

# Impressions of Israel

## Paintings by Durga Yael Bernhard

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Woodstock Jewish Congregation  
June 12 - October 25, 2011



## ONLINE EXHIBITION

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Jerusalem, August 2009

In August of 2009, I traveled to Israel for the first time. As an illustrator who frequently does religious work, I had already been commissioned to paint images of the holy land numerous times. After working from photographs and my imagination for so many years, my whole view of the place expanded and ripened when I went in person. History is still alive in Israel, and its mark upon the land is so ancient that even a man-made environment can appear natural. The line blurs between human and nature, between past and future, in Eretz Yisrael.

Sales from this show, even that result from this website, will be donated in part to the Woodstock Jewish Congregation, and will also help fund my return to Israel for the olive harvest, when I hope to research a children's book that I am writing and illustrating about a two-thousand-year-old olive tree.

# JERUSALEM



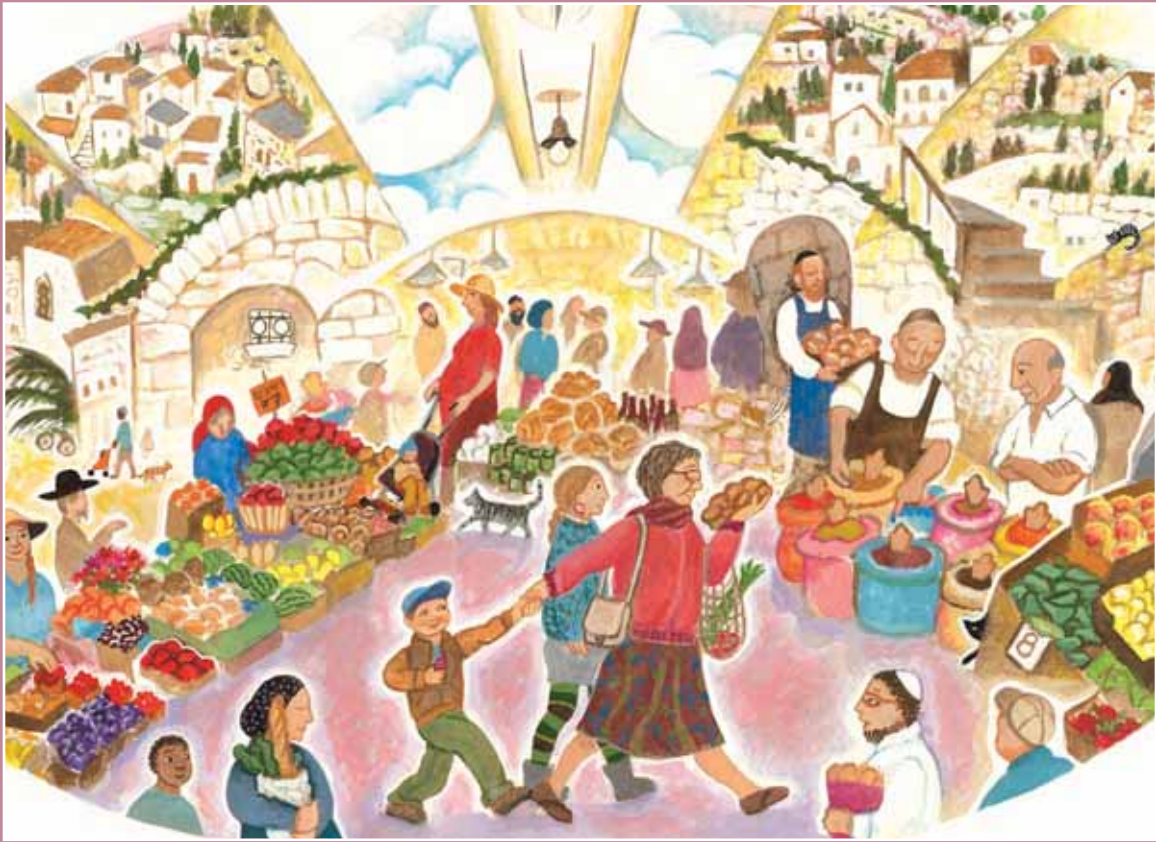
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## Arriving in Jerusalem

collage & acrylic on canvas - 20"x10"

