

Judaism in the Art of Durga Yael Bernhard



June 28 - October 15, 2008

WOODSTOCK JEWISH CONGREGATION
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The Sabbath Bride (*Shechinah*)

2007 acrylic on canvas

20" x 60"

This painting strives to express my joy in the Sabbath, and in the richness of this congregation. The Sabbath tradition is a thread that connects Jews all over the world, separates sacred time from the regular work week, and honor's God's rest after creation. As we light the candles of Shabbat, we rest in the knowledge that Jews in Israel and throughout the Diaspora are singing and praying, making Kiddush, reading the same *parshah*, eating the Sabbath meal, gathering with family, unrolling the Torah, studying quietly, debating with others, resting, and celebrating life. Less defined but always present, the spirits of our ancestors are with us as we carry this tradition forward. Flanking the *Shechinah* is a man-made road and a flowing river that enter and exit the Holy Land, symbolic of the human element and the natural world that are equally divine in Judaism.

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Beginning Prayer *(The Covenant)*

2000
gouache painting
7 1/2" x 5 1/2"

The covenant begins within and grows like a new life, but cannot grow alone. Here the individual is nurtured within by the surrounding community, as inner prayer reaches for the outer world.

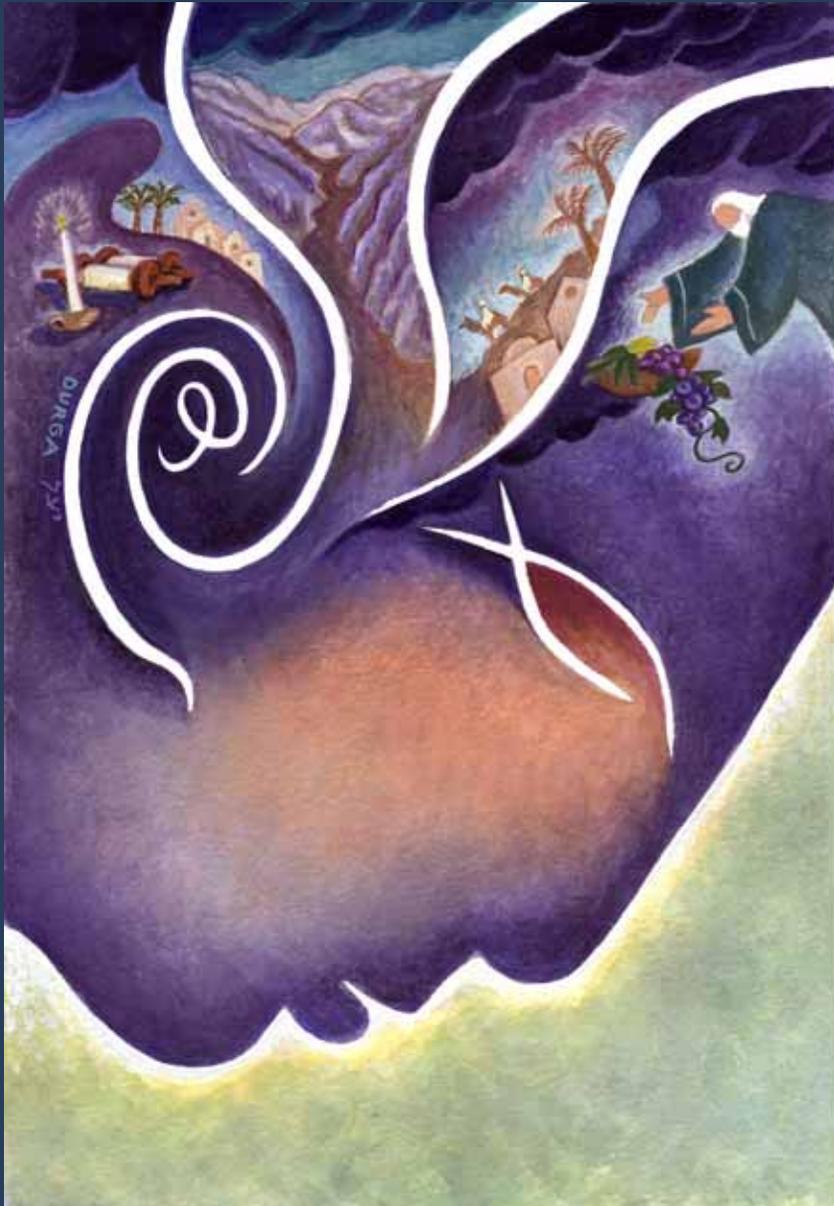
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Isaiah's Ear

2008 gouache painting, 10 1/2" x 7"

There is no end to the richness and mystery that entered Isaiah's ear, and spoke through his prophecy.

