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Reba Wulkan
Yeshiva University Museum

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Reba Wulkan, Contemporary Exhibitions Coordinator
Yeshiva University Museum

Grapes and grapevines are prominent motifs in the vast range of Jewish art dating back to Antiquity. In recent decades, there has been growing interest in creating contemporary Jewish ceremonial textiles for the home and synagogue, as well as textile art on Jewish themes. The grape and vine motif have often been included in these new works.

A brief survey of Jewish sources:

Grapes and wine are highly important symbols in Jewish tradition and ritual and date back to the 1st century. A magnificent golden vine that hung over the inner portal of the Second Temple was described by Josephus and the Mishnah.[1] The Hasmoneans and Bar Kochba followers struck a cluster of grapes on their victory coins as a symbol of the fertility of the country. This same emblem appears slightly later as a decoration in mosaic floors of synagogues.[2] In literature of the period, the vine is prominent as a Messianic symbol (Enoch, 32:4). There is a suggestion that the fruit of the Tree of Wisdom was like bunches of grapes on a vine. Noah planted a vine after the Flood. The importance of the vine is attested to by the Bible's many synonyms for its branches: *baddim, banot, daliyyot, zalzallim, zemorah, hoter, yonek, kannah, matteh, netishot nezer, anat, porah, kezirim, shelalot, sarigun* and *sorek.* Over 40 expressions connected with viticulture are mentioned in the Bible and Talmudic literature.

Many biblical parables and allegories are associated with the vine. The children of Israel are referred to as a vine in Isaiah 5:7 and Hosea 9:10. Isaiah likens God to the owner of a vineyard and Israel is the vineyard. The grapevine is one of the seven species with which the land of Israel was blessed. (Deut 8:8). An ample supply of wine symbolized prosperity (Gen. 49:11,12) and well-being (Kings I, 5:5; Zech. 3:10), and overflowing vats symbolized divine blessing. "Every man under his vine and under his fig tree." symbolizes the idealized past and hope for future peace. Threats of national disaster were couched in terms of laying waste to the nation's vines and fig trees (Hos.2:14; Joel 1:7). The vines in blossom symbolized the passing of winter (Song of Songs 2:13) and the ripening of the fruit represented a fulfilled state of being (Joel 2:22). Although the fruit of the vine was eaten fresh or dried (Num.6:3), the plant was primarily valued for its fermented juice, which was considered an appropriate gift to royalty (Sam I, 16:20). A description of Israelite viticulture is provided by Isaiah in his parable concerning a vineyard. "Let me sing for my beloved/A song of my beloved about his vineyard/My beloved had a vineyard/On a fruitful hill/He broke the ground, cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines./He built a watch tower inside it,/ He even hewed a winepress in it." [3] Isaiah 5:1,2

The vine is a symbol of the Tree of Life and has been used to represent Jerusalem and the Torah. The Tree of Life played an important role in depicting the written law, the Torah and

the Ten Commandments. It is a common theme in many religions. The twisted pillars in Baroque synagogue decoration sometimes had grapevines entwined around them. A Torah Curtain from Prague, 1601/2 (collection of the Jewish Museum), illustrates these twisted vines using flat applique embroidery, a Renaissance technique popular in Italy. The Tree of Life represents the Messianic Age, the Day of Atonement and Life After Death. The wooden staves which hold the Torah scroll are called Trees of Life (Atzei Hayim) .[4]

Viticulture in Israel goes back to antiquity. In the Bible, the spies, sent ahead of the Israelites to report on the land of Canaan, brought back from the valley of Hebron a cluster of grapes of remarkable size (Numbers 13:23). On the fifteenth of Av, a special day, there was dancing in the vineyards. Various strains of grapes were grown. Grapes were grown in two ways: either the trunk and branches trailed along the ground as in *gefen, sorahat and rogeliot* or the vine was trained over a pole as *adderet, gefen,* and the *dalit.*[5]

The grapevine, requiring little soil to take root, was well-suited for hilly country and still grows particularly well today in the area between Bethelem and Hebron. The soil was loosened, stones were removed, and choice vines were planted. Maintenance involved pruning, hoeing, removal of thistles, and watering. Isaiah tells of this process in his Song of the Vineyard (Isa.5:5,6), and he gives a detailed account of the stages from planting to harvesting the grapes. Egyptian New Kingdom wall paintings feature vines on forked, upright poles or as elaborately trained vines on trellises covering large areas. [6]

