

Art @ the Heart of Social Justice

An Artists Beit Midrash Exhibition
curated by Judith Joseph

November 5, 2021 - January 9, 2022



If Not Now, When? by Ronna Bows Leibach

Featuring works by:

Suzanne Horwitz ▪ Julie Isaacson ▪ Judith Joseph

Charlotte Kaplan ▪ Judith MK Kaufman

Ronna Bows Leibach ▪ Marla Snyder ▪ Judy Solomon

Sandy Starkman ▪ Chana Zelig

The Rissman Kol Ami Collection at
North Suburban Synagogue Beth El

Art @ the Heart of Social Justice

The art and literary works in this exhibition catalog resulted from an Artists Beit Midrash, a course of text study and art discussion at North Suburban Synagogue Beth El, with support from the Gertrude Lederman Family Continuing Education program. The class was co-taught by **Judith Joseph** and **Dr. Jane Shapiro**. Judith is on the faculty of the Chicago Botanic Garden and the Art Center Highland Park, where she teaches painting and calligraphy. She is a member of the Jewish Artists Collective of Chicago and organizes the adult study program at Congregation Hakafa. Jane is a local Jewish educator. She is co-founder of Orot: Center for New Jewish Learning and the recipient of the 2017 Covenant Award for excellence in Jewish education.

In this year's Artists Beit Midrash, we examined texts and contemporary art to explore the issues of social and racial justice and inspire art that comes from a place of greater insight, enlightenment and justice. We strove to create art as a catalyst for change: in ourselves and in the world. We discussed visual art by filmmakers, photographers, painters, fiber artists and performance artists. We looked at degraded environments and also sites of tragedy that were ennobled by uplifting artistic memorial monuments. We explored the journey from despair to hope, as we considered justice issues in the Bible and in our society. We dug deep within ourselves to explore the personal side of righteousness and holiness, and dialogued about how best to express these emotions and ideas in our work.

The range of media in this year's exhibition/publication is broad. Two of our artists, Judith MK Kaufman and Julie Isaacson, responded to the 2021 ABM art challenge with the written word. Suzanne Horwitz, Marla Snyder, Judy Solomon and I created sculptural works. Ronna Bows Leibach and Sandy Starkman created works of art in fiber. Charlotte Kaplan and Chana Zelig rounded out the exhibition with paintings.

Judith Joseph, Exhibition Curator and Artists Beit Midrash Facilitator

Suzanne Horwitz

Paper Faces

Hand-made paper and mixed media

Suzanne Horwitz

Emergence

Bronze



The structural basis of this art construction is a grid based on the classic puzzle called fifteen-square. The object of the traditional puzzle is to place the tiles in order by making sliding moves that use the empty space. In Paper Faces, the faces do not move, but the grid's format forces the comparison of varied shapes, texture and color. It confronts the viewer with the void and asks, and begs the question: who or what is missing or next?

My process was to make hand-made paper pulp sheets using various dyes, while adding a variety of other materials into the suspended pulp fibers as I formed the pulp into sheets. While still wet, I carefully stippled the pulp with a stencil brush onto the positive side of a previously made facial fragment bronze mold based on my sculpture, Emergence. Finally, the positive and negative sides of the bronze mold were assembled and heated with a propane torch to dry the paper.



Suzanne Horwitz, a second-generation artist, studied at the Art Students League of New York, received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Bachelor of Science from the University of Michigan.

Suzanne's sculpture won recognition at the Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey. Her work has been exhibited in numerous venues nationally and locally and represented in corporate and private collections. Horwitz was selected to be a Fellow of the Covenant at The Spertus Museum of Jewish Learning in Chicago, Illinois. Her work is represented in the newly published book, *CAST: Art and Objects Made using Humanity's Most Transformative Process*, from Schiffer Publishing.

Although primarily a figurative sculptor, she has produced a diverse and extensive body of work. Her pieces range from intimate portraits to large room sized installations and outdoor public sculpture as well. Horwitz is on the faculty of the Evanston Art Center and Art Center Highland Park and is a working studio artist.

Julie Isaacson

What Words?

How many choirs to preach to?
 How many phrases to call out the unjust?
 How many deaths and
 wars in the name of values?
 How many travesties?

How do we polish the gold in the Golden Rule,
 so shiny we can see our mirrored image?
 In the teaching of faiths:
Justice, justice shall you pursue. — Deuteronomy (16:20)
*O you who believe, be upright for God, and
 be bearers of witness and justice.* — Quran (5:8)
*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free,
 nor is there male or female,
 for you are all one in Christ Jesus* — Galatians (3:28)

What are the magical, awakening words that will align us?
 Who are the *others*?
 Every *other*, born to a mother.

