, insinuating themselves every now and then into my work, reminding me that I am indeed a Jewish woman artist.

### Professional Background

Lilianne Milgrom is an international artist and writer about the arts. Born in Paris, she grew up in Australia, lived in Israel for many years, and now resides in Washington DC. Milgrom exhibits in museums and galleries around the world, including the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City and the National Museum of Art in Romania. Her works can be found in private and institutional collections.

# *Nitzavim, Deuteronomy* 29:9 – 30:20 נצבים

## Cheselyn Amato, USA

*Parashat Nitzavim* speaks to me about God’s love for us, and about our opportunity to reflect this love: “…[T]he thing [Torah] is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.” (*Deuteronomy* 30:14)

I’ve employed female figures — a collage amalgamation of Jewish women over time — at the points of the mouth and heart to communicate the idea of closeness, nearness, all qualities of love. This Torah portion is a Shechinah portion, one that is full of the feminine in-dwelling presence of God.

I envision an embrace, as with the heightened connection between lovers. This embrace is between the Torah and the Jewish people as represented by the figure of a woman with the word ואהבת */* *and you shall love* rising from her mouth and her heart. The image suggests the ways in which we take care, literally, of the Torah. It also symbolizes the deep love of the Torah as a physical object whose words become one with our minds, our hearts, and our souls.

In the spirit of love from the heart, here is my Song of Shechinah:

*We stand before You,* Yah, Adonai, Elohim, Shechinah,

*You give us the Torah,*

*Teaching and Learning,*

*קבלה*

*Receiving and Transmitting,*

שיר

*Song and Singing,*

תשובה

*Repentance and Returning*

*So that we may live and thrive.*

*You show us how to live and die,*

*Under the canopy* / חופה*,* *of Your blessing,*

*You are always close to us,*

השיר של שכינה

*The Song of Indwelling Presence.*

*Your Love* / אהבתך *is always holding each of us,*

*And we are Your Beloved, and You are ours.*

*We stray,*

*And curses befall us, and seize us,*

*And we are cursed,*

*As individuals, as communities, as nations, as a whole globe,*

*And we become broken and fallen*

נצבים / *nitzavim*

*We stand before You and we can be healed*, רפואה / *refuah*

*We can return to ourselves,*

*Recover our hearts,*

*Restore the seed and seat at the center of our souls,*

*by listening, hearing, keeping,*

שמע, שמר

*Your Word* / דבר, *and*

*Blessing and Abundance* / ברכה ושפע

*are bestowed upon us,*

*You can meet us with Your Love* / אהבה

*Because we are meeting You with our love* / אהבתינו

*and we are loving with all our hearts /*  בכל לבבינו

*We Stand.*

נצבים *.*

### Reflections by the Artist

I love the Torah. I love it because of the magnificently compelling and enduring imagery that sweeps me off my feet, the unyielding joy of layered meaning, the unfailing way that the spirit, mind, heart, and body are invited, encouraged, and delighted to engage in a magnificent poetics of themselves. I love it because it is so strange and difficult, a document that chronicles the struggle to discern and choose with tireless intention and commitment the very best action in every instance imaginable that equally honors, in true balance, God, humanity, community, and our individual selves. The Torah is a testament, a witness to human being’s effort to become more whole, to devise tools that can be used over and over again, that stay strong and dependable, that can be improved and renewed, whose limitations and failures are admitted, revealed, and evaluated, whose successes are celebrated and sung. The Torah is evidence that a human being is a fluid and evolving thing; it is a way of being in relationship; it is a way of striving to love and be loved.

I myself am a woman with one foot in consciousness that attaches with infinite and undated origin to Jewish being — back to the beginning, to the emergence of Kabbala, to the waves of immigration out of Europe and around the world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the United States in particular, to the cataclysm of the Holocaust, to this moment. My other foot is in a consciousness that is intensely attracted to and engaged by the contemporary moment, by the sheer state of collective human being, undifferentiated, without identifiers, without signifiers, *per se*. I am a woman born of feminism who has lived the life of imagination and the life of procreation. I have exercised both external and internal powers of creation, in my work as an artist and as a mother.