Following the grape harvest which occurred in the Fall, grapes were brought to the press which was in or near the vineyard (Isa.5:2). The wine press consisted of the pressing floor, *gat,* and a smaller depression for collecting, *yekev.* Both are connected by a passage through which the juice flowed from the pressing into the collecting basin. In Israel, the grapes were usually pressed by treading and stomping (Isa.63:3 , Joel 4:13, Amos 9:13, Micah 6:15). The wild yeasts living on grapeskins started fermentation. The grapevine (vitis, vinifera) provided fresh grapes, raisins, cakes, and wine. [7]

In the biblical period, when wine was consumed like water is today, the importance of the grapevine is apparent. Even today, the landscape of Israel is adorned with the carefully trellised and pruned vines on its terraced slopes. The grape has an unusual flower, which has a crown-shaped cap called a calyptra that falls off when the flower opens. When it falls, a cloud of pollen is released, allowing pollination and fruit development to occur. In a vineyard, the ground can be covered with a white carpet of calyptras, a sure sign of the rebirth of nature and the beginning of the new growing season. "I went down into the garden of nuts, to look at the green plants of the valley, to see whether the vine budded, and the pomegranates were in flower," (Song of Songs 6:11) probably refers to the bright white lawn of grape flower blossoms.[8]

The Jews so thoroughly identified themselves with the land of Israel's most representative plants that in literary metaphor and artistic adornment, the palm tree and the vine became the outstanding symbols. The palm tree, the vine, the pomegranate and flowers naturally found their place in embroideries particularly after the Baroque period gave way in France to the

more elegant Rococo. The French fabrics developed the airy motif of garlands. Synagogues of Eastern Europe had found a preference for floral ornamentation. Grapes as well as other plants and flowers were represented in synagogue art of then and now. [9]

Jews have always been associated with the textile industry. They combined this connection and their love of the synagogue to create magnificent ritual decoration. In Italian synagogues especially, there were costly ark curtains, brocades and silks in various colors with gold borders, fringes and tassels and gold inscriptions.

The grape, vine and wine are prevalent in Jewish ritual practice. Wine spans the lifecycle from the brit, (circumcision rite) to the wedding service under the Huppah, the wedding canopy, as well as for the *Sheva brachot*, the seven blessings following the wedding. It is part of the Jewish calendar, every seventh day on the Sabbath, the Kiddush blessing is made over wine as well as during *the Havdalah*, the ceremony closing the Sabbath, which separates the sanctity of the day from the normal weekly routine. Wine signifies sanctification, marking the day as holy and elevates the meal or service to a higher plane. Wine is an essential part of the Passover service and has many connotations in the holiday, such as its comparison to blood as part of the ten plagues in Egypt and as a symbol of the freedom the Jew acquired in coming out of Egyptian slavery. Wine is an important part of the Purim holiday when it is a commandment to eat, drink, and be merry. Wine's quality of inebrience is utilized on Passover and Purim in a positive way as opposed to wine consumption in Bacchanal imagery. In Greek mythology, Bacchus was the god of wine, protector of the vine; but this term became associated with licentiousness.

Contemporary applications:

From the time of the Mishkan - the Tabernacle, to Solomon's Temple and up to today's Synagogues, inspired craftspeople and artists have worked to create the buildings, the hangings and the ritual objects which have enhanced the lives of Jews all through their difficult history. Among these works of art, which were created wherever Jews travelled, have been embroidered, woven and stitched textiles. As Torah Mantles, they have dressed the Torah scroll in silk and velvet and gold and silver threads. As tallitot, prayer shawls, they have been worn over the shoulders and heads of countless generations of worshippers; as cloths they have covered the Sabbath loaves at home and the Torah reader's table, and they have been made into bags to hold the afikomen, the last bit of matzo eaten at the Passover seder. The fabrics have been magnificent silk brocades, lace, embroidery, velvets, and linens. Their ornamental borders and arabesques have included timeless symbols of Jewish life, the Menorah, the Magen David, the Tablets, the Lions, and the vine and grapes. They were created by gifted artists, and craftspeople who often worked at home in spare moments to beautify the Sabbath and holy days.