And Yet ... Fear. Hate.
 How, Where? Why is there so much Hate
 that grows and multiplies?
 Multiplies to divide.
 Adds to subtract
 our souls from our
 bodies and minds.

Beyond the lyrics,
 Stand to teach each other well
 in our own hearts;
 family community country.

Embrace love as climate change.

Julie Isaacson is a teacher of all ages, primarily in the Language Arts. Julie writes short stories and poetry which have been featured in *East on Central*, and *Highland Park Poetry*. She enjoys writing memoir pieces and assisting her students in crafting stories about important influences and occurrences in their lives. Julie is also an engaged learner focused on a variety of interests, including spirituality, human behavior and world affairs. She studies teachings from Jewish sources, and was particularly inspired in this Artists Bet Midrash to examine Social Injustice from a variety of viewpoints. We live in challenging times, and Julie chose to explore guiding principles from multiple sources, which influence many cultures in our world. Julie believes that important forces for Social Justice are the desire and ability to hear others, welcoming fresh perspectives.

Judith Joseph

The Voice of the Bell

Copper repousse, lambskin

Judith Joseph in collaboration with Judy Solomon

Bat Kol (Echo)

Ceramic (Judy Solomon) and lambskin letters (Judith Joseph)



The Voice of the Bell was inspired by a story told by Badri Cohen, a Samaritan woman, as related by Yeshiva University Prof. Steven Fine in *The Samaritans: A Biblical People*.

In Badri's story, on the eve of Passover, the Samaritans searched for a sheep to slaughter for the important ritual sacrifice. There were no sheep to be found in the whole village. They were about to give up in despair, when they heard the tinkling of bells. They looked up and saw a shepherd and flock of sheep coming over the hill. To summarize, they were able to obtain a sheep and perform the ritual slaughter, in fulfillment of their defining role as Shomrim. The mysterious shepherd, who disappeared, may have been an appearance of the Prophet Elijah.

The lambskin strips are inscribed with verses from Exodus 12: 1-14, in which G-d describes the mitzvah of the Passover rituals. The inscription is in the Samaritan language. The verses are nearly identical to the Hebrew Torah. The botanical imagery represents plants native to Samaria.

As we consider justice in human relations, we must listen for the sound of the bell, which is the inner voice of spiritual and moral guidance. It vibrates silently through our sacred text.

Bat Kol is Hebrew for “echo.” I love this term, because translated literally, it means “daughter of the voice,” which is such a poetic description of an echo.



This work was started by Judy Solomon, who created the ceramic form. She handed it off to me, not certain where to go with it. To me, it resembled a face, or at least, the openings looked like speaking mouths. I was hearing echoes. I added my lambskin Samaritan cut-out letters, emerging from a “mouth.” This ancient language, still in use by a tiny minority, is a “bat kol” of Hebrew, a version of our language that we left behind as Hebrew evolved and the Jewish people incorporated Rabbinic and Diasporic wisdom. I love the dynamism of Judy’s work: swooshes of contrasting colors of bisque clay. They woosh like the voice of the echo.

Judith Joseph is a Chicago based artist whose work is exhibited internationally. She works across media, chiefly woodblock prints, painting and installation. As a commissioned artist, she creates Hebrew calligraphic works, specializing in the Ketubah. Her work is inspired by nature, stories and Jewish ideas. She is a published illustrator and is currently working on a children’s picture book. She co-curates and hosts the Jewish Art Salon Open Studios Program, a monthly live online series showcasing Jewish artists to an international audience.

See **Judy Solomon**’s biography on page 13.

Charlotte Kaplan

*"The beauty of this earth was given to us...
Here man created steps to achieve greater heights...
Embrace this land, for our stay here is brief."*

Acrylic

Charlotte Kaplan

The Old City of Jerusalem, thru the rebuilt Hurvah Arch

Watercolor



The topic discussed for the Artists Beit Midrash was Justice in Human Relations...

Human Relations is just that, a myriad of workers, together creating improvements on THIS land, our world!

The watercolor painting of the reconstructed Hurvah Arch in the Old City of Jerusalem is the Jewish Quarter's re-relationship with the three other quarters ... creating improvements with other religions.

Charlotte Kaplan has been an Art Director with corporations, not-for-profit organizations, and a freelance artist, in the Midwest for thirty years. Currently she has commission work doing unique fiber art wall pieces for home interiors, synagogues, and schools. She creates chuppahs, challah covers, etc. She has clients who will use her interior decorating services, and ideas.



