

Sparked by Torah

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Barbara Mendes studied art throughout her youth in New York City; she then published stories and covers in Underground Comix under the name “Willy Mendes.” She developed her style of brilliantly colored narrative paintings, epic in detail and scale, and has exhibited her work in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Florida, and Tel Aviv. Her biblical murals are permanently displayed in Jerusalem and Florida. Her Los Angeles studio/gallery is open to the public, and more of her work can be seen at www.BarbaraMendes.org This article appears in issue 11 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

I have drawn and painted every single verse in the first three Books of the Torah, (in three enormous murals on canvas), scenes from the lives of King David and King Solomon, all the Jewish holidays, and most of the heroines of *Tanakh*, and illustrated the *Haggadah Shel Pessah* and the whole *Megillah*. And I never had contact with any of these texts until I was 45 years old! I thus conclude that Torah not only stimulates creativity, but provides a vital link to the divine, enabling miracles to occur which enable the work to be done. I'm 63 now, still praying for this process to continue. In this essay, I will describe how Torah knowledge and life have sparked and sustained my creative efforts.

Let's begin with my first Torah art job, which brought me to a Sephardic synagogue in Los Angeles called the Pinto Torah Center, to paint outdoor murals for the preschool, an encounter that led to my becoming religiously observant and a Torah Artist. I decided to paint the Garden of Eden; in preparation I read the beginning paperback “Holy Bible” from the bookshelves of my downtown L.A. loft. When I began to paint the wall, I felt guided to anchor the garden scene with an enormous bush, laden with huge, psychedelic blossoms. Rabbi Pinto wondered what was going on! Eventually the rest of the garden appeared, and the mural, (completed in 1993), still glows on that wall. Soon after its completion, I picked up an English translation of the Zohar, which of course I had never heard of in my prior life, and was amazed to read about the giant blossoms I had painted.

While I painted those early murals, (I also did Noah's Ark, and later added a Holiday Mural showing the cycle of holidays after I experienced them for the first time), the preschool children swirled around me during play time. Periodically, they were called in small groups to go up to the Women's Section, a balcony in those days, for their Hebrew lessons. The wonderful Hazzan, Yakov HaRoche, could be heard bribing the children: “Say it, and you get a cookie.” It occurred to me that I might be able to learn the *Alef Bet* if those three and four year olds were doing so, and the cookie didn't

sound bad either. Later in the synagogue kitchen, as visiting Rabbi Meir boiled a giant pot of fragrant Yemenite soup, Yakov HaRoche coached me, from a traditional “Binah” text, in learning the *Aleph Bet*.

I found the quaintness and authenticity of these people and their lifestyle to be as inspiring to paint as the Jewish and Torah knowledge which I began slowly to acquire, and I began to make paintings of everything I learned and saw.

A huge jump in learning came when I enrolled in the Crash Course in Hebrew Reading, offered at night by Yeshiva of Los Angeles. Our teacher, Dr. Yehudah Berdugo, greeted us with this statement: “Class, learning Hebrew is like learning no other language, because Hebrew is the language of God.” I was hooked, and Dr. Berdugo's awesome skills and insights made learning a joy and an inspiration. As we moved on to Reading Improvement, he would preface each verse that we studied, by telling us: “Class, this is very beautiful,” and he was right. Learning Hebrew opens up Judaism and is of course the key to the beautiful prayer services.

Yeshiva of Los Angeles offered a complete night program for adults just at that time, so I took advantage of those classes and learned all I could. I spent months studying each blessing of the *Shemoneh Esrei* with Cantor Pinchas Rabinovitz, as well as *Shemirat haLashon* with Rabbi Hillel Adler, the Laws of Prayer, and Humash and Rashi. The head of the program, Rabbi Harry Greenspan, became a life-long teacher, friend, and mentor. Better than being the “Head of the Fox,” which I related to having been a honcho in the downtown L.A. art scene, I was now the “Tail of the Lion”—at the tippy end of an awesome entity led by Torah greats like Rabbi Sauer. Our classes were in the Boys’ High School, but I peeked inside the Bet Midrash, where rows of men and boys sat learning Torah in timeless fashion.

I painted the “*Shekhina* Comes” Triptych to commemorate this era. In the center panel (of three 7-by-4-foot oil paintings), a giant woman symbolizes the “Presence of Hashem,” the *Shekhina*, coming into my life. Inside the figure's dress are scenes of learning at YOLA— learning the *Alef Bet* with Dr. Berdugo, and peeking into the Bet Midrash. Surrounding the figure is a neighborhood landscape, where people walk on Shabbat, wearing prayer shawls and finery; a new sight to me. The second panel shows another large figure, but she is being ripped open by devils; symbolizing my fall from downtown honcho-hood. Figures of each member of the Pinto Torah Center, old and young, float in the sky, while bright *magen david* designs emerge from the rip; showing my new life-style and community emerging and rescuing me. The third panel celebrates my arrival into a Torah life. The central figure holds a growing tree—the growth! Decorative diamond shapes contain scenes of different Torah classes, and my own Shabbat table. In a scene of Dr. Berdugo's class, we now learn *Pirkei Avot*! In a scene of Mrs. Shira Smiles' class, we study a story from Kings, about Eliyahu haNavi withholding rain from the earth. A giant outer diamond shape contains my first biblical narrative: the entire story we studied with Mrs. Smiles is illustrated. I particularly related to painting the scene of the prophet breathing life back into the widow's son. It reminded me of the countless times my eldest daughter was supposed to die from her brain cancer at the age of three; she kept coming back from the edge, was still alive at that time, and lived to be 36.

