



# SHARIR'S PSALMS

Pucker Gallery  
BOSTON

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## SHARIR'S PSALMS

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When Bernard Pucker of the Pucker Gallery in Boston commissioned David Sharir's pictures for the psalms, the artist, a secular Israeli Jew, had some hesitation about trying to deal with ancient poetry written in an archaic language with literary imagery very different from anything that we encounter today. However, having been born in Israel with Hebrew as his native tongue and a love for the Bible, Sharir decided to accept the commission and to render depictions of the verbal imagery in his own personal artistic language.

In the introduction to Sharir's book, *Celebrations: Sacred and Secular* (1991), Steven Troope and Paul Nagano talked about the artist's unique style as being "a celebration of the simplicity and the complexity...work that is full of contradictions yet his total vision expresses a profound unity and harmony among the disparate elements of nature" as well as portray "the chaos and the order; the terror and the joy of life." Sharir continues to use his invented "stylized, stereotyped figures" in these visual interpretations of the psalms to reenact "the games and rituals of human existence. Precisely designed and meticulously painted, they play out their roles in idiosyncratic compositions which are often partitioned off into several 'compartments,' concepts derived from his architectural studies."

Illuminating the Book of Psalms is an ancient tradition that began with Christian medieval art and was adopted in the 13<sup>th</sup> century for illustrating Jewish Ashkenazi manuscripts. Sharir's method of dealing

artistically with the text seems to be based on classical Jewish interpretation known in Hebrew as *pshat* and *drash*: the former attempts to explain the "simple," literal and straightforward meaning of the text, whereas the latter is a fanciful way of using the exegesis of the text to the deeper meanings hidden within.

Sharir turns to both *pshat* and *drash* to explain allusions to Bible stories, traditional theological attitudes, and existential situations found in the psalms. His use of *pshat* can be seen, for example, in DSP23, his illustration for Psalm 55, where the psalmist writes that he wishes he could become a dove so as to escape the entanglements of life in the palace and fly to the desert. His recourse to *drash* can be seen in DSP9 and DSP10, the illustrations for Psalm 69, where he refers to the stories of Jonah and Joseph even though they are not mentioned in the psalm itself. Moreover, showing Joseph in a pit with snakes and scorpions (DSP10) does not follow the biblical text, but is rather an allusion to classical rabbinical commentary. That is, the Bible reads, "and the pit was empty, there was no water in it" (Genesis 37:24), and Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century) explains the apparent redundancy by saying that the pit was empty of water but was full of snakes and scorpions.

Artistic license allows Sharir to introduce images from his own life in his illustrations. The house in Jaffa where he and his family lived for 44 years and he first had his studio and its dome serve as symbols of the Temple in many of his paintings, as, for example, in DSP22, his illustration for Psalm 118.



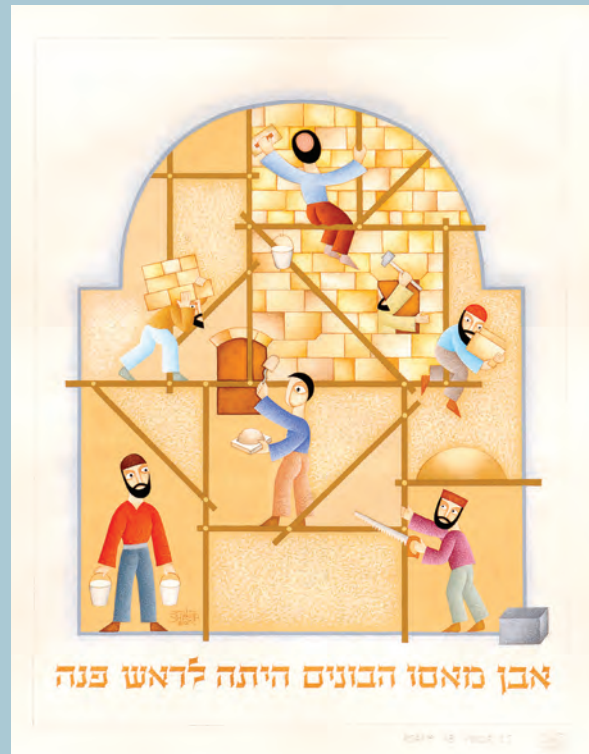
PSALM 118  
VERSE 22

• • •

The stone that the builders  
rejected has become the  
chief corner stone.

• • •

17 ¼ x 13 ¾"  
DSP22



PSALM 45  
VERSES 14, 15

• • •

The king's daughter enters  
with all her wealth. Her  
dress is brocaded with gold  
mountings. Her maidens in  
her train, her companions are  
presented to her.

