



## Jewish Arts

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By: Menachem Wecker

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### Honeybee Songs

*The Song of Songs:*

*The Honeybee in the Garden*

**Illuminated manuscripts by Debra Band**

**Through January 7, 2007**

**The Washington DC JCC**

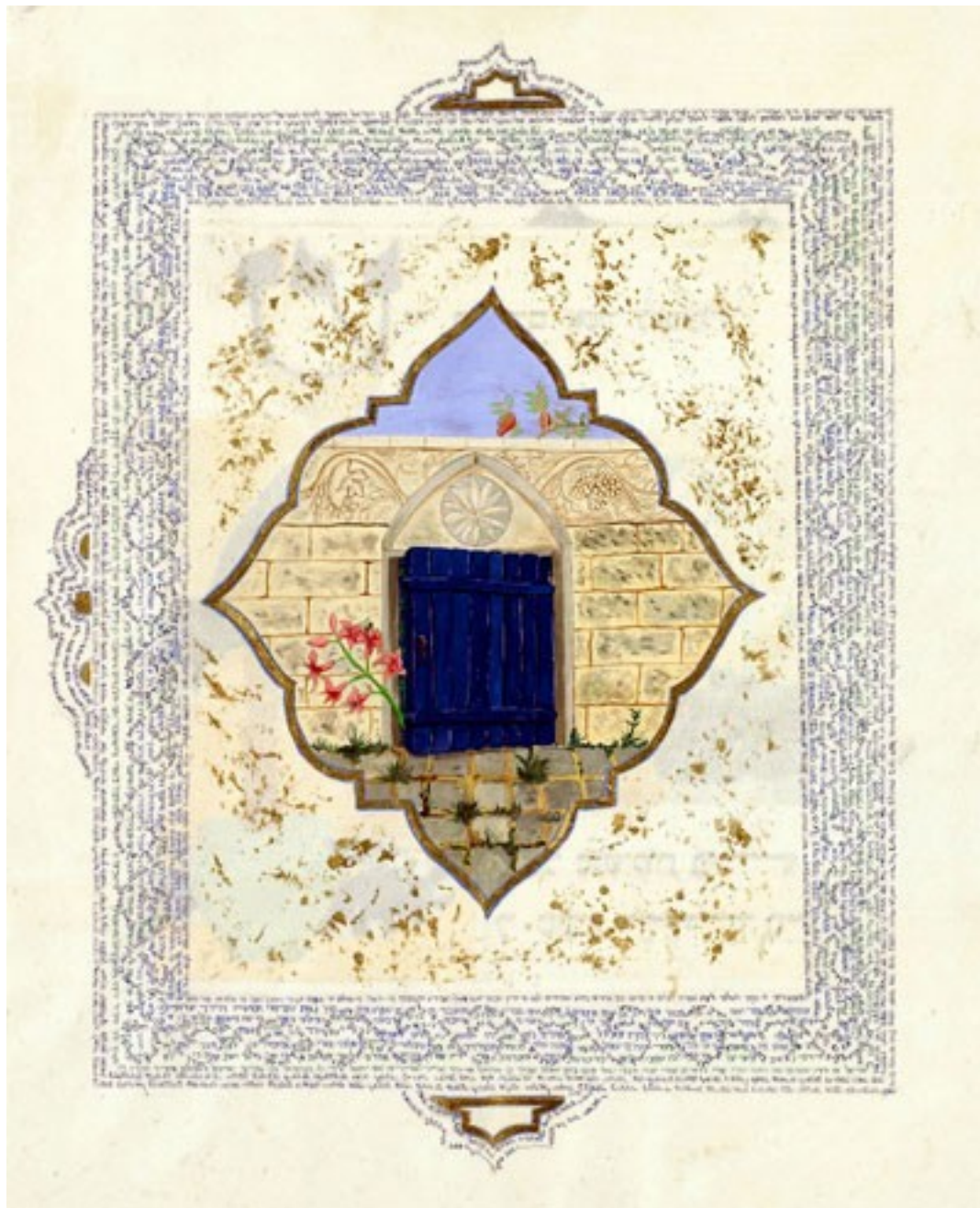
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*Song of Songs* is one of the most controversial books in *Tanach* because of its ambiguity. The text can be read literally as a love story between a man and a woman or as an allegory for G-d's relationship with the Jewish people. The rabbis considered banning it from canonization, for fear that too many people would interpret the book literally. Yet the text was canonized, and it remains with both its literal (*peshat*) and allegorical (*derash*) interpretations. It is probably no coincidence that Rabbi A. Y. HaKohen Kook published some of his most interesting aesthetics writings about *Song of Songs*, where he used a metaphor of a dwarf with cataract eyes standing beneath a tower to symbolize people who use culture for inappropriate purposes.