Loving the Torah — which does not know how, at times, to speak about woman as we would wish, as we deserve — is painful. There is an imbalance on the literal level that I cannot make vanish and which feels, sometimes, like living with incompatible loyalties. The language, the voices that concretized the Torah, were limited as we all are as humans. Part of the beauty of Torah is the limitations that it cannot avoid: There will always be something unjust in this world when compared with the light of justice in whose image we strive. I know that the dance and mystery of the feminine and masculine dimensions are critical to, are key to, the process of becoming one and whole. The struggle with the feminine that goes on in the Torah tells us where our greatest vulnerability is.

### Professional Background

Cheselyn Amato is an interdisciplinary visual artist and designer, Jewish and interreligious thinker, practitioner and activist, kabbalist, and nomadic temple builder. Her work has been exhibited and collected in various venues, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, the Jewish Museum in New York City, and the Spertus Museum in Chicago.

# *Vayeilech, Deuteronomy* 31:1 – 30 וילך

## Chani Cohen Zada, Israel

The story of *Vayeilech* appears at the end of *Deuteronomy*, the last of the Five Books of Moses. It is a relatively short portion positioned between two longer portions, *Nitzavim* and *Haazinu*. *Nitzavim* describes the covenant that God established with the Nation of Israel, literally the last of the generation to leave Egypt,. While *Haazinu* recounts the song that Moses transmits to the coming generations, both occur on the cusp of entry by the Israelites into the land of Canaan.

*Vayeilech* serves as a kind of bridge between these two. Moses hands over the leadership to his successor, Joshua, and describes to him and the Nation of Israel the mission that awaits them for the coming years: to conquer the land and to eliminate the people living there. God will be with Joshua and the community of Israel during the conquest of the land and throughout their future settlement in Israel and, God assures, in the generations to come. In later biblical texts, we see that the community of Israel will sin again and abandon their faith in God. As a result, God will withdraw Divine guardianship from them and “terrible calamities” will come upon them. But even in those difficult times, God will be present and guide the nation forward toward its betterment. This is how I intepret the purpose of *parashat Haazinu* and the song it contains: to serve as testimony for all generations in order to reinforce their faith and help them successfully overcome the difficult periods.

### Reflections by the Artist

The motif of the omnipresence of God fascinates me and occupies my thoughts. I am inspired by it when I paint, and this interest has guided me in choosing *Vayeilech*. I am awed by the long journey of the Israelite nation and I connect intimately with that journey. I have observed how much faith and spiritual strength are required in order to survive periods of fear and near-destruction, and to stand up again and return home to rework the land to flourish once again. The miraculous survival of my nation is the source of my curiosity in my work. What strength do we harness in order to survive?

To express the notion of a hidden but omnipresent God, I chose to observe the sacred and the mundane that reside in the same moment, using a shopping mall and what underlies it as symbolic metaphors. The shopping mall symbolizes the materialism that is the milieu of modern society’s daily existence. The darkened windows reflect to the people in the mall their materialistic presence, while simultaneously illuminating the Divine presence. It is easy and normal for the inhabitants of the shopping mall to forget all else. In this environment, it requires force of will to open one’s mind to what is happening beyond the walls of the mall and its materialism. It is a conscious choice to open toward the Divine presence.

That Divine presence is depicted in spiraling flashes of light. The spiral represents the process of humankind’s growth and evolution. In this model of human growth, the fully completed circle that is carried out to perfection will inform humanity with a new acquisition of knowledge.The progression will always bring us back to the starting point, but only after ascending another rung of the spiral.

### Professional Background

Chani Cohen Zada lives and works in Talmon, Israel. She is a graduate of HaTahana Figurative Art School Master Class, Tel Aviv. Zada has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions including Hayek Center for Contemporary Art in Jaffa, the Wolfson Museum of Jewish Art and HaGalleria HaAheret in Jerusalem.