• • •

15 ¾ x 19 ¾"  
DSP27



We can also find playful, humorous elements in Sharir's work: in DSP27, his illustration for Psalm 45, the king's daughter wears a very elegant dress and the little dog dares to wet her train and in DSP1, for Psalm 92, he paints the righteous playing ping-pong, as though they have nothing better to do.

In designing his illustrations, Sharir follows the tradition of medieval Hebrew illuminated manuscripts, maintaining the balance between "word" and "image" by using verses written in square Hebrew script as decorative frames for his images, as, for example, in DSP5 and DSP20, for Psalms 23 and 48, respectively. In portraying man's exaltation of God he sets a decorated "word" in the center of the composition surrounded by a series of vignettes describing God's deeds, as in DSP29, for Psalm 74. The word "ATA" (You) is repeated seven times in the psalm, referring to God as both the Creator and the Destroyer of the forces of nature. The descriptions of God's deeds in the text are mostly allegorical, referring to the Exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the Red Sea, the wandering in the wilderness, and the crossing of the Jordan River. However, his visual depiction of the psalm does not include interpretation of the symbols, but rather provides a straightforward description of God's deeds in a series of eight scenes, each drawn in its own "window." The windows surround a central square in which the word "ATA" is written in traditional lettering against an ornamental background.

A decorated "word" in a pictorial composition is the Hebrew equivalent of the illuminated initial letters found in Christian Psalters. The word "ATA" has a dual role: it both emphasizes the sevenfold repetition of the word and stands as a graphic symbol for God in lieu of the human image found in Latin Christian illustrations.

We can see another example of the use of decorated words in DSP13, painted for Psalm 29, in reference to the mighty voice of God reverberating over His created universe. Sharir believes that the kabbalistic cosmic connection between the "voice" and the name of God is the cause of unnatural occurrences that the psalmist cannot understand. Thus, the link between "*Kol*" (voice) and "Hashem" (God) serves as a visual skeleton for the pictorial composition that connects the serrated letters of the two words with the images that depict scenes from the psalm.

Another depiction in praise of God's deeds in Creation can be seen in DSP6, the illustration for Psalm 8. Sharir maintains that this psalm is a song of praise for both the Creator of the universe and His chosen creature—man. God, Who created the hosts of the heavens, the fauna, and the flora entrusted man (and woman) with the ability to rule, almost godlike, over His whole Creation. The artist's interpretation shows a mountain that emerges from among the waves of the sea. All living things found in the sea, on the mountain, and in the air are surrounded by a deep-blue ring filled with stars. Adam and Eve are seen standing on the top of the mountain as God's envoys, in control of the entire universe, which God has placed in their hands. DSP8, the illustration for Psalm 24, again portrays Adam and Eve—as the crown of Creation—standing safely on dry land in the middle of the sea.

DSP11, the illustration for Psalm 19, depicts the heavens as a semi-circular shape (the artist's cosmology, which seems to have been influenced by early Byzantine art) filled with winged creatures—both angels and birds—all singing God's praises. The larger angels sound the horns and the smaller ones accompany them

PSALM 15  
VERSES 1, 2

Lord, who may sojourn in Your  
tent, who may dwell on Your holy  
mountain? He who walks without  
blame, doing righteousness,  
speaking truth in his heart.

19 ¾ x 15 ¾"  
DSP7



PSALM 19  
VERSE 1

The heavens declare the  
glory of God, the sky  
proclaims His handiwork.  
Day to day makes  
utterance, night to night  
speaks out.

15 ¾ x 19 ½"  
DSP11

in a chorus. The blue-colored heavens symbolize the night and the white segment at its base with an image of the sun represents the day.

In further homage to the poet's evident adoration of God's Creation, Sharir illustrated Psalm 42 (DSP4) in a way that expresses metaphorically the passion of the psalmist to get closer to God. "Like a deer thirsting for water, my soul cries for you, O God." The illustration shows a deer's easing his thirst, while a doe stands, unreachable, on the opposite side of the winding stream. God, Who dwells outside the realm of earthly existence, is symbolized by a stylized angel/bird hybrid drawn with a hint of Eros in the upper-left corner.