Along with my first experience of the cycle of Jewish holidays came my first experience of another momentous cycle: the cycle of Torah readings. My impulse to make a mural on canvas of the whole Book of *Bereishith* came from gratitude and awe. The six Hebrew letters of the word “*Bereishith*” correspond to the six days of creation, so I put them together in six large boxes on a 16-foot canvas. I surrounded the boxes with a border filled with symbols of Shabbat, the Seventh Day: kiddush, hallah, candles, and Torah scrolls.

There is an element to Torah that cannot be shown, and that is the nature of spiritual experience. Non-visual, spiritual forces are symbolized in my work by using the raw bright strength of

color in patterns that use constantly shifting complimentary color clashes to generate a visual punch, hinting at the cosmic content of religion. So the symbols of Shabbat in the mural are embedded in brilliant patterns of color.

Surrounding this border is another border, divided into sections corresponding to each *parasha*. Each of these sections is filled with tiny paintings of everything that happens in each *parasha*. In the beginning I held a heavy Humash as I worked, but by *vaYera*, I switched to a system of making black and white drawings in the back of my “Day Book,” (visual journals kept since 1969), and then made the paintings by following the drawings. Drawing and painting the famous scenes from *Bereishith* gave me insights into the material. The Matriarchs are behind a lot of the action; *Bereishith* is practically a woman’s book! In the same *parasha* as Yaakov’s famous ladder, 12 babies are born; to me that’s a big deal. The scene of Yaakov arriving to meet Esav with specifically enumerated gifts of livestock, was fun for me to portray. And, I developed strong opinions about Joseph in the pit based on drawing and painting the events.

When the *Bereishith* Mural was completed, it was exhibited in a gallery in L.A. that was never open! But at the opening reception, I met Dr. Berdugo’s wife, the Hebrew scholar Dr. Vardina Berdugo, and she suggested that with my family history, I should make a painting of Dona Gracia Mendes. An 8-by-6-foot history painting was born; it shows Dona Gracia Mendes surrounded by a map of Europe tracing the flight of Sephardic Jews from the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, and Dona Gracia’s triumphal entry to Constantinople, where it was finally possible to be openly Jewish. I borrowed the map from my old family hard-cover edition of Cecil Roth’s definitive biography of Dona Gracia. (Interestingly, the map of my family’s sojourns in the biography of my great-grandfather, Henry Pereira Mendes, late Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, is almost identical.) In the painting, the central figure is also surrounded by a banner containing all of the Torah scenes I could fit into it, to symbolize the force which kept our people Jewish despite danger, persecution, and forced conversions. On each side of the painting are vignettes showing men and women engaged in activities of Jewish Life: praying, learning, teaching children, and celebrating holidays. These vignettes are to show the terrible irony of people being chased and persecuted for the crime of a holy lifestyle!

An artist friend sent me a tiny ad from an art magazine soliciting work for a traveling Jewish Exhibit called “Encountering the Second Commandment.” “Dona Gracia Mendes” was accepted and featured on a 30-foot banner on the side of the Pittsburgh Jewish Community Center; I was stranded there when my ticket to fly home from the opening reception was for September 11, 2001. When the exhibit arrived in Boca Raton, Florida, patrons purchased “Dona Gracia Mendes” for donation to the JCC there, and I was invited to have a solo exhibit in 2002. As I drove across country for that exhibit, I received the news that the “*Bereishith* Mural” had also been purchased for donation to the JCC.

And thus I began “The *Shemot* Mural” upon my return to Los Angeles. This time I carefully drew every verse in pen and ink first. Then I hung up a 6-by-12-foot canvas and outlined larger boxes for the *parashiot*. Even so, when it came time to paint details of every verse onto canvas, it brought on tendonitis in my finger, and I lost three months of work, because I crammed so much tiny detail into each *parasha*. I paint everything first in one rose-and-black color, like a giant, intricate drawing. In the process of painting the “*Shemot* Mural,” I was blessed to paint the *kelim* of the *mishkan* about seven times for each of the seven times each is mentioned in *Sefer Shemot*! Each of the *mishpatim*, or civil laws, tells a little comic-book-like story; showing rules for eventualities in the lives of maid-servants and others, and things that can go wrong between neighbors—such as an ox falling into a hole, with penalties clearly shown. After every single verse has been rendered into a little picture crammed into the whole, I rub large areas of pale color onto the canvas, using linseed oil and rags. Then I mix my colorful palette of thin oil paint in ice trays, and go back over every area, painting in and shading each tiny figure and scene. When all that is dry, there’s another journey around all the details with a very thin outline of black. I forgot to mention that the inner space containing the word “*Shemot*,” and an

outside border, have remained blank until this time. Now is the time to use the symbolic color patterns which are meant to imply the Light of Hashem, in a circular arrangement, radiating out from the center. The whole process took two years to complete, but the day came when the mural was done.