*The Lord God opened my ears,
and I did not disobey,
I did not run away.
I offered my back to the floggers,
And my cheeks to those who tore out my hair.
I did not hide my face
From insult and spittle.
But the Lord God will help me –
Therefore I feel no disgrace;
Therefore I have set my face like flint,
And I know I shall not be shamed.*

Isaiah 50:5-7

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Regina's Star

2008 acrylic on canvas, 40"x30"

My grandmother was a mystery to me throughout my childhood. Born in Hungary in 1894, Regina Loewe was raised as an Orthodox Jew, then emigrated to New York in 1912. She became a seamstress working in the sweatshops of the garment district. My grandmother was the only member of her family to survive the Holocaust. Her parents, six sisters, and other relatives were all deported to Auschwitz. This painting depicts the patchwork of landscapes that made up my grandmother's life: the mountains and villages of her childhood, the tenements of the Lower East Side, the countryside of the Hudson Valley where she passed her old age, and how I imagine she may have thought of *Eretz Israel*. Though my grandmother never talked about it, I believe she was deeply haunted by the life she left behind. Like other Jews around her, she remembers those who perished, and bears the hole of the yellow star that is burned in her heart, a window through which my ancestors may be seen saying the *Shema*. A menorah, split in two on either side of the synagogue where she grew up, bursts forth with new life in the form of blossoms and leaves, as the yellow star is reborn in generations to come.



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The Survivor's Star (Study for "Regina's Star")

2008

gouache painting, 14" x 14 1/4"

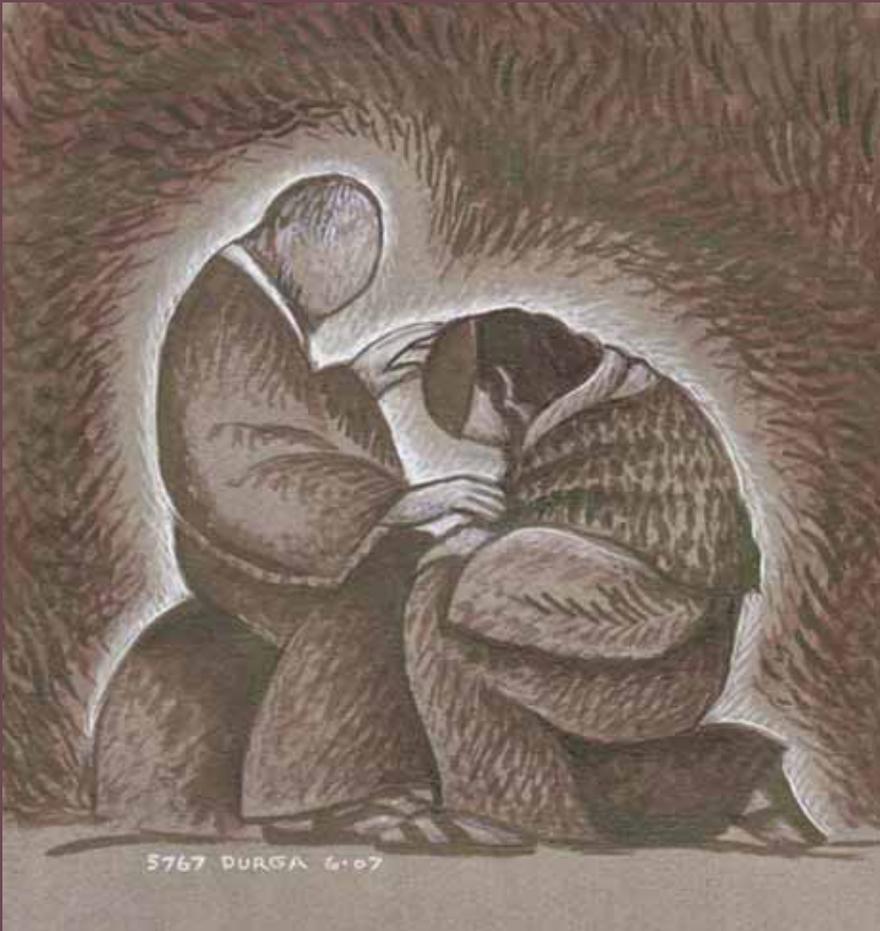
My grandmother always had a characteristic way of holding her hand to her cheek when she was deep in reflection, often covering one eye. Years later, when I drew this familiar gesture, it almost looked like she was chanting the Shema. Sandwiched between the orthodoxy of Eastern Europe and the new world of America, my grandmother survived the Holocaust, but severed her connection to Judaism after her entire family perished. She never spoke of what happened in the past, but her silence made a deep impression upon me as a child. Deep within her, the roots of her heritage continued to live and were passed on. Three generations later, those roots have emerged into the light of day through her grandchildren and great grandchildren. The yellow star that her kin were forced to wear to their deaths is transformed here into a window into the soul that shines with new light.

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The Blessing of Jacob

2007 ink painting, 7 3/4" x 7 3/4"

Isaac said to Jacob, "Come closer that I may feel you, my son – whether you are really my son Esau or not." So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered . . . Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come close and kiss me, my son", and he went up and kissed him. And he smelled his clothes and he blessed him, saying "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the Lord has blessed.