Another way to approach God is described in Psalm 118 (DSP30). The illustration shows the gate through which the righteous enter an archlike structure, which in an ancient walled city also served as a dwelling. The arch is divided into small "compartments" that house the righteous men (and women) who devote their time in eternity to pleasurable idleness in reading, sport, prayer, eating, and drinking. Their standard fare is the Leviathan and the legendary bull (promised to the righteous in the world to come). "The gateway to the Lord" was the phrase used by the Levites guarding the Temple when the pilgrims pleaded (verse 19): "Open the gates of righteousness for me that I may enter them and praise the LORD." This phrase is also an architectural metaphor for the botanical Garden of Eden described in Genesis and in the aggadic tradition. Sharir painted the gate as leaning to suggest its fantastical nature. It stands tilted on a black triangle that symbolizes Limbo, where we see a procession of people who deem themselves worthy to be accepted into the realm of the eternal life to be found inside the gate. Only a select few

are accepted and the queues of the rejected are shown leaving the picture and descending into Limbo.

Psalm 15 (DSP7) posits the question, "Lord, who may sojourn in Your tent, who may dwell on Your holy mountain?" Sharir's interpretative response portrays the virtues of the enlightened man, the righteous one, who loves and respects others, and the reward coming to him; namely, unity with God in His special place. We see tents (at the bottom) and houses in Jerusalem that go up to the summit, to the House of God and the dwelling place for those who walk without blame, doing righteousness, speaking truth in their hearts.

Following the same theme in DSP20, for Psalm 48, Sharir chose to illustrate the verse "Walk around Zion." A continuous procession of pilgrims surrounds the Temple, which is rendered as an image of the Holy Ark with the tablets of the Covenant on its façade, against a brilliant ultramarine blue background, standing on the top of Mount Moriah. The procession breaks at each of the four corners of the frame, where we see towers and citadels, "the city of the great king." The pilgrims with their very detailed and colorful appearance detract from the eminence of the Temple, which raises a pictorial dilemma regarding the "center" and the "margins": is the primary focus of the illustration the centrality of the Temple or the merit and vitality of the pilgrims approaching its gates?

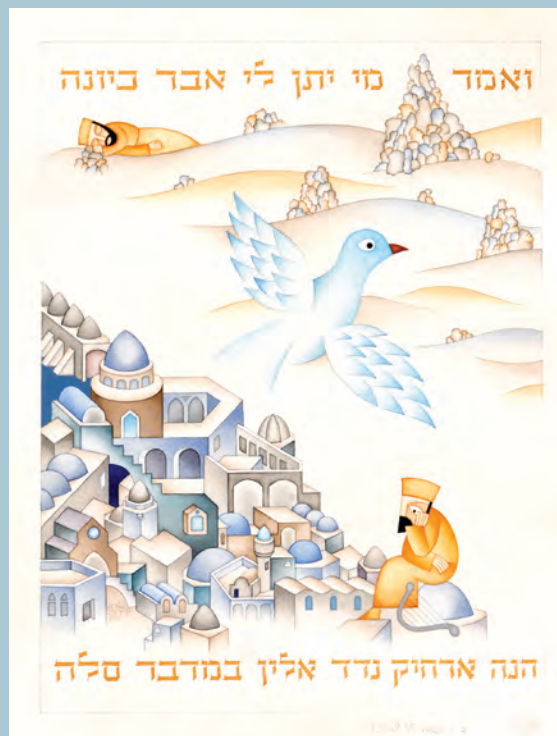
DSP12, the illustration for Psalm 66, shows a cylindrical structure that looks as though it might be a fortress or a prison, but it is topped by colorful domes, which hints at the Temple. The idea for this composition was taken from the verse "You have caught us in a net." Each level is characterized by the written text in a banner beneath it. Starting from the bottom level, which



PSALM 55  
VERSES 7, 8

I said, 'O that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and find rest; surely, I would flee far off; I would lodge in the wilderness ...'

17 ¼ x 13"  
DSP23



PSALM 22  
VERSES 13-15, 17

Many bulls surround me,  
mighty one of Bashan  
encircle me. They open  
wide their mouths at me  
like ravenous, roaring lions.  
I am poured out like water;  
all my bones are disjointed,  
my heart is like wax, melting  
within me ... Dogs surround  
me, a pack of evil ones closes  
me in.

17 1/2 x 21 1/2"  
DSP18





depicts stress and suffering, we see an ascent through the second level, which shows physical and mental affliction, and then on to two levels that lead to the service in the Temple—the offering of sacrifices and the joy of the pilgrims in the heights of the tower. The verse “You have brought us through to prosperity” is drawn away from the severity of the tower in an upward arch that transforms the illustration into a prayer for freedom.

Psalms 55 (DSP23) suggests that even when Jerusalem is built up, the psalmist feels the need to escape to the peace and serenity of the desert. The poet (David) is shown seated in an attitude of hopelessness on one of the domes of the city with his harp at his feet and also sleeping peacefully on a sandy hill in the desert. The contrast between the crowded city and the tranquility of the wilderness finds expression in the diagonal division of the illustration and in the contrast of shades and colors. The city is depicted in the blue and gray of night and the wilderness in the bright shades of daylight. A large flying dove connects the two realities.

