

Artist as Kohen: **Transmitting Holiness**

Featuring works by participants in
North Suburban Synagogue Beth El's Artists' Beit Midrash

Lois Barr ▪ Sam Bernstein ▪ Sylvia Dresser
Nessia Frank ▪ Judith Joseph
Ruti Modlin ▪ Lilach Schrag
Judy Solomon ▪ Linda Carol Sonin
Leah Sosewitz ▪ Sandy Starkman

Curated by Judith Joseph

November 2014 - January 2015

The Rissman Family Kol Ami Museum

The Rissman Family Kol Ami Museum is a unique collection of Jewish art, artifacts and ritual objects. In addition to preserving significant objects for posterity, the museum seeks to develop programs and exhibitions that are designed to educate the congregation and promote an appreciation for works of Judaica.

*North Suburban
Synagogue*
Beth El
בית כנסת בית אל

1175 Sheridan Road, Highland Park 60035

Sandy Starkman

Breastplate of Decision ~ Breastplate of Family

Quilt with family photographs and other embellishments



I am Shulamit Rahel bat Yehoshua Hakohane u'Masha Basha, a product of my parents, ancestors, close family, friends, and teachers. I am who I am because of who they were/are, and am constantly learning from their experiences, their acts of tzedakah, chesed, and their love of Israel. I use that history and connection to make decisions. Memory and remembrance are important parts of being Jewish. This Hoshen Ha'mishpat, Breastplate of Decision, is also a Hoshen Ha'mishpacha, a Breastplate of Family.

Sandy Starkman was born in Lincolnwood, Illinois, learned to sew in junior high home economics, and has sewn various items since receiving a sewing machine from her dad for her *Bat Mitzvah*. She graduated from the University of Michigan with Bachelor and Master Degrees in Economics, and a Master of Health Services Administration. She met her husband Larry Pachter while in college. Her first quilt, *Kimono Quilt*, was published in *East on Central*, Volume 8, 2009/2010. Her next quilt will be a large triptych about her many trips to Jerusalem and Israel. She has been a member of NSS Beth El since 1982.

Leah Sosewitz

Hoshens 12

Multi-layered laser cut with hand-printed paper and gold leaf



Hoshens 12 attempts, by its size and intricacy, to be a statement about the sacred breastplate, the hoshen, worn by the High Priest of the Israelites, according to the Book of Exodus. I created this large work to comment on the majesty conveyed to the people Israel by this object. What must the people have felt and thought when seeing such an expensive object worn by a person of such high standing in relation to God? How do present day objects have a similar effect? Each of the tribes represented is created by a multi-layered paper laser cutting. The stones are represented by hand painted papers that attempt to mimic the look of the gems described in some of the writings about the hoshen. Each tribe's name is cut out and backed in 23K gold leaf to attach some version of the "worth" of the objects used to create the historical hoshen. The panels are attached to a large board to create a "larger than life" hoshen, a paper tribal quilt.

Leah Sosewitz is a Judaic artist with a focus on paper cutting and ketubot. She has illuminated existing manuscripts such as a Megillat Esther, working in 23K gold leaf on parchment as well as creating new pieces based on artistic interpretations of specific texts or images from the Torah and Jewish lore. Leah has worked in the design and creation of ritual objects, handmade books, and donor recognition projects. She has shown her work extensively and was the recipient of an artist's fellowship in Ethnic Folk Arts from the Illinois Arts Council in 1998. Her work is in the collections of individuals as well as in synagogues and other institutions worldwide.

ARTIST AS KOHEN: TRANSMITTING HOLINESS

The art in this exhibit was inspired and informed by Jewish heritage. A group of artists came together last summer to study and discuss their art in an Artists' *Beit Midrash* (study group), conducted by Torah scholar Jane Shapiro (text study) and artist and educator Judith Joseph (art discussion).

Using sacred text study as a stepping-off point, we explored our role as Jewish artists. We discussed the idea of transmitting culture and spirituality by viewing and creating art, much as the high priest facilitated a holy connection through ritual.