I arrived with a friend in Israel for the first time on a sunny August morning, and we took the *sherut* to Jerusalem. We crossed the flat coastal plain and in less than an hour, began the ascent to the city I had waited to see all my life. The road wound its way through tightly-clustered hills, and entered Jerusalem in *Kiryat Moshe*, a busy neighborhood of bustling streets, elegant palm trees, tall cypresses, colorful flowers, buildings of stone, metal, and concrete – all a feast for the eye. The ticket stubs, receipts, and other paper items used as collage material in this painting were collected throughout my trip. The landscape in which they are placed is scaled to make them look like street signs.

**ALL IMAGES ARE GOOD  
ENOUGH QUALITY TO  
ZOOM IN!**



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## Machane Yehuda

gouache painting on watercolor paper - 17"x11"

This is an original illustration from my new children's book *AROUND THE WORLD IN ONE SHABBAT* (Jewish Lights, 2011). The famous outdoor covered market, or *shuk*, in central Jerusalem was the first place I visited – partly because I knew it would be the opening scene of my book, which I was researching at the time – and partly because I was hungry! I made sure to go back to the Machane Yehuda on Friday morning, when everyone is out shopping for the evening Sabbath meal. Every Middle Eastern food imaginable is for sale at the shuk. Truly, it is a feast for the eye!

## From Darkness to Light (View From Yad Vashem)

acrylic on canvas - 40"x30"



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The second place I visited in Jerusalem was Yad Vashem. I immediately loved this side of the city, with its spacious valleys and sunlit, patchy forested hills. The knowledge that the thousands of trees that filled my view were planted by hand made me feel hopeful, and proud of all the incredible accomplishments Jews have brought forth from *Eretz Yisrael*.

What a contrast, then, to step into the dark, angular world of Yad Vashem, the memorial museum of the *Shoah*, the Holocaust, in the heart of the nation that was formed as a result of that tragedy. Passing from one exhaustively documented, meticulously presented exhibit to the next, one's mind is quickly overwhelmed in such a place. The sheer volume of numbers and information to be grasped is staggering.

The main corridor of Yad Vashem is constructed as a long, triangular tunnel. Criss-crossing this extended, windowless pyramid are the hallways that lead to individual exhibits in the museum. At the end of all this is the massive Hall of Names, with its high cylindrical atrium bearing photos of many thousands who perished in the Shoah. The archives below silently commemorate the names of 3.8 million murdered Jews. Three million more have yet to be identified. Wiping my tears, I stopped at the office to ask for a form with which I would add the names of my own great-aunts and great-grandparents from Hungary to the database.

Finally, I came to the end of the museum, feeling as if I had been digested, somehow, in my passage through this canal of human suffering. All previous conceptions felt completely broken down, and the particles of new information were sinking in at a cellular level. I was glad to see the light at the end of the dark tunnel, where visitors are led to exit the building via an open air balcony that overlooks the splendid hills of Jerusalem. With the view still framed by the black triangle, one emerges from the convulsive sorrow of the Shoah into the spacious, sunny relief of being in Israel.

This painting combines into one image the view from the balcony, the Hall of Names, and the black, triangular corridor at Yad Vashem. Every person depicted is based on a real photograph in the Hall of Names, which I was able to view up close on the Yad Vashem website. To complete the frame at top and bottom are images of Auschwitz and an amalgam of different concentration camp train platforms.