DSP24, the illustration for Psalm 57, shows the psalmist hiding in a cave. The verse that opens the psalm sets the scene for the drama: David is hiding from King Saul, who is pursuing him. The poet pictures his enemies as lions spitting fire, threatening to devour him, but the artist paints David strumming his harp and charming the lions, reminiscent of Tamino in *The Magic Flute* or Orpheus playing his music to subdue the demons in Hell.

The sense of being surrounded by enemies in the guise of carnivores is also evident in DSP18, the illustration for Psalm 22. The elliptical shape encased in verses was clearly suggested by the verb “surround,” which appears twice in this psalm. The poet is in desperate

straits, with a pack of murderous beasts encircling him. The beasts represent his enemies, those who seek to do him evil. Some of these enemies are portrayed as wild animals and others as animal-headed humans armed with pistols, swords, and clubs. The poet is doomed: the ferocious creatures in the four corners of the picture are closing in, and trapped as he is in the elliptical envelope that encases him he cannot escape them. DSP28, the illustration for Psalm 80, shows us that the presence of enemies, which makes it impossible to live peacefully, is true not only for the poet but for the entire Jewish People. Here we find a symbolic link between the vine and the People of Israel depicted in pairs of images—humans and gentle animals—living together amid the leaves and twigs, unaware of the wild boar gnawing away at the base of their vine.

DSP25, the illustration for Psalm 84, shows the Israelites seeking refuge from impending disaster. The picture’s primary image is taken from Bialik’s children’s poem *Ken L’zipor*, “the bird’s nest is between the trees and in the nest are three eggs ...” The nest symbolizes a house and the bird (the dove in the picture) the Master of the Universe. The Children of Israel are the chicks protected by the dove’s wings—the wings of the *Shekhinah*—the divine Presence. The nest in the picture has an elliptical shape. Framed by the text it rests among a thicket of gnarled branches painted against a background of brilliant colors reminiscent not only of sunset and fire but of catastrophe. The Jews in the nest are survivors of the camps—families in search of refuge after the Holocaust.

In DSP15, one of his illustrations for Psalm 137, Sharir takes us back to the first national Jewish catastrophe—the Babylonian exile. The Tigris and

PSALM 69  
VERSES 2, 3

Deliver me, O God, for  
the waters have reached  
my neck; I am sinking into  
the slimy deep and find no  
foothold. I have come into  
the watery depths; the  
floods sweep me away.

17 ½ x 13 ¾"  
DSP9



PSALM 69  
VERSES 2, 15, 16

Deliver me, O God, for the  
waters have reached my neck  
... rescue me from the mire; let  
me not sink ... let the mouth of  
the pit not close over me.

13 ¾ x 17 ½"  
DSP10



the Euphrates rivers weave around the bottom of the picture. Against the backdrop of a pastoral scene, we see the refugees from Judah, the Children of Israel, weeping over the destruction of the Temple and their homeland. The image of sorrowing people continues in DSP16, the next illustration for the same psalm. Babylonian soldiers taunt the Israelites, demanding that they sing for them, but the captives, ignoring them, continue to mourn, while their musical instruments are suspended from the beaks of birds perched on the branches of a nearby willow tree.

God's miracle at the Red Sea, referred to in Psalm 66 (DSP14), has been remembered throughout Jewish history as a source of hope and faith that God will rescue His people. The psalm relates to two events of surpassing magnitude in Jewish history: the crossing of the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan River. The Children of Israel cross both on dry land, family by family, with all of their belongings. The path, set within stylized waves in many shades of deep blue with dots representing foam, is bordered on either side with relevant verses. This miraculous situation is described in a rather fantastical verse in Psalm 114: "the sea saw and it fled, the Jordan turned back."

Allusions to biblical references of anguish and a cry for help can be seen in the two illustrations for verses in Psalm 69. In DSP9 Sharir interpreted the verses starting with "Deliver me, O God, for the waters have reached my neck" as a reference to the prayer of Jonah when he was cast from the ship into a violent sea. Jonah dives into stormy waves, the ship in the upper-left corner continues on its way in a quiet sea, and the great fish that swallows him waits at the bottom right. DSP10 portrays Joseph after he has been thrown into the pit, helpless in its depths, surrounded by snakes and scorpions, crying

for help, with his brothers, Reuben holding the coat of many colors, standing at the edge.

