



PSALM 91



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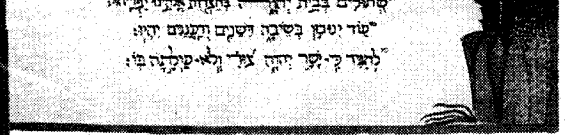
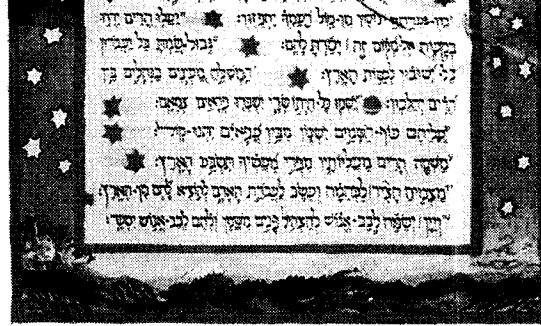
SPEAKING VOLUMES

This would appear to be the season of the Psalms. A recent flurry of books about these impassioned expressions of religious feeling — the trend began last fall with scholar Robert Alter’s reworking of the artful prayers — has recently been added to by a lovingly produced volume from Philadelphia’s own Jewish Publication Society titled *I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms*. The art is the work of painter Debra Band, and it is accompanied by prose meditations by the artist and literary commentary provided by Arnold Band.

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner makes a relevant point — as has been his want for so many years now — in his foreword to the work. There he writes: “The Books of Psalms is unique among the books of the Hebrew Bible. It is the only book that God did not write. If the other books of the Bible are characterized by ‘Thus says the Lord ...’ or ‘the word of God came to Jeremiah ...,’ the psalms represent Israel’s response to being addressed by God and to living in the presence of God.”

What is it these earliest of Jewish poets have to say to God? Overwhelmingly, notes Kushner, they dwell on gratitude. “They anticipate, and perhaps influence, the tone of the later Jewish liturgy, in which prayers that begin ‘God, thank you for ...’ are preferred to prayers beginning ‘God, please give me ...’

But Kushner says that we misinterpret the psalms if we consider them only as page upon page of simple piety. The rabbi writes: “There are psalms of rage, psalms of anguish and religious



# ‘Intimations of the Divine’

doubt, psalms that wonder whether God has forgotten His people ... The psalms are an encyclopedia of the range of religious emotions. In them we find expressions of joy and confidence alongside outbursts of fear and anger, feelings of guilt and unworthiness followed by protestations of innocence and the serenity of being invited to ‘dwell in the House of the Lord forever.’ ”

But with such passion and fire on display — whether it be praise or, at certain moments, frustration and anger — why should such emotion-laden prose and poetry need illustration, further illumination? According to artist Debra Brand, the art works she has created in her new book — she has already done a version of *The Song of Song* — “present a visual midrash, an interpretation, of the selected psalms, which I hope will give not only aesthetic pleasure in their shimmering gold and color, but also a means of recapturing the sense of awe embodied in these verses.”

As for her visual vocabulary, she explains that here, as was also true in her *Song of Songs*, it has been essential that “any given scene begin with a recognizable representation from the world of our own experience. ... I choose and arrange objects in ways that make logical sense in the narrative setting. I draw my imagery from diverse sources: from midrash, from other biblical texts whose meaning relates to the psalm at hand, and from modern society and science.”

As for representing in some visual sense the awe she feels expressed in the psalms, she says she uses the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel as a guide (another inspired choice): “Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.” ♦



PSALM 1