Some of the artists' work is a direct response to the content of the text. For others, the *Beit Midrash* was an inspiration to connect with Jewish ideas, more generally.

Jane Shapiro started each *Beit Midrash* session with an hour of text study and discussion. She helped us connect with ideas in the text as creative transmitters of culture. For the second hour, Judith Joseph facilitated an art "critique" of participants' artwork, followed by a presentation of relevant traditional and cutting-edge Jewish art from around the world for inspiration.

This Artists' *Beit Midrash* is modeled on a group created by artist Tobi Kahn in New York. We are grateful to NSS Beth El for supporting this project, which we hope to carry forward. Special thanks to Beth El staff Ali Drumm, Marcie Eskin and Rachel Kamin, for their hard work in putting the Artists' *Beit Midrash* together, and to Sandy Starkman, whose persistent efforts put it on the synagogue radar.

--Judith Joseph, Artists' Beit Midrash Art Facilitator

Lois Barr, Sam Bernstein, and Nessia Frank *Calling*

Photography with Photoshop by Sam Bernstein; Poem by Lois Barr;
Hand Calligraphy by Nessia Frank



This is a collaborative effort, based on the Beth El Artists' Beit Midrash study of Moses at the burning bush. The study inspired Lois to write the poem "Calling," and Sam manipulated a photograph to depict the burning bush. Nessia then calligraphied (by hand) the poem, and Sam composed the arrangement.

What would you do
if you were called
to a bush that burned
and burned
but was not consumed?
Would you approach
besinged by flames
drop and roll or
keep your distance
mumble I am not worthy
I cannot go
I am slow of speech
I, I, I do, do, do not know
your words echo off the mountain.

But the bush is crafty
so there you are
shoeless in the desert
your toes burrow
you know God knows
the sins you buried in sand.
Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
 Jacob, Jacob
the patriarchs stun you.

If this God of magical rods
ambiguous names and
blood-stained portents
told you to go to Pharaoh
to free your people
would you go?

Number your days
count the omer¹
 if you can
remember your friends
remember the ways
they tickle your fancy
relish in their good taste
 and bad
listen to their stories
with both ears and
both hands
 open

number your days
write one hundred
things to do before you die
rip your list
 to shreds
do what you're doing now
or do something new
listen to Nozze di Figaro
measure flour
cup by cup
 sift with care

number your days
 *Exprime diem*²
and be grateful
for this rainy day
that germinates seeds
or a sub zero day
that freezes microbes
numbs your face

count the beat of a tune
with the palms of your hands
or the heels of your shoes
count the grains of rice
 in a risotto
 count
the creases
on your husband's foot
 count

¹ Jewish practice of counting the 49 days between Passover and Shavuoth

² Squeeze the day

published in [The New Vilna Review](http://www.newvilnareview.com) (www.newvilnareview.com) and
[Biopoesis](#) (Poetica Publishing, 2014)

Leah Sosewitz *Number Your Days*

Handmade book by **Leah Sosewitz** ~ concept and execution based on an original poem of the same name by **Lois Barr**



In order to find a format that would incorporate 49 days (of the Omer) and create a suitable rhythm for the reading of the poem, I decided on 7 folios of 7 pages each, set into an accordion style book. I painted the 7 folios in colors representing the cycle of the sky going from dawn to dusk. I included 7 emotional attributes in Hebrew as “titles” for each of the 7 separate folios. These attributes are said to make up the spectrum of human experience, a kabalistic approach to creating a personal meditation of the counting of the Omer. Little diamond shaped tropes accumulate day by day, culminating in 49 marks of 23K gold leaf on the last word of the poem, “count.” The book covers have the barley/wheat images, literally bookending the words of this beautiful poem with the mitzvah of counting beginning from the day on which the Omer, a measure of barley, was offered in the Temple in Jerusalem, up until the day before an offering of wheat was brought to the Temple on Shavuot.

See page 3 for **Lois Barr’s** biography.