Referring to other biblical episodes, Sharir painted DSP27, the illustration for Psalm 45, to suggest the wedding of Jezebel and Ahab or Pharaoh's daughter and Solomon or perhaps the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon's palace. Dressed in exquisite ceremonial garments, the foreign bride, accompanied by her entourage, is presented to the king. The bride is shown with her pets—a pair of deer, a bird, a rabbit, and a dog. The picture is framed on three sides by verses as well as by rows of maidens, colorful songbirds and peacocks hover among them, dressed in stylized garments, some bearing gifts and others playing instruments.

In his visual interpretations of the various psalms, Sharir often focused on the importance of ordinary people, their goals, their sense of good and evil, their ideas of family and of friendship and of joint efforts to build a house for God. DSP17, the illustration for Psalm 1, affirms the basic value of righteousness, the contrast between the virtuous and the wicked is expressed in floral images. The good person is portrayed entwined in a fruit tree near a bubbling stream and the evildoers as the chaff that blows away in the winnowing season. The head of the righteous person comes out of the top of the trunk of the blossoming tree, whereas the heads of the wicked are caught between the banners of the verses as they float away in the wind.

DSP1-3, a triptych of three illustrations for Psalm 92, portray the qualities of the righteous in a single visual unit. DSP1, which relates to the verse "the righteous will bloom like a date palm," shows fruit-bearing palm trees, which symbolize beauty and eternity. The trees stand erect, able to grow even in parched soil. The righteous are "planted" among the branches of the



PSALM 128  
VERSE 3

Your wife shall be like a  
fruitful vine within your  
house; your sons, like olive  
saplings around your table.

17 ¼ x 13 ¾"  
DSP21



PSALM 133  
VERSE 1

How good and how pleasant it is  
that brothers dwell together.

15 ¼ x 19 ¾"  
DSP26



trees and, with a touch of humor, are shown enjoying a game of ping-pong. DSP2, which relates to the verse “they will thrive like a cedar in Lebanon,” depicts the righteous as the cedars of Lebanon from which Solomon built his Temple. The cedar tree, a symbol of strength and perpetuity, is pictured as a dwelling place for the good men and their wives. In DSP3, the central panel of the triptych, which illustrates the verse “planted in the house of the Lord, they flourish in the courts of our God,” the righteous, who demonstrate the qualities of the palm and the cedar are shown in the Temple courts. The picture is divided into geometric compartments in which the righteous conduct the business of daily life. As they are “planted” in the Temple, they are endowed with sanctity.

People who choose the virtuous way of life also live in harmony with one another, as described in Psalm 133 (DSP26). The description of “How good and how pleasant it is that brothers dwell together” (attributed to Nehemiah’s call to the Children of Israel to join with him in friendship and in joy in the land following the return to Zion) really applies to all periods of history and to all societies. Sharir’s depiction of a traditional Friday evening (with candles, wine, and loaves of challah) turns an intimate family gathering into a public celebration (in a kibbutz? a youth movement? a class reunion?), where we can see celebrants of many ages with joyful expressions (reminiscent perhaps of the peasant scenes of Breugel the Elder). As a complement to the sublunary elation, three angels, who according to biblical tradition are bearers of good tidings, are shown standing in the doorway.

From the joy of a happy social gathering, we move on to wholesome family life, as described in Psalm 128 (DSP21). Symbols of fertility abound. The

fruitful vine is seen in the background, behind the mother, who, carrying a child in her womb, is bringing a platter of cooked fish (colored gold) to the table, which has the verse from the text embroidered on its cloth. The father is at the head of the table, with the sons (and daughters!) of the house seated around it, leaning against branches of olive trees—symbols of both fertility and longevity. The green background also suggests vitality, growth, and fertility.

DSP5, the illustration for Psalm 23, the last one that I discuss in this introduction, framed by the psalm’s magnificent text, portrays the three periods in the psalmist life, which are indeed universal.

The pastoral scene at the top reflects happiness and prosperity: the sheep graze in the colorful pasture together with some beautiful animals of Paradise. The image in the center pictures “the valley of shadow of death,” a bleak river of doom that expresses tragedy but also suggests faith in redemption. The redemption is explicit at the bottom, where the poet is shown sitting at a table prepared with all manner of delicacies while his enemies float in space and look down upon him enviously, as it says in the psalm: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

~ Dr. Shulamit Laderman

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*Dr. Shulamit Laderman received a Ph.D. in Art History from Hebrew University in 2000 writing about Jewish Midrashic influences on the iconography of Byzantine art. Her research focuses on the visual interpretation of the Bible in art and the literary sources that influenced both Jewish and Christian art during the late antique, Byzantine and later medieval periods. She has published articles on the subject in Hebrew and English academic journals and books. Dr. Laderman teaches Jewish and General Art History courses at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat-Gan, Israel, and at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies where she coordinated the Judaism and the Arts M.A. track.*



PSALM 92  
VERSES 13, 14

...