Judith MK Kaufman

I Was Never a Slave

*It is not your duty to finish the work,
but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.*

– Rabbi Tarfon, *Pirkei Avot*, 2:16

How do we channel history
to make a mark in *this* world?
We were commanded to
remember
our people were slaves in Egypt.
The memory of slavery
should elicit empathy.

A more recent recollection
pervades my mind and heart:
ancestors – names we know –
the slaves of Europe.
They, too, made
bricks from straw.

Beaten, starved, tortured,
drowned, hanged, gassed.
Don't tell me
*this cannot happen
in our lifetime ...*
it has.

I read about a man of my own age
who, in his lifetime, in my own,
was forced into labor
for speaking his thoughts;
in his lifetime, in my own,
was hanged from a tree, and
only through God's gift
was his life saved.

This could be us.
This has been us.
This may be us again.

I take these words to heart:
אנחנו חיבים זה לזה
anachnu chayavim zeh lazeh.
We are responsible,
we are commanded,
it is our duty
to do this work.

I Was Never a Slave was inspired by the events in recent years, which have shown a terrible backsliding in the basic ethics of our country. I cannot help but compare the experience of people of color in the U.S. to the experience of the Jewish people. But it is also difficult to express without sounding presumptuous. I do not presume to know what others feel, but I believe the comparison can be a basis for positive action by our people on behalf of others who struggle with their own suffering.

Judith MK Kaufman is a transplanted New Yorker who has lived in Highland Park since 1976. A poet and memoirist, she believes her late-in-life pursuit of creative writing was the result of living in this town, where the arts are an integral part of the community. How many suburban communities have a major art center (TAC), a major music venue (Ravinia Park), a number of performing organizations (HP Strings, Pilgrim Chamber Players) and a high school that holds a biennial Festival of the Arts? Judith is a founding member and Editor-in-Chief of Highland Park's journal of literature and art, *East on Central*, now in its 20th year. Her own work has been published in *Poetica*, *Collage*, *the Journal of Modern Poetry*, *East on Central* and online at *Pirene's Fountain* and *Highland Park Poetry*. A memoir about her parents, *Caught Laughing: the Esther and Bernie Story*, was published in 2017, and she is currently working on a book of poems about her grandchildren, tentatively titled *All My Cookies*.

Ronna Bows Leibach

If Not Now, When?

Surface design on fabric, enhanced with machine stitching, Lumiere paint, beading



In our study of social justice, both through Torah study and artists' self-expressions, it is not only important to acknowledge injustice, insolation, indifference, oppression and cruelty but to have a personal plan to help combat it. The key to defending those who have been so maligned is to actively pull them out of the holes of oppression. Whether it is an individual reaching out to other individuals, or working to change laws, it is our responsibility to start. This piece is made of fused fabric, machine free motion quilting, fabric paint, beading and metal enhancements.

Ronna Bows Leibach has been silk painting for fifteen years, making challah covers, scarves and Torah covers. As a member of the North Suburban NeedleArts Guild (NSNG) and the Women's Journey in Fiber, she has expanded her work to include artwork that is made of fabric, thread and surface enhancements.

Marla Snyder

My Pekelach (My Basket)

Collage, gouache on canvas with ink

Marla Snyder

My Pekelach (My Basket)

Rope & wire, assemblage



When I was young and complained to my mother about my problems, she often would respond by saying “If everyone threw their problems in a basket, and then saw everyone else’s, they would take their own back.” This I thought was a wise aphorism.

Today’s world is riddled with complicated issues, entanglements and knots. Woven into the fabric are commandments and problems that are overwhelming to the average person.

In exploring the problems of social and racial justice, I acknowledge there are no simple solutions to the inequalities of mankind. As an artist, I have chosen to depict different people in various sizes, shapes and colors as paintbrushes. I have put them in a woven basket of ideals and opinions represented by bunched up (frustrating) newspaper headlines.

We all must find our moral voice and express it, our own individual “pekelach.” As Rabbi Joachim Prinz pointed out ... “Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept. It means a collective responsibility for the preservation of man’s dignity and integrity.”

Marla Snyder has been a working designer and art teacher in the community for over forty years. Her medium has been predominately watercolor so these artworks are really out of her comfort zone. Marla says, “The events of the past two years, COVID-19 and our Artists Beit Midrash seminar have pushed my creativity and made me rethink how I approach my work. I’ve learned to just let it happen.”



