

A LOVE OF *Torah*



Peter Hvizdak/Register

Jeanette Kuvin Oren, an artist who specializes in commissioned Judaic artwork, sits in her Woodbridge studio with examples of Torah covers that she creates for clients worldwide.

Artist's Torah covers inspirational



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WOODBIDGE — When the High Holy Days begin Wednesday at sundown, Torahs throughout the world will be “dressed” in their holiday best, covers traditionally in whites with muted tones.

At Temple Emanu-El in Livingston, N.J., and dozens of other synagogues worldwide, artfully inspired Torah covers are made by reknowned Judaic artist Jeanette

Kuvin Oren of Woodbridge.

“Her artwork is so striking, you’re drawn into looking. It’s so vibrant, you just look at it and it connects with you, with people of all ages,” said Rabbi Mark Kaiserman of the New Jersey synagogue. “It exhibits the joy and brightness you want the Torah to have. It sort of gets you in the mood for the holidays that are about to happen.”

The Torah is a scroll containing the five books of Moses that are central to Judaism. The High Holy Days include Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the day

of atonement. The holidays emphasize the personal, reflective and introspective aspects of Judaism.

Kuvin Oren, who makes the covers from white silk that she dyes, quilts, sews and details herself, made four colorful everyday covers for Kaiserman’s congregation and four for the holidays that include images in muted tones of a dove carrying an olive branch and flying over Jerusalem and a Shofar or ram’s horn. The whites are symbolic of the ridding of sin.

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Artist: Judaica inspires her work

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To view the Torah covers: www.kuvinoren.com/gallery/torah-covers/temple-emanu-el-nj.html

Her commissioned works are so in demand all year round that she's always busy in her sprawling home studio, but a little pressure let up recently when she shipped 30 Torah covers to different parts of the country just in time for the holidays.

"I love thinking about Judaism and translating it into visual art that inspires people," Kuvin Oren said. "I have never not loved a day's work in 27 years."

That's about the time Kuvin Oren decided to make art a career instead of an avocation.

It was a choice she never saw coming, as she was a Princeton graduate and doctoral candidate at Yale University who was 80 percent through her dissertation in the field of epidemiology. Her goal was to do health policy research. Becoming a professional artist "never crossed my mind," she said.

Newly married to Dr. Dan Oren, a psychiatrist whom she had met at Yale, she remembers the day in the 1980s when she called her parents to discuss a change in her career plans.

Her parents — a little shocked after all that education — asked, "Can you support yourself?" She said yes, but was not sure that was really the case.

Although she has had no formal art training, Kuvin Oren was always artistic as a child and her parents embraced that, even allowing her to paint the walls of her bedroom. But they discouraged art as a profession.

At age 14, she designed and sold T-shirts to her classmates. For her Bat Mitzvah, she created a Torah cover with her mother to donate to the synagogue in Jerusalem where the event was held. She did the painting on the

cloth cover and her mother did the needlepoint.

Today, she and Oren have two adult daughters who are also artistically talented.

Kuvin Oren grew up in Palm Beach, Fla. "before there were Jews" there, she said, and her family was not overly religious.

The desire to become a Judaic artist kicked in after she made her own ketubah, a special Jewish marriage contract, at the suggestion of a rabbi who knew her artistic talents.

She went on to design many ketubahs and many other Judaic items, teaching herself techniques along the way, as she still does today. Kuvin Oren produces art on fabric, mosaics and stained glass.

She said she's lucky to have come into the field at a time when a renaissance was under way in Jewish art.

"Artistically, I think people are more open to the idea of representing the Jewish faith visually." She said people have moved toward spiritual and nature-based themes rather than, say, the image of a Menorah or the Star of David.

In creating pieces, "I just follow my heart," she said.

"I always loved everything to do with Judaism, loved Jewish history and learning about God," she added.

But it's not as simple as just taking an order for a Torah cover or Ark curtain. A big part of her work is looking at the sanctuary and meeting with a committee of the various congregations to get a feel of what they are trying to convey.

"Every commission is a new opportunity to learn and work with a community," she said.

In high school, she was a national champion debater. "You'd think someone like that would be a lawyer or politician," she said, but instead she uses that well-honed communication gift to work with various Jewish communities and cre-

ate the vision.

A few years ago, she made a Torah cover for a synagogue in Soho that formed after 9/11, saying it was a welcome challenge to create a cover that memorialized 9/11, stayed within Orthodox rules and was beautiful.

Rabbi Eytan Kenter of Congregation B'nai Torah, in Atlanta, Ga., said Kuvin Oren made a spectacular Ark curtain for the synagogue's uniquely structured Ark, with crisscrossing lines that make six parts. Her recommendation was to embrace the unique shape.

Each section of the curtain represents the different books read on the holidays. For Yom Kippur, there's a whale for the Book of Jonah; for Ecclesiastes, a tree; and for the Book of Esther, which celebrates the saving of the Jewish people, it's figures dancing across the curtain.

"It makes the entire sanctuary look more beautiful, impressive," he said. "We decided we wanted to get a new Ark curtain, and if you want the best, it's Jeanette. She embraced what was special and unique about what we're trying to do."

To view the Ark curtain: www.kuvinoren.com/gallery/ark-curtains/congbnai-torah.html

Kuvin Oren loves interacting with Jewish communities around the world and says, "They're more alike than different."

"I think the differences are not so much between communities as generations," she said, adding that it's more difficult to have a young family appreciate how important it is to have a community.

"I love art, I love Judaism. To do the two, I feel blessed," she said. "It's a great life, no long commute, I never get sick of it."

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