The *Shemot* Mural had its debut at the tiny “Museum of the Bible,” or *Bet Tanakh*, upstairs from Independence Hall, in Tel Aviv, thanks to the efforts of a fellow student from my original Hebrew class, who had moved there. When I arrived home in Los Angeles with the mural, I held a reception to open a gallery in my studio/home in the Pico Robertson area. That's when a great miracle occurred: the *Shemot* Mural was sold, to be mounted at the Sephardic Educational Center in the Old City of Jerusalem. When I traveled to Jerusalem to make arrangements, I looked up some old friends from the Pinto Torah Center days, now living in Tsefat. A young daughter to whom I had given art lessons when she was little, was doing her National Service in the Old City, so we arranged to meet there. Her service turned out to be in the Temple Institute; I was treated to a private tour of replicas of the *kelim* I had painted so many times.

And during which *parasha* of our yearly cycle did I land in Jerusalem to deliver the *Shemot* Mural? It was the week of *parashat vaYikra*, (the beginning of the next *Sefer* after *Shemot*!), which I hiked the Temple Mount to hear read at the Kotel. That week, I borrowed a Humash from the SEC, and began the drawings for the “*VaYikra* Mural.”

VaYikra is different from *Bereishith* and *Shemot*, in that there is far less storytelling, and lots and lots of laws. How will the viewer know for which sacrifice this round of blood is being sprinkled on the altar? The answer was to label the depictions of each of the 859 verses in *Sefer VaYikra*, by chapter and verse numbers. I made my painting wall bigger, and this time hung up a 6-by-16-foot blank canvas when the pen and ink drawings were finally done. Actually, during this period my beloved daughter Oma, (“Annie”), passed away after her long and amazing survival. Perhaps the rigidity of the task helped ground me in work during the worst of that ghastly grief. Thank God, my younger daughter Kerby, with her husband Jeff and my precious granddaughter, Melody, live nearby.

The *VaYikra* Mural took three years to complete. After the 859 numbered verses were completely painted onto the canvas, and the Hebrew in the mural corrected by my mentors the Berdugos during their visits from Israel where they now live, there remained the blank areas of the center and the outer border. I experimented with studies of bright, circular patterns framing narrative areas within and without. On the mural, I let the colors grow crazy patterns until the edges were reached and the mural completed. Fittingly because of the content, the mural has been shown at the KOH Cultural Center of Mosaic Law Congregation in Sacramento, CA. It's currently available for exhibition and sale.

I want to mention that aside from Torah texts, my art is inspired by friends and life in the Jewish community. My friends the Elyassi family provide me with a model of devout Jewish life, shared with love, amid struggle. I love them and often paint the holy *avodah* of their home-life. I celebrate happy occasions with gifts of special paintings of the mitzvah child, couple, or baby. If you have participated in a Jewish community for a number of years, you can imagine how many are out there by now!

If I had been born a man, when I fell in love with Torah learning, I likely would have disappeared into yeshivot and the men's domain of ritual, study, and prayer. If I had been born observant, I may have been busy having a lot more kids and doing a lot more cooking. As it was, I developed into a narrative painter whose art exploded to express every new-found gem of Torah life and learning. I also developed into a terrific visitor of the sick, a mitzvah I still find fulfilling. In fact, I've become comfortable with a more womanized version of Torah living, since I live alone and don't even have to help someone else do the zillion things Orthodox men must do. But I wouldn't want to face life without *Shaharit* (morning prayers) in Hebrew at home, or the *Tehillim*, which Dr. Berdugo

encouraged me to memorize, ensuring life-long instant access, or the cycle of Torah readings, holidays, and beloved friends that is synagogue life, or the awesome fun of living each yearly cycle in our Jewish community, sharing joys and losses, or the amazing bond I've been honored to forge with the beautiful land of Israel.

Most of all I would never want to face life again without the sense of closeness to the Creator of the universe that Judaism is all about. I see the hand of Hashem in the above events, and I certainly feel aided and abetted by the Almighty in doing the work I've described. I often wonder why the nature of religion doesn't more accurately reflect the obviously half-female nature of the divine. Oh well! I try to portray it that way in my art. Rabbi Marc Angel has written of the importance of finding one's own mission in life and in Torah. Voila!