*"May God give you
Of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth,
Abundance of new grain and wine.
Let peoples serve you,
And nations bow to you;
Be master over your brothers,
and let your mother's sons bow to you.
Cursed be they who curse you,
Blessed they who bless you."*

Genesis 27:21-30

The story of Jacob and Rebekah's deception of Isaac speaks to all of us who have known sibling rivalry or favored a child. As a younger sibling who competed for the favor of my parents as a child, I am moved to both judge and forgive Jacob. As the black sheep of my family who frequents the woods and hunts wild game, I identify with Esau. Most of all, the impact on history of this fateful exchange between father and son is something that cannot be measured. Jacob's intellectual bent is changed to a more primal state as he kneels before his father wearing the skins of animals. Despite all ambiguity, Isaac's blessing holds. The use of white ink on dark paper symbolizes the "brightly lit darkness" of Isaac's poor eyesight combined with the sincerity of his intentions.

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The Burning Bush

2007 acrylic on paper, 22" x 29"

"The original Pentateuch, like everything celestial, consisted of fire, being written in black letters of flame upon a white ground of fire. God held counsel with it at the creation of the world, since it was wisdom itself, and it was God's first revelation, in which He Himself took part."

"God revealed Himself to Moses for the first time in a thorn-bush to prove to him that 'nothing'—not even such an insignificant plant as the thornbush—is void of the Shekinah." — www.JewishEncyclopedia.com

The inspiration for this painting came to me in a dream. The black Hebrew letters dance like fire upon a ground of glowing light. Hidden in the flames of destiny are future generations yet to come, Jews who will live by the divine revelation that was given to Moses.

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Shema

2007

acrylic on canvas, 24" x 30"

Whether in a room or under a tent, something magical happens when Jews gather to recite the *Shema*, the age-old Jewish affirmation of One God that was first told to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Though our beliefs in God differ, we are all part of one tradition. The beauty of Judaism (as I have experienced it) is that no one trespasses upon the individual's privately held beliefs. I have always imagined that no two people think alike when we retreat into the inner chamber of the *Shema*.

This painting is also my personal prayer to remember all those who have said the *Shema* before us, in times of joy and sorrow – and for many Jews who died in the Holocaust, in the extermination of Jews in Spain, or defending Israel, as they went to their deaths.

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Genesis (I)
2003 gouache painting
16 3/4" x10 3/4"

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Hidden Mizrah

2008

gouache & ink painting on cut and glued paper
19" x 12 1/2"

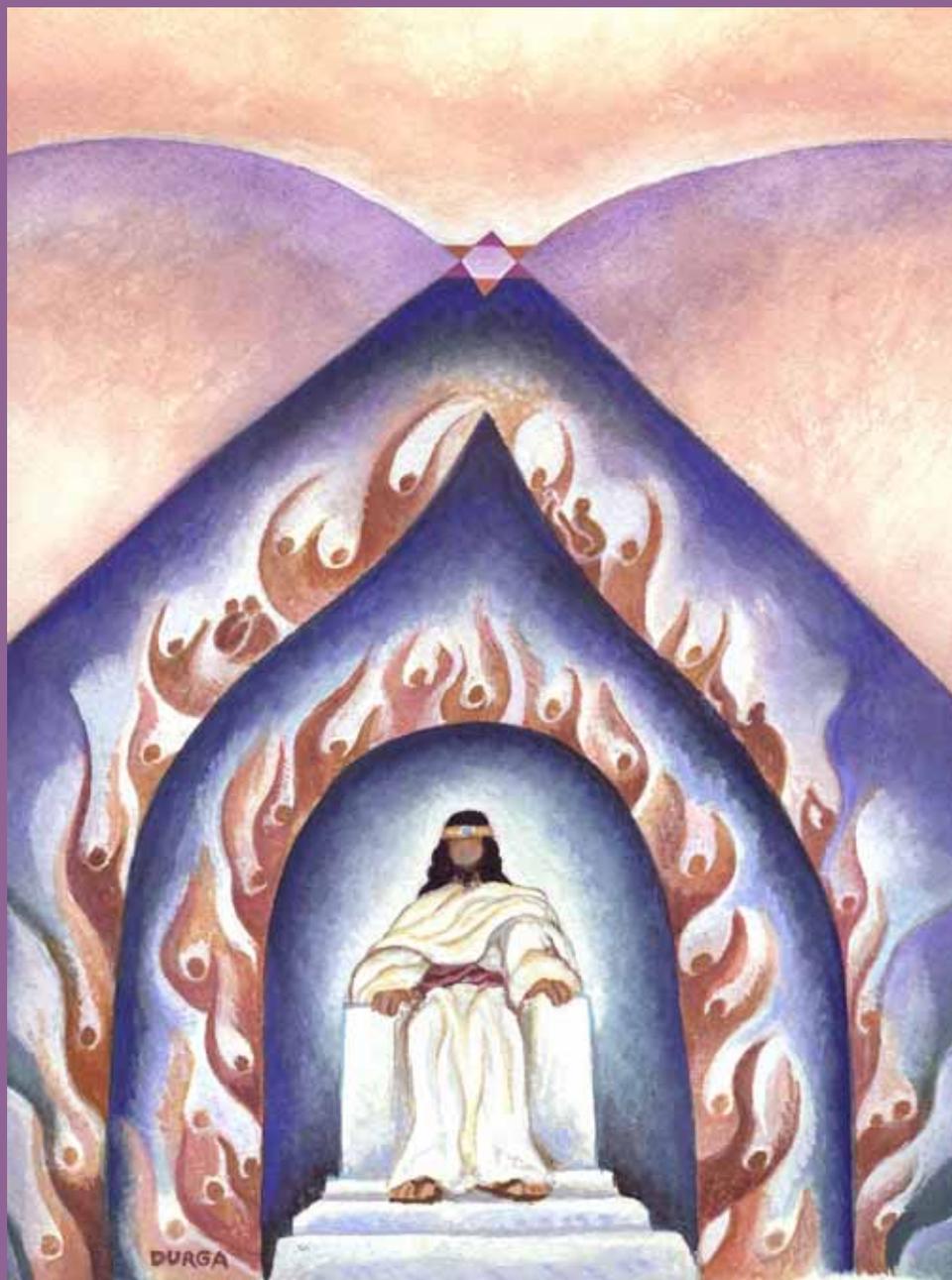
This painting arises from three visits to an exhibition of carved decalogues and intricate *mizrayim* (paper cutouts that mark the eastern wall of a synagogue) at the American Museum of Folk Art in New York. This fabulous collection of the work of some of the most talented Jewish artisans of Eastern Europe made a deep impression on me. After the show I spent many hours finishing the sketches I brought home. Rich with animals, birds, plants, and decorative geometric forms, these are the icons and symbols that filled the lives of Jews throughout Eastern Europe. As I learn more about my own ancestors in Hungary, Germany, Russia, and Rumania, my Jewish heritage becomes like a rich and colorful tapestry that is hidden inside me, carving itself into my awareness.