# *Haazinu, Deuteronomy* 32:1 – 52 האזינו

## Charlotte Hart, USA

“And God said to him,‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I will assign it to your offspring. I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross there.’ So Moses, the servant of God died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of God.” (*Deuteronomy*, 34:4-5)

*Parshat Haazinu* presents the last moments of Moses’s life. Sacred spoken words become visuals to Moses. He sees the land and people of Israel through all time in an instant. This immediate depth of knowledge and understanding ends his life.

The medium for my artwork is pen and ink. I had a vision to incorporate the traditional materials a scribe uses in writing a Torah scroll. I practiced with inks and quills for a long while, but was unable to move the lines as quickly as my thoughts. I came to realize that those precious tools would only be fitting for one element of the drawing: the black dot representing the navel of the pregnant earth, the *evan hashtiya*, the well of souls of the foundation stone.

Here is a poem about this *parasha* that describes my thoughts in words.

### *The Water Stone*

*From a vibration came music of the limitless un-delved.*

*A quivering watery shudder opened all his senses.*

*Faint frequencies stirred a telling trope from far and he heard.*

*There. The land he would not enter, not only the dry mountain vista;*

*but that land unfettered by time, careening through space,*

*the people entering, burdened heavy with threat, laws and promise.*

*The vision swept past his life to the temple and scribes, the lowly and great,*

*past nascent trinity then logical ideas, ages of ignorance, silk road pilgrims,*

*classical wanderers, faiths of sword, sickle, apathy and hate, stone upon stone.*

*In the land, the trees were severed, trunk from root, olive to date.*

*Seeds scattered on the wind, took root and were loathed in places they loved.*

*With no standing, they drifted.*

*Where they took root and flourished, they finished in smoke.*

*Their pregnant land waited.*

*He saw the survivors return, they planted forests in memory of, in honor of.*

*The people were running to become, embracing science, turning to defense,*

*medical advance, technological brilliance, musical genius, mystical chess.*

*The trees bloomed and fruited.*

*Milk and honey, land for peace, no peace, all given in stillness.*

*The land undulated in heat and unfolded what would be.*

*And he knew, as he stood by a water stone the instant before his death.*

### Reflections by the Artist

My creativity as an artist has been influenced by the intellectual and spiritual journey on which I embarked when I began studying Torah every Shabbat morning. This ritual of study motivated me to further my contemplation of each Torah portion both visually and in prose.

I have spent over 30 years interpreting the weekly Torah portion into a piece of art with an accompanying poem. There are over 700 pieces of art and I am not finished. I continue to work on this ongoing project, with a vision to have a completed piece for every aliyah, the weekly Torah reading.

It was the pursuit of my history, identity, and understanding of the world that led my voice as an artist to this project. I found that drawing or painting what I had learned, and my thoughts about it, brought me deeper into myself as a creative person and as a Jew. Through my creative work, I have been able to preserve experiences that I treasure. In my art and poetry, I feel the joy of experimentation. The Torah portions have afforded me continual inspiration. My body of work is my conversation with Judaism.

### Professional Background

Charlotte Hart’s art exhibitions include the Smithsonian National Museum of American Art, Studio im Hochhaus die Kunst und Literaturwerkstatt in Berlin, and Levure Littéraire in Paris. Her work appears in the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. In addition to her visual works, Hart is a published poet. Her chapbook *Organic Spirits* (Finishing Line Press, 2011) follows her book of poetry *The Pegasus Ring* (2008).

# *V’zot Hab’rachah, Deuteronomy* 33:1 – 34:12 הברכה וזאת

## Jacqueline Nicholls, England

The very last *parasha* of the Torah, *V’zot Hab’rachah* concludes the Five Books of Moses. Moses’s story ends here, after leading the Israelites for 40 years from slavery to freedom. His story ends just as the people prepare to cross into the Land of Israel. Moses will never cross the border, but will only stand and watch as his people enter the Promised Land. He views it from afar, knowing he cannot enter, and he blesses the people before he dies. It seems almost cruel. In the verses leading to his death, Moses speaks and longingly gazes upon the Land and those who will inherit it. His mouth and eyes are active to the end. His death is described as על פי ה׳ / by the mouth of God. The scripture tells us that his eyesight never weakened. His vision was unique and never left him. He saw God as if through clear glass until the moment of his death.

