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JEWISH LITERARY FESTIVAL**  
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Featuring **Dan Savage**

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# Jewish Woman

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### Artist Explores the Stories of 3 Biblical Women

#### In a new book, Debra Band presents a “visual midrash” with Deborah, Ruth and Hannah.

By Sue Tomchin  
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In recent decades, Jewish women seeking role models have sought out stories of the matriarchs and other Jewish women of the biblical era and beyond, giving birth to a whole genre of women’s midrash writing—as well as a rash of novels, from *The Red Tent* to *Rashi’s Daughters*. A remarkable new book from respected artist Debra Band, *Arise! Arise! Deborah, Ruth and Hannah* (Honeybee in the Garden, \$39.95), creates a different kind of midrash.

Anyone familiar with Band’s two earlier books, *The Song of Songs: The Honeybee in the Garden* and *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*, knows she creates stunning visual interpretations—in essence visual midrash—that inspire her audience to engage more deeply in the text. For the new book, Band has painted 61 illuminations that appear in tandem with the text, offering a richly layered exploration of the stories of these three biblical women who took action at crucial moments to help preserve the nation of Israel and shape its national character.

Band has written introductory essays for each of the women’s stories and provides extensive commentary that identifies the symbols in each painting. Dr. Arnold Band, professor emeritus of Hebrew literature at UCLA, provides literary analysis for each story. Eminent scholar Dr. Adele Berlin, Robert H. Smith Professor of Hebrew Bible at the University of Maryland, wrote the forward.

The project was born at one of the most difficult moments of Band’s life. Her husband, David, was in the final stages of a seven-year struggle with a rare spinal cord cancer, and she and family members were sitting vigil at his bedside. Arnold Band, her father-in-law and longtime mentor, said to her, “You know what your next project is going to be, don’t you? The Prophet Deborah.”

“My husband really loved reading Deborah,” Band says in an interview with *Jewish Woman*. “It had been his bar mitzvah *haftarah*,” she says. “He was the most peaceful of men, but he relished each annual opportunity to chant the war story before our synagogue congregation. A few nights before his passing, our younger son chanted it for him in the quiet hours before dawn.

“My father-in-law’s intent, I think, was for me to do it as a memorial to David,” she says, thinking back, “but I think it was also an expression of his admiration for my care of David through his illness.”

In the weeks and months following her husband’s death, Band began to think about the suggestion. The story of Deborah, the dynamic judge, prophet and general who leads the Israelites against the Canaanite General Sisera and his army, wouldn’t be enough for a whole book, she decided, but what about including

[Arise! Arise! Deborah, Ruth and Hannah...](#)  
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Ruth and Hannah, as well? These three women are distinctive in *Tanach* (the Torah, Prophets and Writings), she points out, because they play central roles in their narratives. “These women are leaders,” she says, noting that while Esther is certainly a heroine, she is guided by Mordecai, and the matriarchs essentially operate in supporting roles to their husbands. Examining the stories of Deborah, Ruth and Hannah, she believes, puts to bed the notion that women’s role in biblical society was completely suppressed. Even though this was a patriarchal society, women did play important roles, including leadership, and were taken seriously.

“I want people to understand the cultural significance of these stories that have been handed down to us and to see the role that women have played in our tradition,” Band says.

When she sat down and began to explore the texts in depth, she found that together they reveal a “striking synergy of human qualities” that are essential to the Israelite nation and its descendants, while also setting the stage for Israel’s monarchy. Deborah embodies courage, strategic shrewdness and faith in prophecy, as she for the first time unites the 12 tribes, an essential step to enter the land of Israel. Ruth embodies the value of *chesed*, loving kindness, as she cares for Naomi, her mother-in-law, but also is integral to King David’s genealogy. The childless Hannah passionately prays for children and invents silent prayer within Israel’s tradition. She devotes Samuel, the child who is born, to divine service, and he ultimately establishes Israel’s monarchy by anointing David as king.

Over a period of two and a half years, Band delved into the stories in a variety of ways. Beginning with preeminent biblical commentator Rashi, she explored the basic text and then moved on to other retellings of the stories from the rabbinic and later periods. Finally, she looked into contemporary academic biblical scholarship and archaeology. “Once I digested all of that, I had a sense of the ideas and emotions that I wanted to convey in my paintings,” says Band.

“The paintings aren’t just narratives,” she explains. “Everything has symbolic significance but also makes narrative sense whether archaeologically, sociologically, religiously or emotionally.”

In addition to creating the illuminations and commentary for *Arise! Arise!*, Band self-published the book, shepherding the project from concept to finished product. That involved raising funds and handling production, legal issues, marketing and distribution. “I was advised that I did not need a publisher,” she says. “It was very exciting to do it on my own.”

One of the decisions she made was to create a beautiful book, but at a price that people could afford. The book is printed on vellum, the preferred material for the finest Torah scrolls, and she used 23-karat gold leaf and the finest opaque watercolors available for the paintings, but she intentionally kept the book at 8x10 inches, making it both economical and portable, “a jewel you can carry with you.”

Learn more about the book at [dbandart.com/books](http://dbandart.com/books).

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