The righteous will bloom like a date palm...

...

15 ½ x 19 ½"  
DSP1



PSALM 92  
VERSES 13, 14

...

Planted in the house of the Lord, they  
will flourish in the courts of our God.

...

25 ½ x 19 ½"  
DSP3





PSALM 92  
VERSES 13, 14

...

They will thrive like a cedar in Lebanon...

...

15 ½ x 19 ½"

DSP2

PSALM 74  
VERSES 1, 13, 15-17

...

A maskil of Asaph. Why, O God, do You forever reject us, do You fume in anger at the flock that You tend? ...

It was You who drove back the sea with Your might ... It was You who crushed the heads of the Leviathan ... It was You who released springs and torrents, who made mighty rivers dry up ...

The day is Yours, the night also ... It was You who set in place the orb of the sun ... You fixed all the boundaries of the earth; summer and winter You made them.

...

21 ¼ x 22 ¼"  
DSP29

מושכיל לאסך למה אלהים זנחת לנצח יעשן אפך בצאן מרעיתך



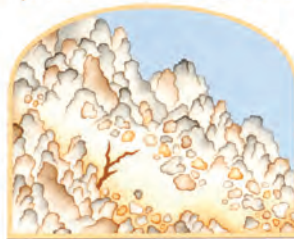
רצצת ראשי לויתן



פורדת בעוז ים



בקעת מועין ונהל



הובשת נהרות איתן



הכינות מאור ושמש



הצבת כל גבולות ארץ



שכרת ראשי תנינים



לך יום אף לך לילה



קיץ וחדף יצדתם





# PSALM 1 VERSES 1, 3, 4

Happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of the insolent ... He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never withers, and whatsoever he does will prosper. Not so the wicked; rather, they are like chaff that the wind blows away.

17 ½ x 21 ½"  
DSP17



# PSALM 23 VERSES 1-5

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in straight paths for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies: You have anointed my head with oil; my cup runs over.