It is easy to imagine the souls of those faces displayed in the Hall of Names escaping their papery confines, and floating beyond the building to rest in the trees, to soak into the earth from whence their ancestors came. The spirits of our ancestors are everywhere in Israel; it is all fertilizer for the soil. May the beautiful Jerusalem forest continue to thrive, thanks to the JNF and the many hands that planted it, tree by tree, before, during, and after the Shoah.

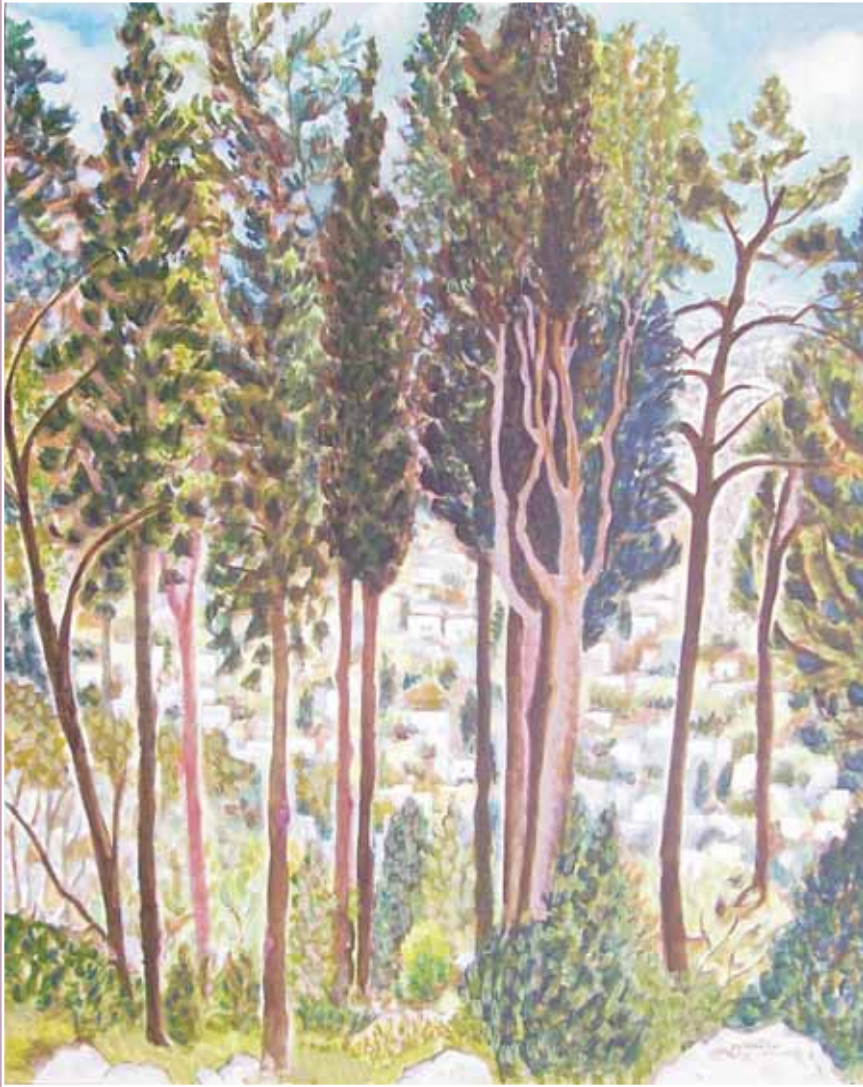


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## Jerusalem Alley

acrylic on canvas - 9"x12"

I painted this picture so I would always remember the feeling of walking down this stone alleyway in Jerusalem. My feet were treading over walkways built by hand, stone by stone, centuries and millennia ago – the hands of my ancestors and many others besides – invaders from every century, masons and slaves, architects and builders – each stone was eroded to a sagging, polished shape by the countless millions of feet that had tread there before me. When you live in a nation that is scarcely two centuries old, it is difficult to grasp the feeling of inhabiting a place that goes back three millennia. The ancient stones stand like sentinels to the past, bringing history alive everywhere in Jerusalem.