Judy Solomon

Reflection Mezuzah

Mixed media: ceramic, mirrors, on wood

Judy Solomon

Glowing Mezuzah

Mixed media: wood, glazed ceramic, LED lights, stain and paint



Variations on a Theme - two musings on Mezuzot:

*Since this class ended in June, I have been thinking about what I “should” be doing to repair the world. I get overwhelmed thinking about it. I try to keep myself in equilibrium but feel too spread out, too scattered. These pieces were made to be the **reminder**, the focus and the strength to take more action. They are the culmination of years of gaining insights about conceptual art that I have enjoyed through study with Judith Joseph and Jane Shapiro. They hopefully speak for themselves while referencing Judaism and spiritual growth.*

Reflection Mezuzah was created in honor of Ruth Bader Ginsburg - “Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue” (Deuteronomy 16:20). Glowing Mezuzah speaks to strength from within - hold onto it.



Judy Solomon is a retired art teacher who had been working exclusively in Ceramics since 2011. She is a member of the artists collective Space 900 Gallery in Evanston. She has attended all seven years of the Artists Beit Midrash at Beth El.

Sandy Starkman

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Cotton fabric and digital prints



This work comes out of the initiative I helped create in the summer of 2020 at NSS Beth El entitled “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself - V’ahavta L’ray’a’cha Ka’mo’cha.” In the Torah, Talmud and other Jewish texts, so much of what we learn is how to treat others with respect, to take care of the widow and orphan, to feed the hungry, to pay the workers at the end of each day, to return lost objects, to give charity with dignity and for lasting effect, etc. We were slaves in Mitzrayim (Egypt), which we include in our tefillah (prayers) daily, and therefore, we ‘don’t do to others what was done to us.’ I have said that “Social Justice could be another name for Torah.” We must not “stand idly by. . .” and so much more.

Sandy Starkman has been a member of North Suburban Synagogue Beth El since 1982. The founder of Beth El’s Artists Beit Midrash, she is an experienced seamstress, intermediate quilter, amateur photographer, and creative cook and baker. Her first quilt was published in the East on Central: A Journal of Arts and Letters from Highland Park, IL (2009/2010). Sandy enjoys Hebrew Text study and admires art glass, textiles, photographs and ceramics. She THOROUGHLY ENJOYS the Artists Beit Midrash but still doesn’t consider herself an artist quite yet! Sandy brought the Artists Beit Midrash program to North Suburban Synagogue Beth El and is pleased to once again participate with her fellow students, who with Dr. Jane Shapiro and Judith Joseph, continue to inspire her each summer.

Chana Zelig

Justice, Justice You Shall Pursue (Deuteronomy 16:20)

Acrylic on muslin-covered panel



In Jewish tradition, we are told not merely to wait for an opportunity to act justly, but to pursue social justice. As our country calls on us to seek a “more perfect union” and “establish justice,” our tradition obligates us to actively look for areas where our democracy falls short of its ideals. And, when we find cruel inequalities, we must commit ourselves to economic, social, religious and racial justice.

Perhaps the repetition of the word “Justice” suggests that there is another obligation in addition to social activism: philanthropy. Judaism considers this to not only be acts of love and charity, but also of justice; in fact, the word tzedakah comes from the word tzedek (justice). Like the United States’ founding ethic to “promote the general welfare,” this injunction requires the institutions of the Jewish community to help needy people in all walks of life.

Chana Zelig integrates her religious scholarship and spirituality to bring an engaging perspective on Judaism and Jewish art. Her work ranges broadly from paintings and custom Judaica pieces to large installations at synagogues and schools across the US. Chana was raised strictly Orthodox, attended Michlala Jerusalem Seminary for Women and is a graduate of the Wexner Heritage Foundation.

Chana creates visual midrash. A self-taught artist and a soulful, original thinker, she expresses herself in her work and finds insight into Judaism. Zelig combines images and texts to form

meditations on sacred literature, ritual, tradition, and history. Her work ranges from small devotional pieces to large installations. Her art is in private collections, synagogues, and educational institutions across the United States. "Exploring great ideas and making lovely things is what animates me. My Jewish artwork uses the language of color, symbol, composition and words to discuss the wisdom of Torah and engage the experience of holiness."

Chana resides in Chicago and has her studio in a converted barn in southwestern Michigan. She is a member of the Jewish Arts Salon and first joined the Artists Beit Midrash in the spring of 2020.

**Additional participants in the
2021 Artists Beit Midrash were:**

Nessia Frank

Andrea Kamen

Linda Kupfer

Ricki Marks

Harry Solomon

Laura Hodes Zacks

The Rissman Kol Ami Collection 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

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