18 x 22"  
DSP5



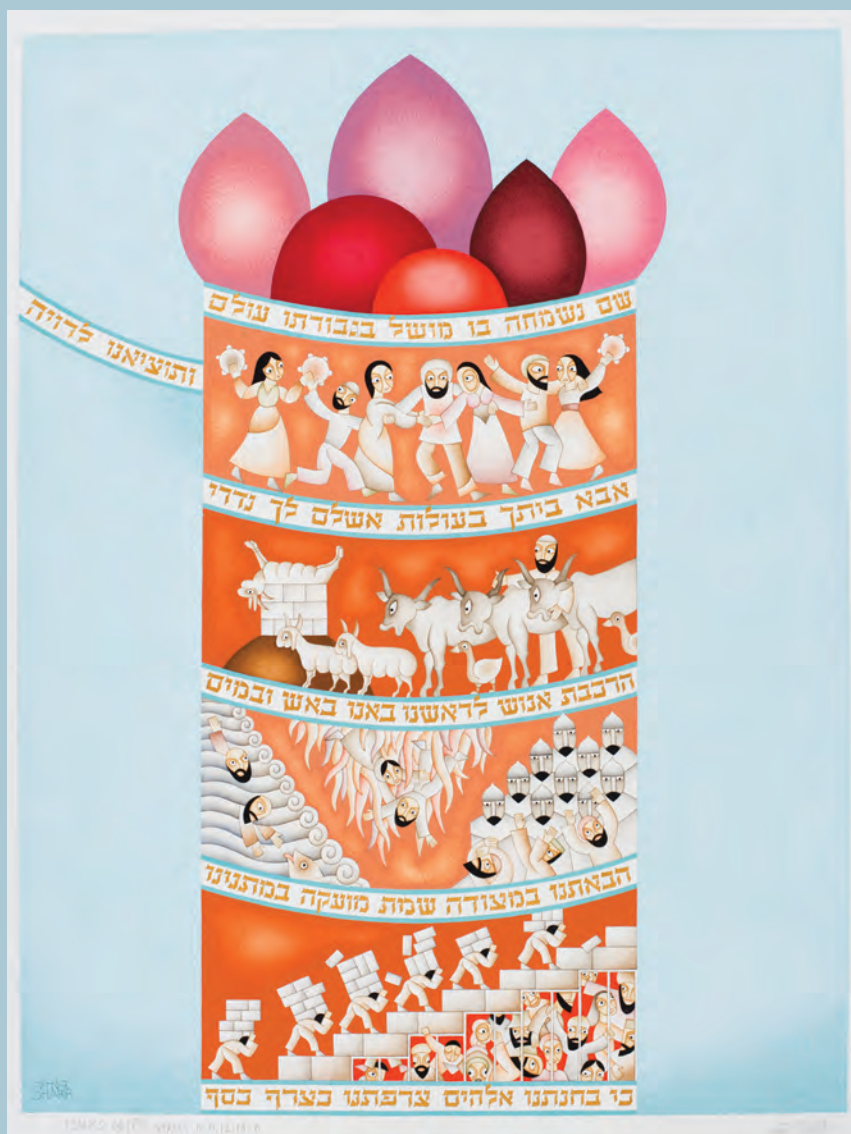
PSALM 66  
VERSES 10-13

• • •

You have tried us, O God, refined us,  
as one refines silver. You have caught  
us in a net, You did lay constraints  
upon our loins. You have let men  
ride over us; we have endured fire  
and water, and You have brought us  
through to prosperity. I will enter  
Your house with burnt offerings. I will  
pay my vows to You.

• • •

25 ¾ x 19 ¼"  
DSP12





PSALM 57  
VERSES 1, 5

• • •

To David, a michtam when he fled  
from Saul in a cave ... as for me, I  
lie among the man-eating lions ...

• • •

17 ¾ x 13 ¾"  
DSP24



PSALM 137  
VERSE 1

• • •

By the rivers of Babylon,  
there we sat, sat and wept,  
as we remembered Zion.

• • •

19 ¾ x 16"  
DSP15

PSALM 84  
VERSES 4, 5

...

Even the sparrow has  
found a home, and the  
swallow a nest for herself  
in which to set her young  
... happy are those who  
dwell in Your house, they  
forever praise You ...

...

15 ¾ x 19 ¾"  
DSP25



PSALM 42  
VERSE 2

...

Like a deer thirsting for water,  
my soul cries for you, O God.

...

20 x 16"  
DSP4







PSALM 24  
VERSES 1, 2

• • •

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. He has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods.

• • •

19 ¼ x 15 ¾"  
DSP8



PSALM 137  
VERSES 2, 3

• • •

There on the willows we hung up our lyres, for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors for amusement: 'sing us of the songs of Zion'.

• • •

14 x 17 ¾"  
DSP16





PSALM 29  
VERSES 3, 5, 7, 9, 10

...  
The voice of the Lord is over the waters, the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over the mighty waters ... the voice of the Lord breaks cedars; the Lord shatters the cedars of Lebanon ... the voice of the Lord kindles flames of fire; the voice of the Lord convulses the wilderness ... the voice of the Lord causes hinds to calve, and strips forests bare; while in His Temple all say 'glory!' The Lord sat enthroned at the Flood ...

25 3/4 x 19 1/4"  
DSP13



PSALM 48  
VERSES 5-7

For, look, the kings have conspired,  
passed onward one and all. It  
is they who have seen and so  
been astounded, were panicked,  
dismayed. Shuddering seized them  
there, pangs like a woman in labor.

21 ½ x 17 ½"  
DSP19





## SILENCE, WORD & IMAGE



cholars remain undecided about the occasion for Psalms: Were they originally private meditations? Perhaps proto-liturgy?

Was there musical accompaniment? Who was the audience? We simply do not know.

Some historians maintain that the animal sacrifices in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem were offered in virtual silence – without any music, liturgy, or even language. Indeed, the only noise was the animal's death yelp and, then, the sound of gushing blood. In those days, that was simply how Israel did its prayer-work. Indeed, much of contemporary Western worship is a ritualized, *verbal substitution* for the slaughter of animals.

Even for a society where the slaughter of animals was commonplace, that silence of those moments around an animal's death surely must have been powerful and disturbing. Words may never have been uttered but they were universally heard:

*"I am overwhelmed with gratitude..."*

*"I'm scared to death..."*

*"I am so thankful..."*

*"Please, God, accept this animal—instead of me."*

Students further propose, therefore, that the psalms might originally have been recited, for a fee, by the Levites on *behalf* of each Israelite as he re-emerged from the inner, sacrificial courtyard (bespattered with

blood?). "When I walk back outside, *without* the animal, please chant Psalm number such and such for me."