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## Jerusalem Forest

acrylic on canvas - 24"x30"

As a landscape painter, I have always loved painting distant views through interesting foregrounds: close-up plants, trees, buildings, or other objects. As a mountain person, my favorite subject has always been rugged, hilly terrain. And as a history lover, I am most drawn to places where the land is shaped by humans and nature alike. For all these reasons and more, I fell in love with the Jerusalem forest. The sparse Mediterranean undergrowth made a perfect frame for the distant, patchwork hills. And the play of light on white Jerusalem stone, near or far, sunny or shaded, suggests infinite possibilities for both color and shape. Truly, it is an artist's paradise!



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## Valley of the Cross, Jerusalem

acrylic on canvas - 30"x15"

The Valley of the Cross, or *Emek Hamatzlevah*, is located in West Jerusalem, near the Knesset and the Israel Museum. It is named for the adjacent Monastery of the Cross, which was built in the 11th century. Today, the Valley of the Cross functions as a city park, with joggers passing through, mothers pushing strollers, teenagers walking with ipods, and artistic graffiti decorating the tunnels that lead under the busy roads that surround it. Here was an opportunity to juxtapose two different olive trees: old and young, large and small, near and far, in a rocky landscape, with the neighborhood of *Givat Ram* rising up behind. I began with a pencil sketch on location, and did the final painting at home.



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## Doorway, Jerusalem

acrylic on canvas - 14"x11"

Windows and doors, arches and gates, alcoves, patios, and alleyways have always been among my favorite subjects. What better place than Jerusalem to find such interesting juxtapositions? Even in this tiny sampling of a residential street, the city's ancient history is revealed in complex angles and layers of stone. Somehow, it all fits together to form a place where, thousands of years later, people continue to live and thrive today.



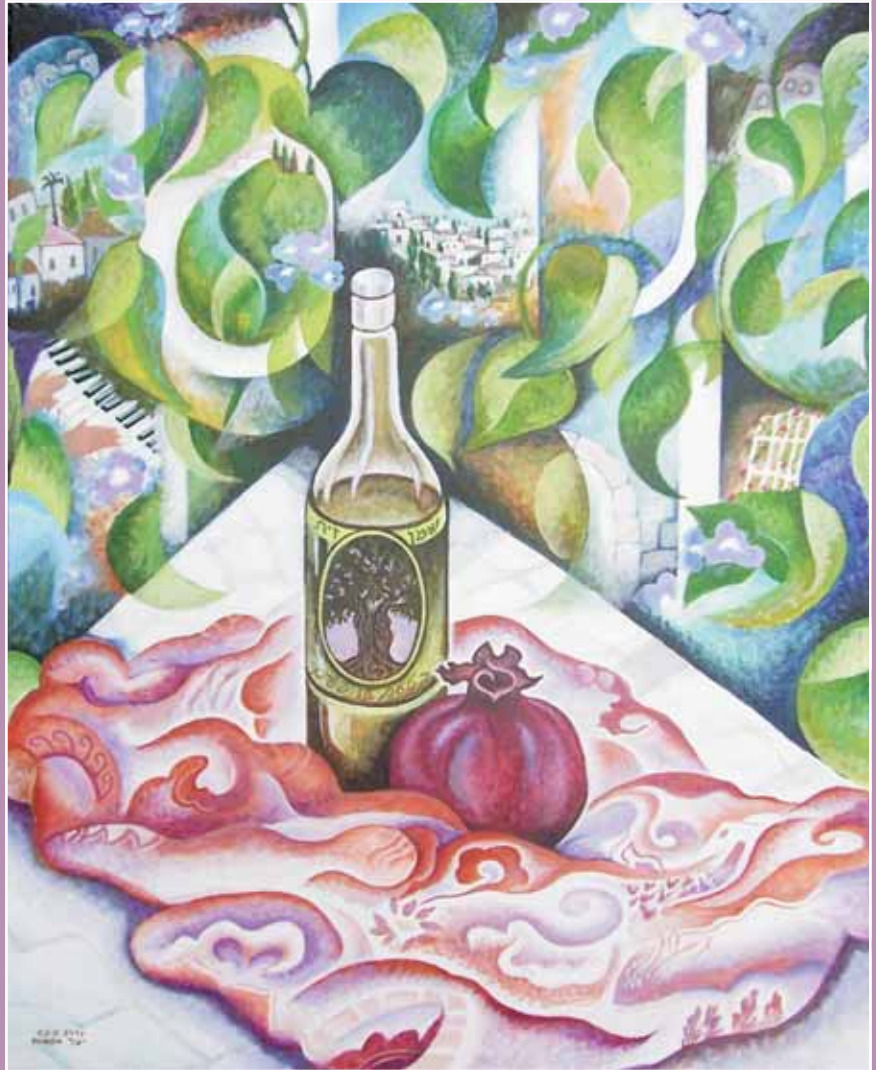
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## Study for Still Life, Rechavia

