

Artist Statement of

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The Revelation is a constant hermeneutics of the Word, whether written or oral, discovering new landscapes, problems and truths fitted into one another. It reveals itself not only as the source of wisdom, the path of deliverance and elevation, but also as the nourishment of this life . . .

Emmanuel Levinas, 1906-1995

I am driven by two passions in life—painting and pedagogy. My parents were educators who reveled in the process of transmitting core values. They conveyed to me a love of the Jewish tradition and a passion for education. It is not surprising that this precious legacy manifested itself in my journey toward the rabbinate—a sacred calling in which education and learning are lifelong companions. Driven by a passion and love for Judaism and Israel, I continually seek to convey these treasures in a meaningful, substantive and real way. My profession is educating adults, but my avocation is painting and the visual arts. I have always been pulled in the direction of the fine arts. Wedding the two loves of art and text is a vital necessity in my life, a wellspring of creativity and wholeness. As such, I think of painting as visual prayer mirroring the prophetic experience of ancient Israel. The artist senses a message within that desires to be expressed. As much as a prophet may attempt to suppress the Divine word, it is ultimately futile; so too in the artist's world. Accordingly, my desire is to establish a dialectic between art and exegesis—to use the visual arts as a hermeneutical midwife that delivers the Hebrew text into the hands of a receptive audience. At times, the biblical text is often closed and inaccessible—to both native Hebrew speakers and foreigners alike. Nuances and intratextual messages evade us. Translating biblical and rabbinic text through art breaks down barriers to meaning, inviting the viewer to respond. Rather than being experienced as a daunting, parochial, and fundamentalist force, my art mirrors the humanistic and constructive core of the religious experience.

My works begin *lento*, in deliberate deceleration mode. Friedrich Nietzsche best explains the process of *lento* in his work *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality (1886)* as he described the art of philology, the study of words:

For philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow—it is a goldsmith's art and connoisseurship of the word which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it *lento*. . .this art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read well, that is, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers.

I approach the biblical and rabbinic texts with few expectations. The text must shape me just as I give meaning to the text. I am attuned to repetitive words, phrases, and themes, which appear in a narrative, discovering interplay between particularity and universality. Moreover, the extent to which outside cultures have and continue to shape the Jewish experience motivate and inspire my religious devotion. From a close reading of sacred text, I turn to the palette and paper as I create a composition that reflects the moral, ethic, or principle latent in the written word. An example of

my approach may be found in the interplay between traditional scribal letters juxtaposed to modern styles in some of the pieces. Such lettering reflects my essential view of Judaism, rooted in a four thousand year old tradition yet also responsive to contemporary culture and issues.

My present work, *Passover Landscapes: Illuminations on the Exodus* is born of a number of experiences. Training in the scribal arts at a studio in the heart of Jerusalem; studying illuminated *ketubbot* (marriage contracts) and their history under the tutelage of Shalom Sabar; immersion in the collection of medieval manuscripts and *Haggadot* in the Rare Book Room of The Jewish Theological Seminary; admiration for David Moss and his work *The Moss Haggadah*; crafting a course on the archaeology of the Passover Haggadah with two students, Dedee and Stephen Lovell; and losing two dear friends, Sara Duker, and my rabbinical school classmate and roommate Matthew Eisenfeld (who had been working on a Haggadah) to a terrorist attack in 1996—all led to this experience.

At many Passover tables around the world, the words are recited without understanding, much less discussion, ossifying what was initially an interactive, transformative Passover experience. Through *Passover Landscapes*, I hope to challenge the ennui often experience around the *seder* table and to recapture a spirit of creativity and spontaneity. This work continues the tradition of passing collective memory from generation to generation but invites today's voices to join in "singing a new song to the Lord" (*Psalms 96:1*).