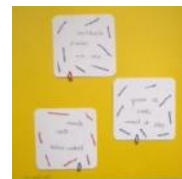
Lois Baer Barr is a professor of Spanish at Lake Forest College. Her poems and stories have been published in numerous journals and included in five anthologies. She has received Pushcart nominations for poetry and fiction. Her books, articles, and reviews on Spanish and Latin American literature, with a special focus on Latin American Jewish Literature, have appeared here and abroad. Her chapbook *Biopesis* won *Poetica Magazine’s* 2013 contest.

Born and raised Jewish in Ottumwa, Iowa, **Sam Bernstein** was one of only two Jews in his high school graduating class of 600. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of Chicago and graduate degrees from Northwestern University, and has been married to the same wonderful woman since 1971. He took up painting after his retirement in 2001 and more recently has been playing with photography manipulation. Sam sees the world through Iowa-colored glasses with a strong Jewish tint, despite having lived in the Chicago region since 1965. You can take the boy out of Iowa, but you can’t take Iowa out of the boy.

See page 4 for **Nessia Frank’s** biography.

Sylvia Dresser *Life Intervenes*

Mixed Media (paper attached to canvas, embellished with pulpboard, embroidery floss, and bells)



This class was wonderfully inspiring to me at just the time that I was looking for something new. However, due to a broken wrist, I was unable to complete the projects I had planned, hence the frustrated tone of this piece which I was able to complete. I do plan to continue exploring the ideas that came to me during our studies together.

Sylvia Dresser has played with fabric, thread, and yarn for most of her life. In her retirement, she intends to continue exploring the joys of these and other media.

Nessia Frank



Alef

Paper and Ink (printed on foam plate)
On loan from Benjamin and Wendy Frank, Buffalo Grove, IL



Hanukkiyah: HaNerot Hallelu Anu Madlikin

Stoneware (hand built and carved)
On loan from Dr. Rachel Dulin, Sarasota, FL



Yizkor Votiv

Porcelain (hand built)

Although I grew up in a secular environment in Israel, from an early age I was exposed to everything Jewish. My teachers came from religious European backgrounds, but they rejected Jewish observance. In spite of themselves, they oozed Jewish knowledge, and could not help but immerse us in it. It was not until years later, when studying Talmud with Rabbi Kurtz, that I discovered the source of many phrases they had taught us. In my work, I am especially enamored of the Hebrew and English alphabets.

Nessia Frank was born in Israel and raised in Herzliyah. She served in the Israeli army and was trained as a youth counselor through the Jewish Agency and worked in Kiryat Malachi, an immigrant town. Nessia also studied at the Bezalel School of Art in Jerusalem and worked as an arts counselor in a cultural center. After coming to the United States in 1963, she graduated from Spertus College with a Hebrew teaching certificate. She combined her artistic and teaching abilities working at Solomon Schechter Day School and spending a summer on staff at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. Nessia developed calligraphy skills and began creating art in multiple media including paper and ceramics. She was married to the late Edward Frank and has a son, a daughter, and four granddaughters.

Linda Carol Sonin

Pomegranate Choshen

Needle Felting/Mixed Media



I spent many hours studying the text in Parashat Tetsaveh depicting the Choshen (Breast Plate of Decision), and then creating my own artistic interpretation based on my learning. Pomegranates which ringed the hem of the priestly garments are reinterpreted to represent each of the Twelve Tribes. The stones corresponding to each tribe listed in the Torah are depicted here as “seeds” representing the proliferation of the tribes. Although there is little agreement among scholars as to the exact modern-day equivalent of the stones specified in the Torah, I enjoyed the challenge of researching and selecting these gemstones to closely approximate those described in the text. I am grateful for this opportunity to use my love of fiber arts to bring a Jewish text to life.

Linda Sonin is the Director of the Board of Jewish Education of Metropolitan Chicago’s Marshall Jewish Learning Center. Throughout her career in Jewish education, she has focused on creating art projects which engage students in meaningful Jewish learning.

Judy Solomon *Altars and Home Altar*

Ceramic (glazed high fire clay sitting on acrylic-painted canvas on thick frame base)



The Artists' Beit Midrash offered me an opportunity to take a look at what I could say about a Jewish theme through the medium of ceramics. The idea of the mizbe'ach as a form, both ancient and modern, turned out to be a good focus for me. Ancient artifacts and their mysterious, silent, proud forms, continue to keep my fertile imagination working overtime, as do modern artifacts of living.