In recent decades, fiber art has achieved recognition as an artistic medium enhancing Jewish ritual. Experimental techniques in handweaving and needlework and innovative concepts in the decorative arts revolutionized the approaches and directions of an emerging generation of textile artists all over the world. The influence of the Bauhaus art movement and the

energy of weavers like Annie Albers and Jack Lenor Larsen evoked a growing response from Jewish hand-weavers and needleworkers. In Israel when the Bezalel School established a department of handweaving in 1936 under the direction of Julia Keiner, who studied textile design in Germany, there began a revival of the ancient skills along with modern techniques.

The interest in new forms and pride in Jewish roots and heritage has inspired and encouraged young Jewish craftspeople to create Judaica; new interest arose in creating different *kipahs*, skullcaps. Today, complex designs are crocheted with ornamental patterns and Hebrew letters. Crochet, crewel and canvaswork have grown in popularity as the joy of needle and thread was shared by Maggie Lane and Pauline Fischer, professional embroiderers who became household names.

Early in 1977, a group of needlwork artists led by Ita Aber formed the Pomegranate Guild of Judaic Needlepoint. Their objective was to educate members in the use of appropriate symbols and technique in Judaic stitchery. The number of members has mushroomed in the U.S., Canada, and Israel. The guild publishes a quarterly newsletter "The Paper Pomegranate."[10]

Contemporary Jewish craftsmen/artists create ritual objects used in the home and synagogue much as in early times as well as fiber sculpture, tapestries, and purely decorative work. Many have incorporated the grape and the vine symbols in *challah* covers whose function is to cover the two loaves of bread, the *challah*, a necessary constituent of the Sabbath table together with the goblet of wine. The *challah* must be covered during the kiddush blessing; and this cover is generally embroidered as is the covering for the matzo on Passover. Artists such as Ina Golub, Ita Aber, and Pauline Fischer, plus a multitude of others, have created challah covers and matzo covers using the grape motif. Ita has made a Miriam's Cup with beads and sem-precious stones wrapped with a grapevine.

The Torah binder also called a wrapper or wimpel, that originated in Germanic lands is often embroidered. The Mishnah mentions the cloth bindings that were used to bind up the Torah scroll. Today's binders still carry the traditional blessing and mothers and grandmothers are creating and presenting these binders to the synagogues in honor of their children. To this day, when a Jewish child is named, a blessing is said that expresses hope that he/she will grow up "to Torah, the wedding canopy, and good deeds."[11] Binders are sometimes decorated with grapes and vines as symbols of fertility such as one included in YUM's "Tradition and Fantasy" exhibition by Bonnie Yales, Lexington, MA and embroidered by Bernice Manning of the U.S.

The Huppah or marriage canopy is another part of the Jewish lifecycle that lends itself to new and innovative expression by textile artists. There has been an exuberance of expression in creating canopies for weddings. The canopy symbolizes the home that the wedded couple will share and build. The ancient Israelites escorted a new bride to her groom's room or tent, where the marriage was consummated. In some communities, when a child was born to the new couple, a tree was planted for that home. Branches from the mature tree were then used to make poles for their chuppah. The use of the grape and vine can be seen in many

contemporary huppahs. Illustrated here in a marriage canopy, handwoven, embroidered, quilted and beaded "Ani L'Dodi" I Am My Beloved's by Phyllis Kantor made for Temple Sinai, Champaign, Illinois.

Another canopy by Corinne Soikin Strauss in the collection of Yeshiva University Museum, was exhibited in 1993 as part of the Aishet Hayil exhibition. "Heaven and Earth - A Vision" illustrates the quotation from the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs, "She Envisions a Field and Buys it, From the Fruit of Her Handiwork, She Plants a Vineyard" celebrating the woman's position in marriage The artist tells us that the word "envisions" suggests a space without boundaries, that lets in both light and air. This huppah made of painted silk organza and wood branches, 4' x 5' x 7', takes on the character of an arbor and then of a Sukkah that had both a sense of place and a sense of journey. The artist tells of a woman "envisioning a golden field in which she will plant a verdant vineyard and soon reap a magenta harvest as painted in this final panel, floating between the heavens and the earth. The space defined by the silk panels beckons and protects. It envelops but does not restrict. And the gossamer walls are animated by the movements of visitors, just as the imagination is enlivened by the search for meaning in sacred texts."[12]

