

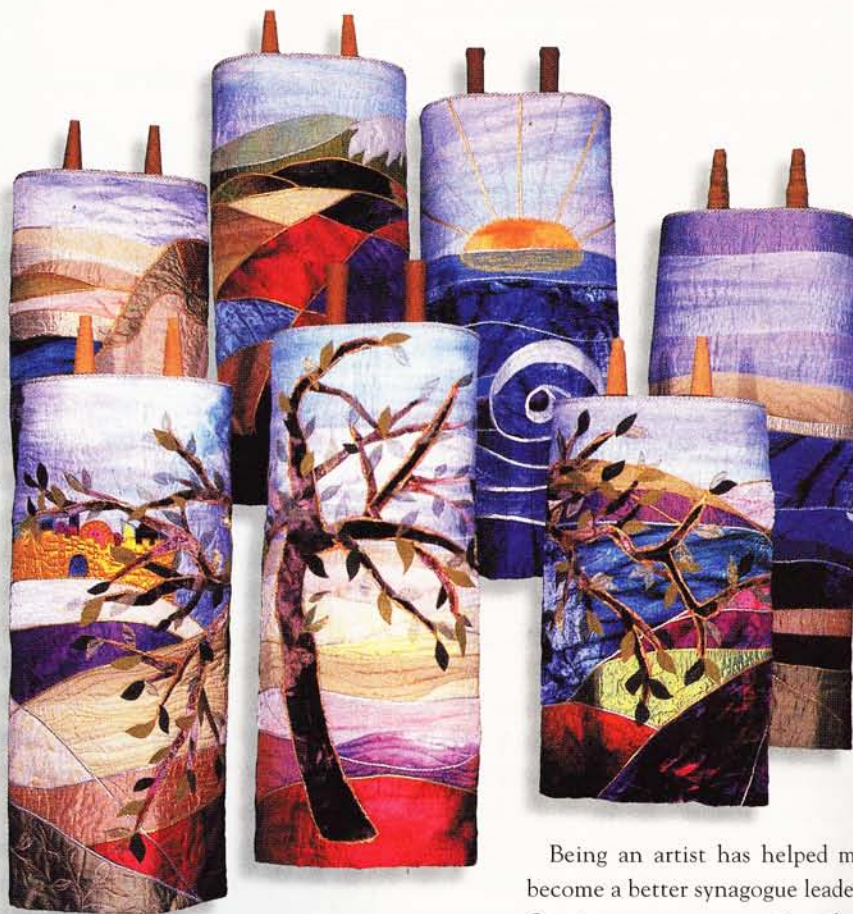
*Throughout history, creative people have made art out of the Jewish experience. Here, artists in very different media talk about what they do and why they do it. Whether working in cloth, paper, and ink to create ritual objects from Torah covers to ketubot, spinning words into glittering moral tales and fables, or using the power of the theater to repair the world, all three of these artists are committed to enhancing Jewish life.*

## THE WAY OF A JEWISH ARTIST

BY JEANETTE KUVIN OREN

**I**T WASN'T THE PHONE CALL my parents were hoping for: "You want to quit your nearly-completed PhD in epidemiology to become a full-time artist of Judaica?!" But since that conversation 22 years ago, neither I nor they have ever regretted my following what amounted to a calling toward a vocation and an avocation. I have the great privilege of working with synagogues across the world to create Jewish ritual art to beautify worship spaces, and I have the even greater honor of working with fellow committed volunteers and professionals to improve the synagogue in which my own family worships. Designing sanctuary spaces and creating Torah covers, ark curtains (*parokhot*) and mosaics for synagogues has given me insight into how synagogues work to beautify our spaces and the lives within our own communities. As I begin my two-year term as president of my congregation, B'nai Jacob in Woodbridge, Connecticut, I am awed by how much I have learned in my travels creating art for synagogues.

Dedicated lay members across all the Jewish denominations who are passionate about their congregations, have worked tirelessly to improve their buildings and worship spaces, and have raised the money to commission their art. I am constantly learning things that I take back to my community from Orthodox and Reform



congregations. At the Union of Reform Judaism's biennial conventions I am enthralled at the energy and appreciation for all aspects of *hiddur mitzvah*, of beautifying the mitzvah, that the Union encourages. Reform congregations have taught me about how we can inspire young Jews through visual, musical and other sources. I learn about sanctuary space and the importance of feeling part of the Torah reading when I am in modern Orthodox synagogues.

Being an artist has helped me become a better synagogue leader. One issue many congregations face when they commission a set of Torah covers, for example, is whether to continue using their silver breastplates. As an artist, I prefer they retire the breastplates to allow more space for color and design. But as a synagogue leader, I understand the need to honor the historic and artistic significance of the breastplates and the donor who gave the cherished decorations. The histories of congregations must be appreciated.

Just as congregations have reputations as tra  
(continued on page 55)

# The Way of a Jewish Artist

(continued from page 42)



Jeanette Kuvin Oren

ditional or liberal, synagogues want to evoke a specific style in their art. Some want spiritual values conveyed in visual forms. Such themes as tzedakah, Torah, and hesed can be reflected in the art with which they surround themselves. Other congregations want to evoke eretz Yisrael. Each congregation's values influence the ritual art I create for them. Long Island's Huntington Jewish Center worked with me to create a set of Torah covers and a parokhet that are all about the themes of light and Torah. Rabbi Richard Thaler, z"l, of Manhattan's Sutton Place Synagogue wanted worshippers to feel as if they were in Jerusalem when the aron kodesh was opened. Tifereth Israel Synagogue in San Diego chose Torah covers that would portray the days of creation. Creating commissioned art means being able to listen to the spirit of each community.

The ability to listen is also my most useful technique in leadership at my own synagogue. As I write this article, we have been undergoing a search for a new rabbi. It has been a heartening, wonderfully evolving process. The guidelines distributed by the Joint Commission on Rabbinic Placement encouraged us to hold focus groups to assess who we are and what we want as we hire a new rabbi. At the 16 focus groups, the same themes I create in my visual art with fabric, mosaic and glass were articulated by members of the con-

gregation. They want a congregation filled with warmth, inclusivity, diversity, love of Israel, hesed, and tzedakah. While we cannot create the rabbi who fulfills all of our desires out of artistic media, we can listen to everyone in the community and let each member know that his and her concerns are heard and appreciated.

Maybe I will write another article after

this two-year commission, my presidency, is done. Until then, I will continue fulfilling my great passion for the art that beautifies our sanctuaries and helps uplift our communities. ■

*Jeanette Kuvin Oren is president of Congregation B'nai Jacob in Woodbridge, Connecticut. Her art can be seen at [www.KuvinOren.com](http://www.KuvinOren.com).*