In this way, then, psalms would give voice to what would, otherwise, have been only inchoate and unspeakable. We are talking here, in other words, about peoples' souls at the times when they are laid bare: at the births and the weddings and the deaths. It is the silence of the surgical waiting room; the quiet of the bridal party moments before the ceremony; the stillness of bereaved relatives prior to a funeral. People have universally figured out that they cannot endure such silent proximity to awe-full times. This is why they pay religious leaders to get them through it by speaking, as one of my congregants once called them, "Rabbi words." And those, of course, are the words of psalms. In over two and half millennia, no one has come up with better words!

Images can also fill that terrifying and holy silence. And that is what David Sharir has given us. His prints are commentaries, translations if you will, into color and line of the very same unspeakable, sacred emotions. His artworks are not so much illustrations as visualizations of the prayerful emotions already latent within the Biblical text. And to see them is to literally give shape to spirit.

A true story.<sup>1</sup> At a summer institute where I was teaching a class on the meaning of sacred text, we studied a Hasidic story that taught that the text not only described, but actually contained the event itself.

PSALM 66  
VERSES 5, 6

...

Come and see the  
works of God, who  
is held in awe by  
men for His acts.  
He turned the sea  
into dry land;  
they crossed the  
river on foot.

...

13 ¾ x 17 ¾"  
DSP14



If read properly, the event could be summoned and relived. This reminded one student, Milt Zaiment, of something he had done as a boy more than sixty years before when his uncle had pneumonia.

"In those days, people didn't go to hospitals like they do now. My uncle lay in his bedroom and the doctor, a good man, came out and told my parents that the end was near. 'I'm sorry,' he consoled, 'but I don't expect him to live through the night.' We helped the doctor on with his coat and saw him to the door.

'Come,' said my father, taking me by the hand. 'We have a job to do.' He sat me down next to my uncle's bed, sat next to me, opened the Bible and recited a Psalm. Then he gave the book to me. 'Now you read.' When I finished, he took the book from me and read the next Psalm. And so it went, all through the night, the two of us reciting Psalms, one after another.

When morning came, my uncle was still alive.

The doctor returned. He was amazed. He said he had never seen anything like it, that it was a miracle. My father smiled respectfully. He washed his face, had a cup of coffee and went to work. He never said a word about that night. My uncle lived another forty years."

In much the same way, the present volume is more than an "art book," it is a "prayer book." It shapes our reality. We are in Sharir's debt.

~ Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

...

*Lawrence Kushner is the Emanu-El Scholar at Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, California. He has served as Rabbi-in-Residence at Hebrew Union College in New York City where he taught spirituality and mentored rabbinic students; he continues as an adjunct member of the faculty on the Los Angeles campus where he teaches courses on Kabbalah. For 28 years, he served as the rabbi of Congregation Beth El in Sudbury, Massachusetts. Rabbi Kushner originated the concept of synagogue havurot, family fellowship groups, and has published numerous books and articles. A native of Detroit, Michigan, he was ordained rabbi from the Hebrew Union College in 1960.*

...

<sup>1</sup> *Invisible Lines of Connection: Sacred Stories of the Ordinary*, Lawrence Kushner, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996.





## DAVID SHARIR

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### BIOGRAPHY

David Sharir was born in 1938 in Israel, the son of Russian immigrants. He began his study of art in Tel Aviv and continued in Florence and Rome where he studied architecture and theater design. His set designs include such productions as “Peer Gynt” for the Habima, Israel’s National Theater (1970-71) and “Hansel and Gretel” for the Opera Company of Boston (1978-79). The brightly colored costumes and intricate stage designs that he created for these productions profoundly influenced his art. In 1966, David Sharir moved to Jaffa where the style which has become his hallmark was truly developed. His studio, his family, and his spiritual devotion all serve as inspiration for the imagery in his work. His evolving style combines personal experience, Biblical symbolism, and fantasy. Today, Sharir has earned a place as a leading Israeli artist. He currently resides in Tel Aviv where he continues to live and work in the spirit of celebration.



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4 December 2010 to 10 January 2011

Opening Reception: 4 December 2010, 3:00 to 6:00 PM

The public is invited to attend. The artist will be present.

### PSALM 80 VERSES 9-11, 14

...

You have plucked up a vine from Egypt ... it took deep root and filled the land ... the mountains were covered by its shade, mighty branches by its bough ... wild boars gnaw at it and creatures of the field feed on it ...

...

15 3/4 x 19 3/4"

DSP28



On the cover:

PSALM 8, VERSES 4-7

...

When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place, what is man that you have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him, that You have made him little less than divine and adorned him with glory and majesty; You have made him master over Your handiwork, laying the world at his feet ...

...

27 1/2 x 21 1/2"

DSP26