Ina Golub is another contemporary artist whose work has recently been exhibited at YUM in a 1996 retrospective, "The Work of the Weaver in Colors." She has elevated her craft to the realm of art using the grape and vine motif in her marriage canopies, Torah mantles and ark curtains, employing diverse techniques such as weaving, applique, quilting, silkscreen, needlepoint and beadwork. "You Are My Beloved" is appliqued linen with silk, 84" x 60" x 60" and illustrates her use of the grape motif, (made in 1983 for Lois and Richard Janger, Highland Park, Ill.) Ina's Torah Mantles, which are her specialty, include "Grapes" from the Shabbat Series, 1986, appliqued, silk on chennille, metal stitchery, 35" (made for Temple B'nai Abraham, Livingston, N.J.). Another example of Ina's work using the grape motif is illustrated here is her "Milk and Honey" tallit, of 1997, silk applique, 72" x 24".

Amanda Ford of Cabin John, Maryland has fabricated a huppah which was designed by Tamar Fishman. It was completed May 1993 and is 66" h x 75" w called "The Seventh Blessing". It is made of silk and linen, pieced, appliqued, and quilted with cotton batting. This huppah represents the seventh blessing when God is thanked for bringing pleasure and delight, love and brotherhood, peace and good fellowship to be the bride and bridegroom. Each panel shows flowers found in Israel, grapes representing sanctification and pomegranates representing fruitfulness.[13]

Many artists today are creating tapestries, weavings, and hangings purely for decorative purposes but using Jewish symbols, including the grape motif. Ita Aber is one artist who has made weatherproof outdoor wall works of grapes using acrylic on canvas with mixed media, illustrated here and dated 1997. The panel measures 69"h x 50"w and is part of a series commissioned for the Hudson River Museum, Yonkers. Others who have exhibited works at YUM are Rachel Shmueli and Nellie Stavisky of Jerusalem. Many artists have worked cooperatively to create fiber works.

Chaim Kirkell of Cleveland, Ohio, and formerly Beit Yatir Moshav, Israel, paints on silk using the subject of the vineyards as a basis of his work. Beit Yatir is situated near Hebron. Kirkell lived in this cooperative settlement, and worked the vineyards himself, experiencing the land of the Bible. "Dusk at Beit Yatir" is illustrated here and conveys the physical beauty of the land as well as the lushness of the grapes and vineyards. Chaim plans his design on paper and then transfers it to silk. He then paints on silk and uses synthetic wax to separate areas. He shades by varying intensity of dyes and water and then steams the work to set the dyes and then backs them with nylon or silk. The artist summarizes the use of this motif in contemporary Jewish textiles in his expression about his work: "As the seasons changed and the vineyards flourished, I came to the realization that these ancient Hebraic themes are directly related to the land, the people and at this moment in time, I had found my place." [14]

"Dusk at Beit Yatir"
Painted silk, Chaim Kirkell, 1998
Collection of the artist

Endnotes:

1. Hayward, Robert. "The Vine and Its Products As Theological Symbols in First Century Palestinian Judaism," *Durham University Journal* 82 (1990), p. 1.

2. *Ibid,* p. 1.

3. *Daily Life in Ancient Israel*, New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 1980-81, p. 24.

4. Salomon, Kathryn. *Jewish Ceremonial Embroidery*. London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1988, p.41

5. *Daily Life in Ancient Israel*, p. 25

6. *Ibid*, p. 26.

7. *Ibid,* p. 65.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Freehof, Lillian S. and King, Bucky. *Embroideries and Fabrics for Synagogue and Home.* New York: Hearthside Press Inc., 1966, p. 51.

10. Aber, Ita. *The Art of Judaic Needlework.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979, p. 10.

11. Ford, Amanda. Interview with the artist, 1998.

12. *Aishet Hayil*, New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 1993, p.23.

13. Kirkell, Chaim. Interview with the artist, 1998

"Milk and Honey"
Tallit, Ina Golub
Silk applique, 72" x 24"
Collection of Frieda Haidt, Los Altos, Calif.

"Grapes"
Wall work, Ita Aber, 1997
acrylic on canvas, mixed media
69" x 50"
Collection of The Hudson River Museum

"Ani L'Dodi" I am My Beloved
Marriage canopy, Chuppah, Phillis Kantor,
handwoven, embroidered, quilted, beaded,
Collection of Temple Sinai, Champaign, Il.

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