gouache painting on  
watercolor paper - 6"x9"

## Still Life, Rechavia

acrylic on canvas - 24"x30"



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This shapely pomegranate from the *Machane Yehuda* begged to be painted, as did the bottle of olive oil and the scarf from India, purchased at Zion Square. What better setting than a balcony in Rechavia? Stepping outside, one entered at third floor level a shaded, T-shaped courtyard, where laundry hung and the clinking of dishes could be heard from neighboring apartments . . . and once in a while, the faint sound of someone practicing piano, the notes trickling down like water over pebbles. A large eucalyptus grew up the center of the courtyard; lush foliage from its vine-covered trunk grew between the white railings of our balcony. The small painted study was done on location; but right away, I knew a larger version would be forthcoming, with the surrounding world of Jerusalem woven into the vines. The final piece is painted from the first (not by looking at a photo of the original objects). This is my first larger-than-life still-life – both a challenge and a pleasure. Somehow, the olive oil and the pomegranate seemed worthy of the added stature.



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## Sleeping in Rechavia

acrylic on canvas - 16"x12"

Awake or drifting in the middle of the night, the knowledge that I was in Jerusalem would often come to me in the dark, and sift itself into my dreams. Like a soft patchwork quilt, the city made itself felt all around me. In the silence of sleep, the rooftops and towers of *Yerushalayim* quietly intermingled with my own hidden longings. A blind woman who we had helped find her way on Rechov Azza felt her way into my unconscious, and I wondered, when I awoke, what way I could not see.

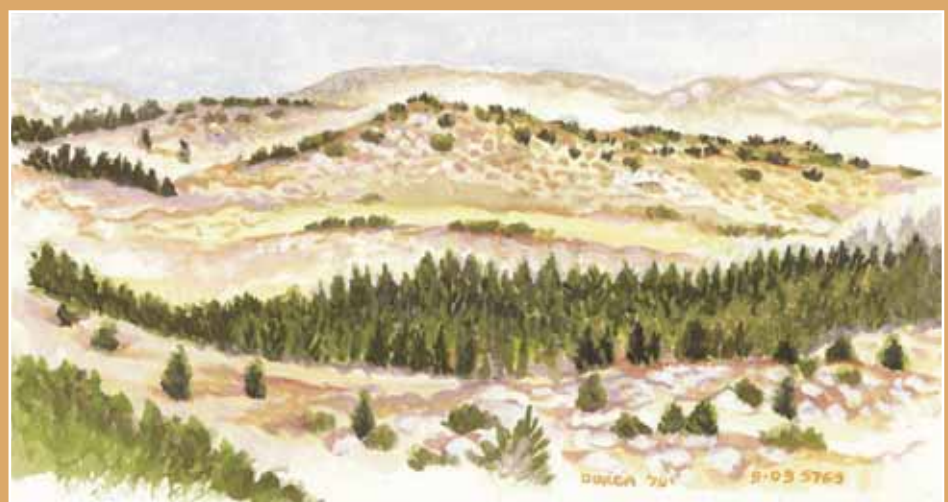
# AROUND ISRAEL



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## View from Ne'ot Kedumim 1 & 2 gouache on watercolor paper - 9"x7" (1) and 11"x6" (2)

