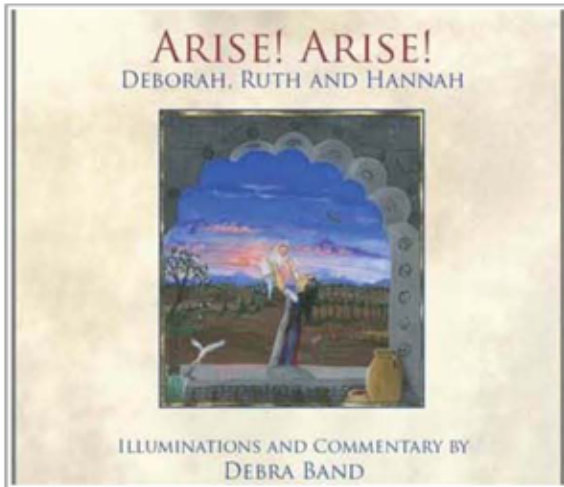


An illustrated story of three biblical heroines



By AARON HOWARD • Thu, Oct 10, 2013

What do we know about the prophetess Deborah? Not much from Tanach. The text tells us Deborah was in communication with G-d, as all prophets were assumed to be. In Judges, we get a more vivid picture of Sisera's death scene than we do about Deborah's life.

We learn even less about Deborah from traditional midrashim. Men wrote all the rabbinic commentaries, men who might have been profoundly suspicious of a woman leader.

"Most rabbinical praise of Deborah was qualified," said painter Debra Band. "So, if one is trying to figure it out, how to understand the story, what one wants to communicate about it, and where the heroism of this woman lay, you must begin with a close reading of the text."

Band used the text of the fourth chapter of the book of Judges to render Deborah as a hero, whom modern readers can see through illustrations and understand through modern commentary in "Arise, Arise: Deborah, Ruth and Hannah." The author will discuss her book on Nov. 12 at 8 p.m. at the Ann and Stephen Kaufman Jewish Book & Arts Fair at the ERJCC, 5601 S. Braeswood Blvd.

"Arise, Arise" is a visual midrash of Deborah, Ruth and Hannah. Consider the book a modern version of a medieval illuminated manuscript.

It was from Band's close reading that she came up with the strongest proof for what she saw as Deborah's heroism: a well-established track record of common sense and fairness even to be considered a judge. Plus, Deborah showed a willingness to gamble because the whole story hinges on a gamble: the willingness to lead a band of farmers-turned-soldier infantry against a better armed "mechanized" chariot cavalry.

What makes the book special is Band's use of paintings to illuminate not merely the story narrative but also the emotions of the characters.

"Jews have this vast body of literary lore that conveys solid moral, ethical and religious principles," said Band. "But, the stuff has almost never come out in our visual art. It has come out in Christian art. I've learned from a 15th-century Flemish painter, Jan van Eyck."

Van Eyck created a sophisticated visual vocabulary for expressing all kinds of religious and moral ideas using objects from daily experience. In his most famous painting, "The Arnolfini Portrait," a young couple appears to be standing in a bedroom in front of a bed, making a pledge. This apparently is a domestic nuptial scene until the viewer

Book Fair author creates an illustrated story of three biblical heroines

examines each of the items in the painting.

"Van Eyck is telling a moral tale through each of the pictured items, which all belong in that kind of room," said Band. "People of that era would have been aware of these items through sermons. And, the symbols would have had much more resonance and importance in an illiterate society. Obviously, I'm not working from the same set of symbols out of the medieval Christian church. My images come out of Tanach and Midrash, and I use a lot of archaeology for my choice of items."

For example, Band uses clay vessels in most of her Deborah illuminations. The Israeli clay vessels one sees in archaeological museums were simple, functional and ubiquitous. They held everything from oil to wine to flour. Band used them as a barometer for the people's sense of security: If the vessels are full and upright, the environment is secure and safe. If the vessels are cracked, there is anxiety. If the vessels are broken, all hell is breaking loose.

And, in case you miss the symbolism in your initial glance, you can go to Band's commentaries for an explanation. After all, many modern readers might miss symbols like Deborah deliberating her community's issues under a palm tree. The source comes from Psalm 92, where the righteous are compared to the palm tree.

"The palm is a metaphor for righteousness and a palm tree that would have been common in front of an Israeli farmhouse," said Band.

"Visual symbolism represents a shift in our visual society. I'm speaking to the Melton group at the JCC before my book talk, and I'm going to speak about visual symbolism. Our society has gone through a radical shift since the beginning of the Internet era. Images now carry amazing amounts of information. All this visual imagery becomes newly important. Jewish culture is under so many challenges. I believe building a visual vocabulary that can bring up important Jewish concepts and ways of life becomes an important way of carrying Jewish culture into the future."

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