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Solomon's Dream

2007

gouache painting

10 3/4 x 8 1/2"

Dreams have played an important role in my exploration of Judaism. My own dreams have provided important inspiration in my work as an artist, and the dreams that appear throughout the Bible have been equally inspirational and fascinating.

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask, what shall I grant?" Solomon said, ". . . I am a young lad, with no experience in leadership. Your servant finds himself in the midst of the people You have chosen . . . Grant, then, Your servant an understanding mind to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and bad." . . . And God said to him, "Because you . . . did not ask for long life, you did not ask for riches, you did not ask for the life of your enemies, but you asked for discernment in dispensing justice . . . I grant you a wise and discerning mind . . . And I also grant you what you did not ask for – both riches and glory all your life – the like of which no king has ever had."

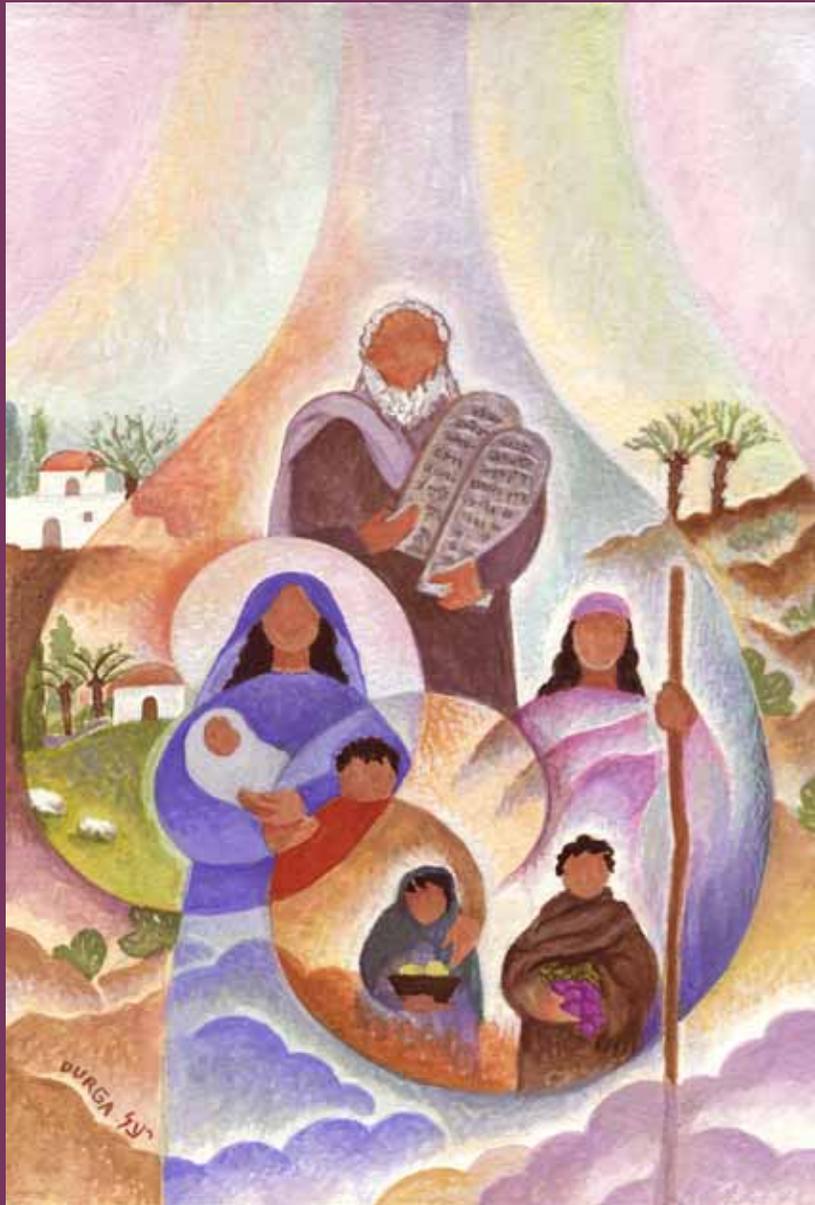
1 Kings 3:3–14

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God Among the Israelites

2008
gouache painting
10 1/4" x 7 1/4"