These two views adjoin each other, and were painted simultaneously from the side of the trail that circles Ne'ot Kedumim. Located between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Ne'ot Kedumim is a land reserve and botanical garden that endeavors to recreate the physical setting of the Bible (you can take a virtual tour online!). It is close to the separation barrier, and looking out of the preserve to the east, there is an open view of what has been known since before the time of the Maccabees, whose graves lay nearby, as Judea. For me these paintings embody the pure joy of sitting on the earth of *Eretz Yisrael*, for the first time, with my paints and paper. The ground was dry and scratchy, but I was as happy as a hoopoe bird sitting in the sun!



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## The Road to Masada

acrylic on canvas - 18"x36"

We left Jerusalem well before dawn for the ride to Masada, hoping to climb the famous "snake path" up its eastern face in time to watch the sun rise over the Dead Sea. Driving through the Judean Desert at night is an experience I will never forget. The road paralleled the base of a succession of silent mesas that towered over us like giant sentinels in the dark, with magnificent stars sparkling in the clear desert night above their massive silhouettes. The sheer size of them, and the knowledge that Jews had fled Jerusalem two thousand years ago along this very route as they sought refuge at King Herod's palace at Masada, was both humbling and moving – and reminded me again of how deeply history is rooted in the land of Israel.



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## Bamidbar

acrylic on canvas - 24"x30"

This painting depicts the Torah portion *Bamidbar*, the focus of my adult bat mitzvah, for which I was simultaneously preparing while working on these paintings of Israel. Here the wilderness encampment of the ancient Israelites is shown in the Sinai desert, with the *mishcan*, or tent of meeting, at center. The chaotic forms of the jagged mountains are tightly-clustered in contrast with the order of the camp, to emphasize the great task of survival with which the Israelites were faced in their forty-year trek through the desert. The legendary plume of fire with which the presence of the Eternal protects and illuminates the wilderness camp each night is an image that has long intrigued me.



## Blue Alley, Tzfat

acrylic on canvas - 12"x47"

More than anything about this ancient mystical city nestled in the mountains of the northern Galilee, it was the blue alleyways of Tzfat (Safed) that intrigued me most. The old part of the city is like a living shrine, the living effect of which presses upon you when you walk between these ancient walls. How precious the color blue, for besides the heavens above and the great blue sea, it was seldom seen in nature, and difficult to reproduce. To walk these passages is to feel the pale blue celebration of Gd's presence throughout the ages. Over the centuries, buildings constructed over the tops of these alleyways have joined to form partial tunnels underneath.



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## Tzfat Window (1)

acrylic on canvas - 20"x20"

The juxtaposition of near and far curves caught my eye immediately when I saw this view from a window in an outdoor stairwell in Tzfat (Safed). Other stone walls are also visible in the distance. The only way to paint a wall in Israel, I discovered, is to treat each stone as an individual portrait. The eroded shapes and textures seem to speak of living creatures. It is humbling to touch a manmade structure that is ten times older than the United States. So aged are some of the stones, that the whole wall almost appears as a geological formation.





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## Tzfat Window (2)

acrylic on canvas - 30"x24"

With its irregular mountains, circuitous roads, and narrow by-ways, Tzfat (Safed) in northern Israel is a place of changing , dramatic views. This painting is comprised of several different overlapping windows and views. The main view, toward Mt. Meron, includes in the foreground a crumbling wall painted in the sacred color blue.



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## The Sabbath Bride (Shechinah)

acrylic on canvas – 60" x 20"

This painting strives to express my joy in the Sabbath, and in the richness of Jewish community. The Sabbath tradition is a thread that connects Jews all over the world, separates sacred time from the regular work week, and honors 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 treasured in Judaism.