But whatever the controversy surrounding *Song of Songs*, Washington, DC-based artist Debra Band has courageously tackled the text in her recent series of paintings and papercuts. Band describes herself as Modern Orthodox, having grown up in a "Jewish and general environment" that "accepts full intellectual engagement with the modern world." She is married to an astrophysicist (who helped her translate the *Song of Songs* text), which has led her to comfortably reconcile the Big Bang with *Bereishit*. "So far as I'm concerned," she said, "modern academic Biblical scholarship ... is basic to understanding Biblical texts, and any Biblical text project I take on begins not only with the traditional rabbinics, but with academic Biblical studies.



**Song of Songs, Page One, Garden Entrance, Courtesy of DC JCC**

“I strongly believe that within the context of Jewish culture it must be understood simultaneously according to both readings; to understand it only as allegory is to willfully blind oneself, but to understand it only as romantic love poetry ignores its profound cultural value as the paramount expression of the love between G-d and Israel that colors and animates every aspect of Jewish life and thought.”

Her *Song of Songs* book (JPS 2005), which was painted in San Diego and Santa Fe, took more than six years to make. The research took even longer. The book consists of 33 leaves (all made on kosher slunk vellum, a particular sort of parchment made from cows) that were crafted in Israel. On the vellum, Band used gouache (opaque watercolor) and gold leaf to heighten the color. On seven pages, Band cut shapes in the vellum and used the negative space to vary the pages somewhat. The oscillation between negative and positive space seems to mirror the different layers of meaning in the text.

For the book, Band found it vital to use an up-to-date translation (for instance, “*tapuach*” is translated as apricot, where convention has held it to be apple), which her husband provided, based on his studies and those of his father, a Biblical scholar. “This was necessary, not only for the sake of honesty,” Band explained, “but because, working with the *Midrash* so much – which is already interpretive – the understanding of the poetry would have been entirely muddled by a translation that took liberties with the literal Hebrew text.”



Song of Songs, Page Two, Courtesy of DC JCC

Allegiance to the text also proved essential for the artwork. Band wanted to treat the text “honestly,” and yet “the use of full-body human imagery would have meant incorporating an enormous amount of erotica, which would have been problematic on many levels.” So she chose to represent human bodies indirectly, strategically placing textile patterns over the lovers (see image two), and showing hands and arms (and a foot on one page) instead of whole bodies. She uses the symbols of flowers and the garden – which figures prominently into the text – throughout the book (image one shows the entrance).

The lettering, in a scribal style, provides a very interesting touch, as many contemporary Jewish illuminated manuscripts tend to use more modern typography. Band sees no *halachic* problem in this enterprise, because

illuminated books “do not have direct *halachic* requirements.”

“Fortunately, I am not even slightly interested in writing *sta”m* (Torah scrolls, *mezuzot* and *tefillin*), and would not do so if asked because of the *halachic* requirement that they be written only by male scribes.”



Song of Songs, Page Nine, Courtesy of DC JCC

Within the illuminated manuscript framework, which is not governed by *halachic* requirements, Band is able to employ some playful moves. The exhibit subtitle, “The Honeybee in the Garden,” is part of a scribal tradition in which scribes use their work, in part, as self-portraiture. Band’s signature, which she embeds within the text and title, is her name. *Devorah* means “honeybee” (thus the title), and in each painting she makes a Waldo-like move of hiding a bee (some are easier to find than others).

By wrestling with the *Song of Songs* text through rigorous translation and identification of metaphor, through traditional illuminated manuscript coloration, typography and gold leaf, and with a playful feel for signature, Band is able to convey the vividness and life affirmation of the literal text through modest, allegorical forms. In a way, she is making the same move in paint that the rabbis made in their textual analysis.

*To see more of Band's work (including her recently completed illuminated manuscript of a selection of 36 Psalms, to be published by JPS next year), see <http://www.dbandart.com>.*

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