The closeness of the people to God – an unseen spirit who has no name except that of an eternal verb – is strikingly unique in Jewish monotheism. The interest and concern of the creator-god as expressed in the teachings of Torah has been likened to that of a parent in children. The Torah itself reminds us of this:

For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him?

Or what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?

Deuteronomy 4:7

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Jacob Wrestles With the Stranger

2007

gouache painting

16" x 16 1/2"

"I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved."

Genesis 32:31

The story of Jacob's preparation for his reunion with his long-estranged brother fascinates me. He disengages from his tribe and his worldly possessions to linger by the river Jordon alone before crossing. There he is confronted in the night by a "stranger" – an angel, or divine being – who wrestles with him until dawn. How many of us have found ourselves alone, wrestling with the ethereal in the darkness of our own minds as we stand before a threshold to the unknown? The stranger gives Jacob a new name, but will not reveal his own. As the sun rises upon Jacob, now Israel, he is left both wounded and blessed by this incident . . . and Jews for all time are given the challenge of wrestling with mystery and paradox.

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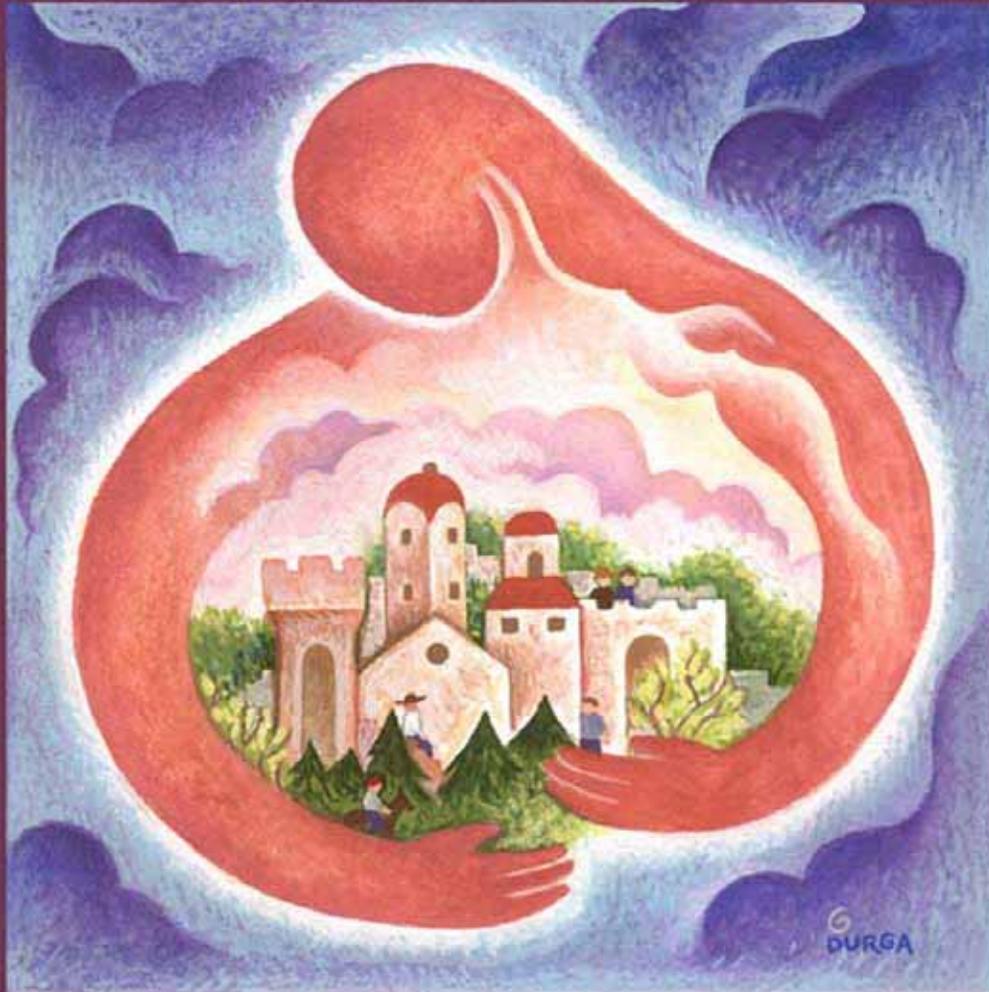
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The Holy Land (I)

2006

gouache painting

8" x 8"