# OLIVES



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## City Olive

acrylic on birch wood - 20"x20"

Olive trees in Israel seem almost like people. With their unique forms sculpted by time, every tree seems to have an individual personality. This tree's curvaceous forms seemed even more sensual against the geometric shapes of a modern building in Jerusalem.



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## Resurrection (Ancient Olive, Garden of Gethsemane) acrylic on canvas - 10"x20"

The olive tree's ability to regenerate itself is astounding. So much do they thrive on pruning – or even hacking – it is said that if an olive tree could speak, it would say, *"Make me poor, and I'll make you rich"*. This ancient olive tree stands in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mt. of Olives in Jerusalem, and is thought to be over 2000 years old. Yet out of the convoluted fissures of cracked and aged bark emerges a slender young branch, green with new foliage and the promise of ripening olives.



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## Olive Trunk

acrylic on canvas - 20"x20"

Here is a study of two olive trunks, near and far. This young olive is just beginning to show the undulating forms that distinguish the bark of older trees.



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## Olives in August

acrylic on canvas - 10"x8"

Beginning as a quick sketch, the pale, unripe fruit and elegant leaves of this olive tree in Jerusalem made an excellent study.





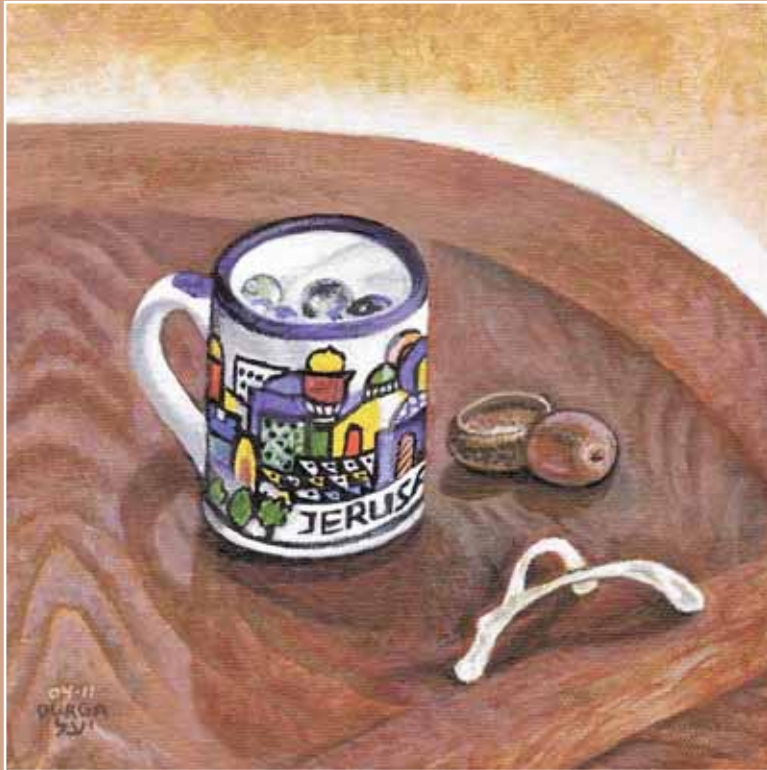
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## Young Olive

acrylic on canvas - 12"x12"

The silvery green of olive foliage in sunlight is a difficult subject to capture, as are the waxy forms of the bark. This young olive tree stood on the edge of the parking lot of the Maccabean graves, near Modi'in.