The burnt matches in Home Altar are from candle lighting and were collected from friends who saved them for me during the baggim.



Judy Solomon holds Bachelor and Master Degrees in Printmaking. She retired after a long career teaching art in public schools in the Chicago area and in Philadelphia. For the last three years, she has been concentrating on the medium of ceramics to explore her aesthetic vision.

Judith Joseph *Ghost Scroll II*

Woodcut on Muslin



Ghost Scroll II was produced in the context of a large-scale printing project. It was carved on a 3' x 5' piece of birch plywood, transported to the University of Wisconsin-Manitowoc, inked, laid on the pavement, and printed by a steamroller. The imagery in the work was inspired by a Czech Torah scroll that was rescued from the Holocaust, that I have come to know and love. I visited the Torah scroll's town of origin, read from the Torah in the half-ruined synagogue, and some years later, brought the Torah to the Memorial Scrolls Trust in London for a 50th anniversary celebration and ceremonial procession. To me, the Ghost Scroll represents the joy of Torah, mingled with the sorrow of absence: missing letters, missing people. The tree of life is our vital, eternal heritage.

Also on display is Judith's woodcut relief print, Peh.

With Jane Shapiro, **Judith Joseph** is co-instructor of the Artists' Beit Midrash. She is a painter and calligrapher with commissioned works in many private and public collections. Her specialty is the Ketubah. Judith works in egg tempera, watercolor, acrylic and relief printing. In addition to her calligraphy and illustration commissions, she exhibits widely. She is a published illustrator and a two-time recipient of the Illinois Arts Council Artists' Fellowship Award. She is a painting instructor at the Chicago Botanic Garden and the Art Center, Highland Park. In 2015, she will exhibit her work in a two-person show at the Zack Gallery of the Vancouver JCC.

Ruti Modlin
Burning Bush
Mixed Media



This new painting was inspired by my participation in the Artists' Beit Midrash during the summer of 2014. This work is my personal interpretation of the Biblical text in chapter III of Exodus, where Moses "stumbles upon" the enigmatic sight of an unconsumed burning bush on a desert mountain.

This event heralds the start of an unparalleled direct relationship between Moses and God, who guides him in the emancipation of his people from slavery in Egypt, cementing the ancient covenant by introducing them to the Ten Commandments and readying them for their new identity and destiny in the promised land.

Ruti Modlin is an Israeli-born artist who spent her formative years in Europe. After her army service in Israel, she rejoined her parents in South Africa, where she studied Graphic Design and Fine Art in Johannesburg. She married and raised her children there until their move to Highland Park in 1998. Her family was part of the Beth El congregation for 12 years, while her children attended Solomon Schechter Day School. Ruti has been a member of ARC Gallery in Chicago for the last 6 years. She teaches at The Art Center of Highland Park and at Congregation Beth Shalom Hebrew School in Northbrook. Her work is in private collections and has been exhibited in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, Canada and Paris, France. Her most recent public commission, *Autumn Glass*, has been adorning Highland Park's Central Avenue since 2013. She regularly participates in various juried exhibitions. Her new solo show, *Pentimento*, opened at ARC Gallery and Educational Foundation on November 7, 2014.

Lilach Schrag
Suspended Cloak
Fabric, glue, wire, and paint



Anchored in the Biblical story of Elijah's ascent to heaven, the cloak represents a link between heaven and man, and between man and himself, becoming a tool in the hands of a miracle worker, and a symbol of authority and opportunity. Part of the cloak series was recently exhibited in a two-person show in Chicago.

Lilach Schrag is an artist and an educator whose artwork reacts to nature and to text, and manifests itself in metal and glass sculptures, fabric installations, and spray-painted canvases. Lilach earned an art teaching certificate at The Art School of Beit-Berl College in Israel, and a Master of Arts in Jewish Professional Studies from the Spertus Institute in Chicago.