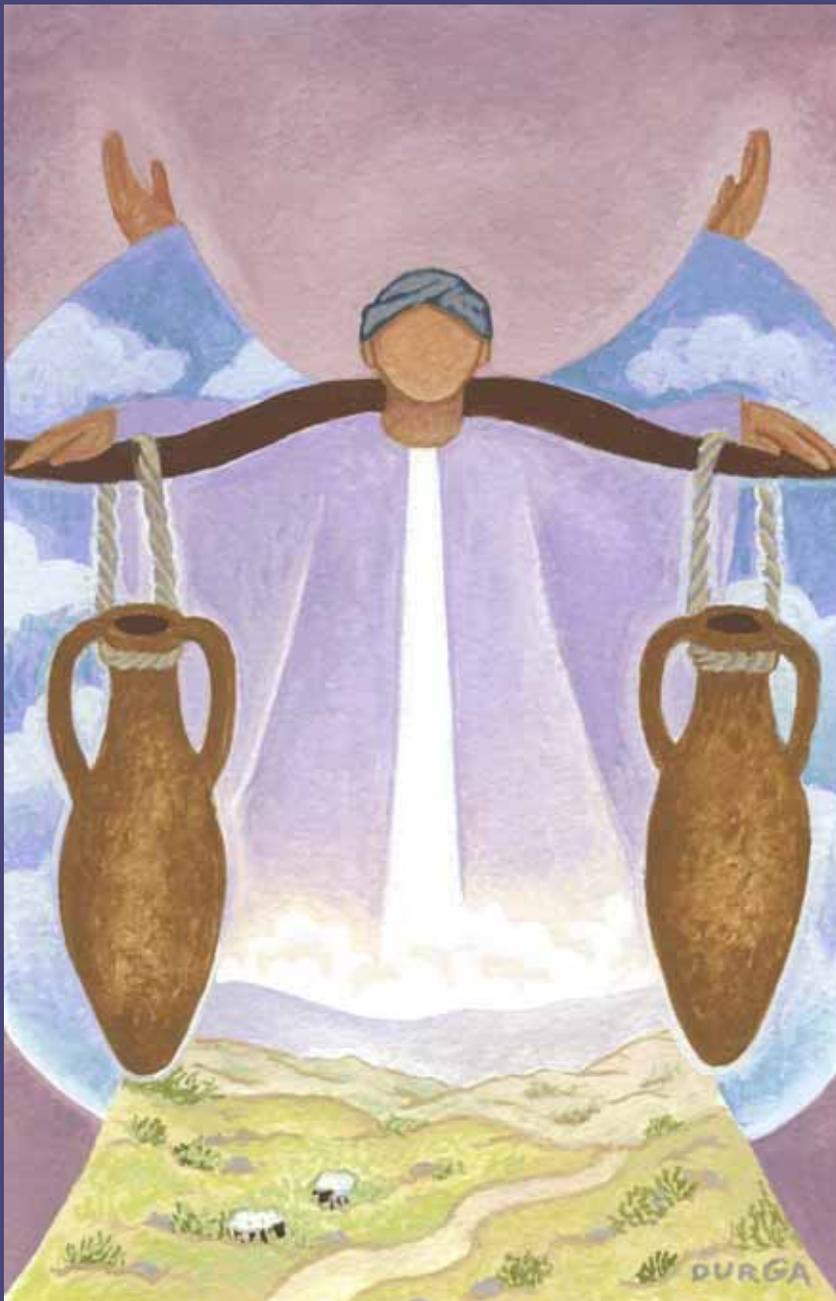
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The Holy Land (II)

2007

gouache painting

8 5/8" x 5 3/4"

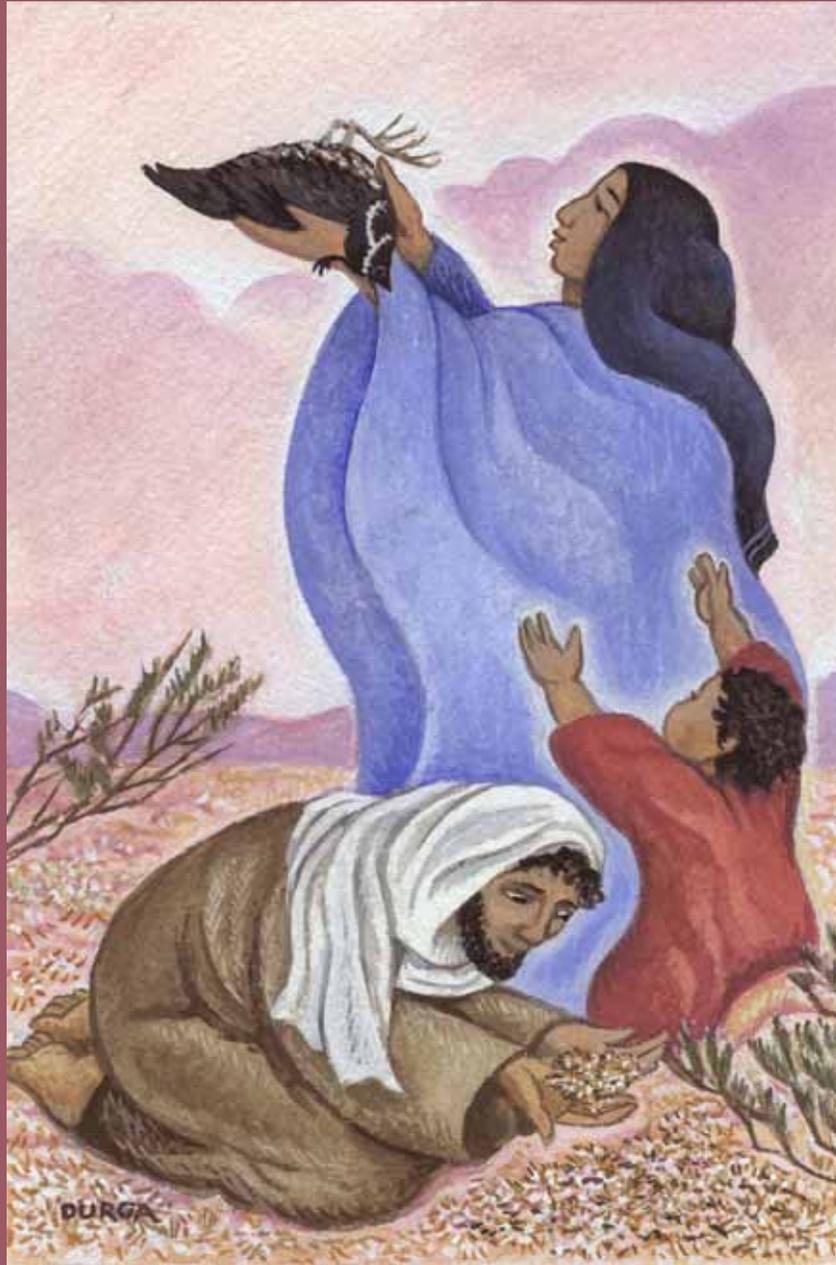
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Quail & Manna