# RETURNING FROM ISRAEL



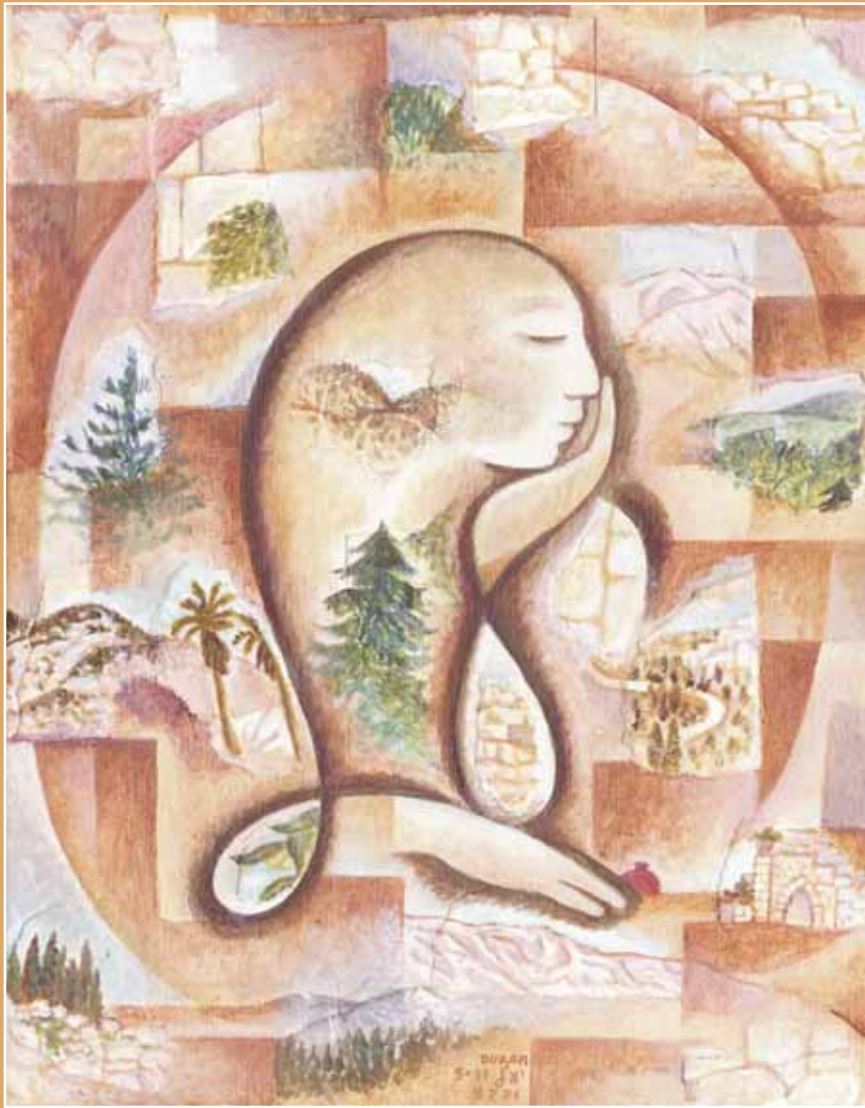
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## Still Life with Wishbone

acrylic on canvas - 8"x8"

With my last loose shekels I bought this little cup at Ben Gurion airport. How many North American window sills, I wonder, are graced with this common souvenir? I decided to acquaint the new addition with the mundane objects of my kitchen . . . and painted this still-life as cherished memories mingled with cool autumn days, and yearnings for the future formed new images in my mind.





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## Returning from Israel

collage & acrylic on canvas - 11"x14"

Returning from Israel to the Catskill Mountains of New York, I felt like a different person from the one who had left home just a few weeks earlier. My internal experience of the familiar sights and sounds around me was interlaced with a new awareness – of the faraway, tree-studded hills of Israel. Even as I walked under hemlock, oak, and maple, I was haunted by the memory of cypress, date palm, and prickly pear. Like veils from a dream, the rocky hills and wadis of Israel lingered in my mind's eye ... but I already knew that someday, I'd walk the land of *Eretz Yisrael* again.

Look carefully and you will find my Hebrew name in this image, painted in script.

Thank you for taking the time  
to view this exhibition.



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