

Manuscript Illumination: Bringing Light to the Page

An Interview with Debra Band

By Jennifer Stern Breger

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

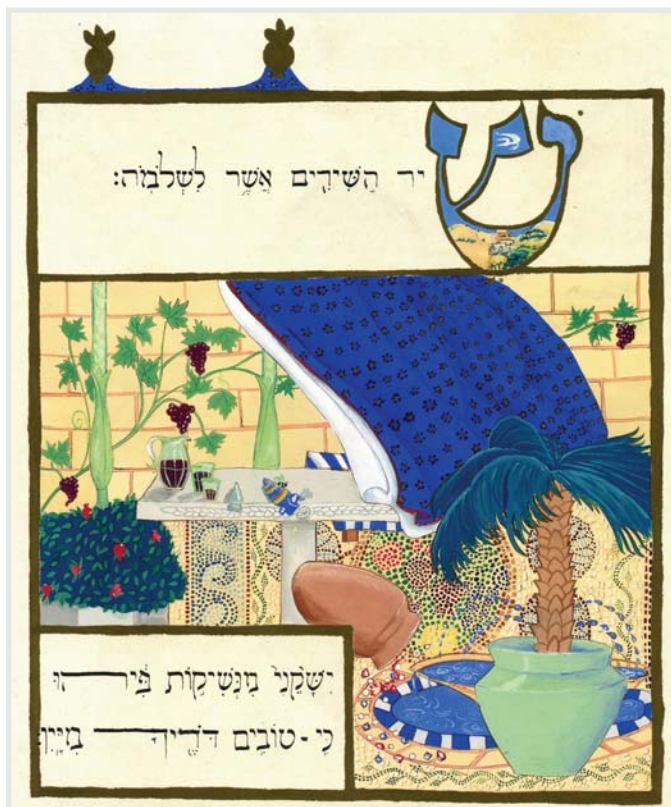
A: Hebrew manuscript illumination rings every bell for me. I’m from a 250-year line of orthodox rabbis in Britain and before that, Russia; the family traces back to the Berditchever Rav, and Jewish learning has always been the central family value. I read and wrote Hebrew before learning to read and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

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

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

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

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



Debra Band, Opening of *Shir Hashirim*

“The Song of Songs of Solomon:
May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth
For your love is better than wine”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Debra Band, Illuminated page to illustrate Chapter 2:8-11 beginning:

*The voice of my beloved, here he comes, skipping in the mountains,
jumping in the hills. My beloved is like a deer or young gazelle
He stands behind our wall, gazing through the window, peeking through the lattice.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A: Undoubtedly. I am far more keenly aware of much of the subtle nuance of expression in many of the

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

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

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

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

Q: Are you planning on illustrating other Biblical texts?

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



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