2008

gouache painting

8 7/8" x 5 3/4"

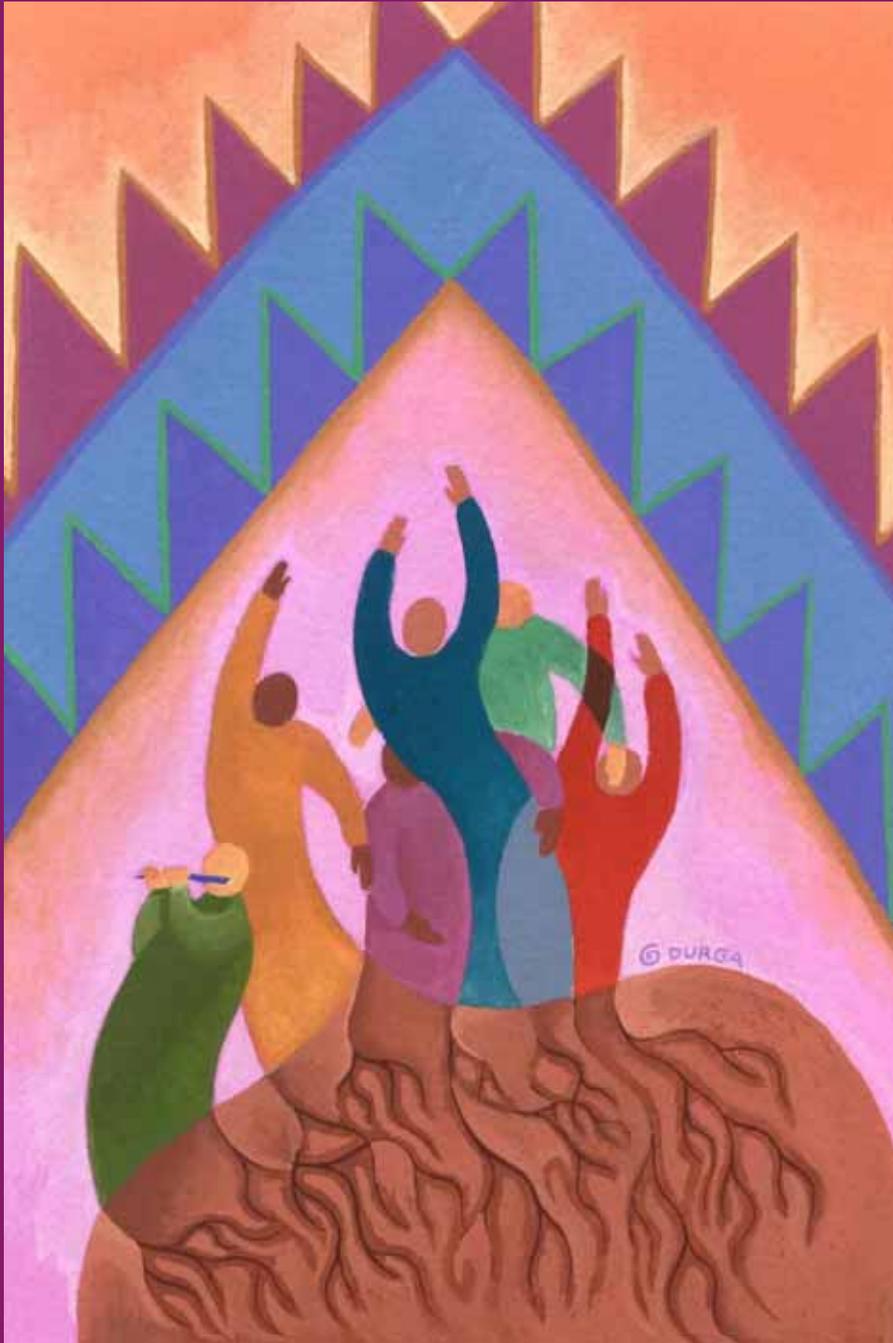
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Halleluyah (I)

