

# The Arts

Theater, Books, Music & Visual Arts

## Museums

### Drawing The Tradition

In his 'Visualizing the Bible' show, David Wander makes the Torah his own.

**Sandee Brawarsky**  
Culture Editor

David Wander makes books that might be 50 feet long, illustrating biblical and other stories with great artistic skill, creativity and appreciation of the text and its layers of meaning. One page leads to the next, and the handmade books fold up like accordions.

"Visualizing the Bible: Works by David Wander" at the Herbert & Eileen Bernard Museum of Judaica at Temple Emanu-El is a gem of an exhibition, not to be missed this summer. It is made up of eight books that seem inspired by Renaissance artists who illuminated manuscripts with spectacular imagery, as well as by contemporary creators of stylized graphic novels, who also tell a story in a frame.

"There's a concept that everyone should write their own Torah. If they can, well, great, but everyone has to deal with what Judaism means to them and how to make it theirs," the New York artist says in an interview.

In black-and-white and somber tones, his "Eicha," Lamentations — read later this month on Tisha b'Av — powerfully captures the mood of the day, with images of skulls in the streets of Jerusalem, chains suggesting captivity, people walking in the dark in a maze and jackals.

His treatment of the text mirrors the book's themes of destruction. Wander wrote the letters with white ink on black, then ripped and burned some of the text, then rewrote those letters and affixed the repaired, burnt fragments of text to the pages.

"Writing, burning, writing it again," Wander says. "It's why we're here — to keep telling."

Each of the narratives — which might take a year to create — is in a distinctive style, whether resembling an African story quilt, like "Megillat Esther" or a dreamscape, like "The Jonah Drawings."

Warren Klein, curator of the museum, says that this is the institution's first exhibition featuring a living artist and also its first show featuring biblical and religious texts. One of the challenges of the exhibit was displaying the books in full, so the presenters came up with a system of showing most, but not all, of the pages.



Wander's depictions of the Esther story, the Haggadah and the Golem of Prague.

COURTESY OF DAVID WANDER

Born in New York City, Wander is the son of a printer and photo engraver who became a painter. David studied at Pratt, the School of Visual Arts and the Rhode Island School of Design, and later worked as a fine art printmaker here and in Europe (including work for the Picasso family). A cousin commissioned him to create an illustrated Haggadah linking together themes of the seder and the Shoah, in memory of relatives who perished. Working in Jerusalem, he completed The Wolloch Haggadah in 1985 — a 300-copy edition that was shown at Yad Vashem, with copies now in the permanent collection at JTS, Harvard and other institutions.

On exhibit here is a page showing the four sons of the text. Wander's version features four books: One open with black letters, one on fire, one with blank pages and one closed.

Through the Haggadah project, he met David Kraemer of JTS, and they began a biweekly chevruta, or study session, in which they look at texts along with midrash, or commentary. The two men have been learning together for eight years. The ideas generated in their sessions animate these works, which Kraemer, the Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Librarian and professor of Talmud, describes as "a kind of midrash on the midrash."

"David does something that not's radically new," Kraemer says, "but the continuation of a tradition. This is a very old tradition that most people who work with traditional texts don't know much about. People often make comments about how new it is for Jews to be producing images, and it's just not true — Jews have been doing so all along. It hasn't been studied, except by specialists — it's not that it hasn't been done."

Wander's "Book of Judith," with a style inspired by ancient Greek terra cotta



pottery, includes no text, but a dramatic rendering of the biblical story in bold illustration done in acrylic and colored rice papers. At the end, Judith, with her expressive eyes and long gray hair, appears as a wise figure.

"The Golem of Prague," which also has no text, is a retelling of the 16th-century tale in a richly colored panorama. Wander traveled to Prague to sketch the city's monuments, which appear floating in the background, along with kabbalistic symbols and flying angels carrying stones. According to legend, the stones from Prague's Altneu Shul, built from the remnants of the Second Temple, will be returned by angels to Jerusalem with the coming of the Messiah.

Set in contemporary times, "Ruth" highlights social issues that are still current. The text is English, in a comics font. But the story of honor, love, loyalty and the possibility of redemption — with stirrings of the Messiah — moves from right to left. The title character wears a little black dress, black pumps and pearls as she goes to meet Boaz.

Wander, who teaches art at SAR High School in Riverdale, also paints landscapes and streetscapes, and has shown that work widely. His books invite repeated viewing and a return to the text itself to see it anew. ■

**"Visualizing the Bible: Works by David Wander"** is on display at the Herbert & Eileen Bernard Museum of Judaica, Congregation Emanu-El, One E. 65th St., Manhattan, through Oct. 18.



Wander in his studio: "Writing, burning, writing it again."

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