Moses was always an active leader. When his story begins in the Book of *Sh’mot* [*Exodus*], he kills an Egyptian to save an Israelite before fleeing to Midian. He returns to Egypt with God’s message to free the people, but because he suffers from a stammer, his brother, Aaron, speaks for him. By the time we come to Moses’s death, we are in the Book of *D’varim* [*Deuteronomy*], the book of words. Over his 40-year leadership, Moses finds his voice and leads the people with words from the mouth, rather than with physical strength. His leadership is rooted in teaching, rebuking, and blessing with words.

The importance of using words over physical action is exemplified by the gravity of Moses’s punishment. He must die in the wilderness, prohibited from entering the land to which he has aspired, and he is only permitted to gaze at the land with his perfect vision. He does not inherit the Land. There is no grave to mark his resting place. Why? Because when commanded to speak to a rock to produce water, he hit the rock instead. He chose physical action over the words of his mouth.

The mouth, the eye.

This piece, drawn on parchment, contrasts the mouth and the eye before and after death. Before death, the mouth and eye are drawn vividly in pencil, and the relevant verses are embroidered in a bright blood red. After death, they are simply embroidered in white, as are the phrases that quote the mouth and the eye.

Although Moses has no grave, we have not forgotten him; we visit his death every year when we read *parashat V’zot Hab’rachah.* The image includes 12 stones, one for each tribe of Israel, echoing the customary leaving of stones at the graves of loved ones. He will always be מושה רבינו / *Moshe Rabbeinu*, our teacher, whose place on earth rests in the words we carry with us as we wander across many lands.

### Reflections by the Artist

I am a London-based fine artist who uses visual art to explore traditional Jewish ideas in untraditional ways. I engage with text in my art, bringing the *beit midrash* (house of study) and art studio together. I like to use these texts as a springboard for the initial concept, and then develop ideas by working in series of interconnected art pieces. This engagement is often informed by a feminist perspective, in which I use my art to subvert the usual dominant male discourse. My work involves a lot of craft-based techniques: paper-cutting, dress-making, embroidery, knitting, origami, tailoring, as well as more conventional drawing and printmaking.

In the artwork, I often quote the texts that have inspired, challenged, and motivated me to form a response. The text may be a starting point for the work, but, while I am working, the thoughts develop as my hands are busy with the process of making. From this very hands-on engagement, I will often arrive at a different understanding of the text.

I was inspired to use embroidery in my work partly from an exhibit at the Israel Museum titled “Eshet Chayil,” a collection of historic needlework from various synagogues. This was one of the traditional ways that women could contribute to communal life. Their voices were not allowed to lead the community, but their hands made the space more beautiful and inspiring. The prominent male cantors and rabbis who would have been in close contact with these pieces are long dead, their voices now silent. Yet these women’s handiwork is still there to be appreciated today.

A large part of my art is to examine the tradition from my contemporary feminist perspective. I question the traditional roles that women are expected to fulfill. Through the arena of my handiwork, I can be thoughtfully challenging and confrontational, while exploring the text that is both my intellectual inheritance and alienating to me as a woman. This is especially vital in my project “Draw Yomi,” where I follow the *daf yomi* cycle, learning a page of Talmud a day and respond with a daily drawing. The way women are discussed often makes me want to close the book. But that would only silence my voice. These texts are part of the library, so I pick up my pen, pencil, scalpel, needle and thread and start to talk back.

### Professional Background

Jacqueline Nicholls is an artist and Jewish educator who has exhibited in solo exhibits and significant contemporary Jewish Art group shows in Europe, the US, and Israel. She teaches at the London School of Jewish Studies and is an arts programmer at JW3, the London Jewish Community Centre. Nicholls is a regular contributor to BBC Radio’s show, “Pause for Thought.”

1. \*\*Excerpted from Janet Shafner’s book, *Women of Mystery, Men of Prophecy* (Jewish Heritage Project, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)