1994

gouache painting

9" x 5 3/4"

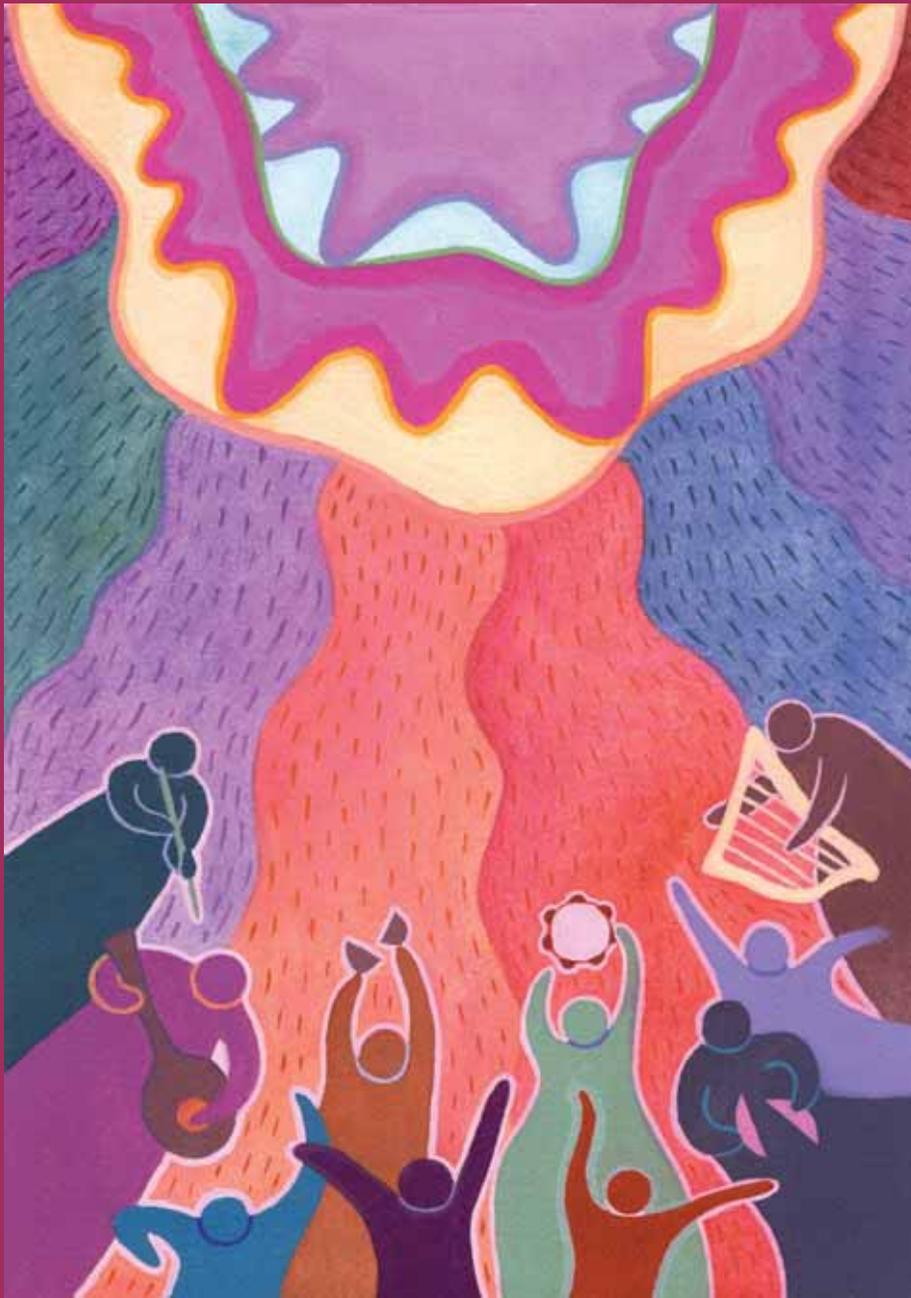
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Halleluyah (II)

1993

gouache painting

11" x 7 1/2"

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The Jewish Dream

2008

cut & glued gouache painting

approx. 8" x 11"

As a child of the Diaspora, I want to understand and piece together all the layers of history that make up my heritage. This painting is made of the many layers of Jewish tradition, almost like geological formations, that combine to form a face. I imagine the spirit of a land weaving itself into a people, through a people. My impressions of ancient Canaan, of Sinai, of the deserts and mountains crossed by Abraham, Joseph, Jacob, and the Israelites, of Eretz Yisrael are pieced together here. The cutting apart and reassembling into a new whole symbolizes the Jewish dream for the future, the living, growing tapestry of which we are a part.

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