

**A site-specific
installation at
Congregation
Magen David
of Manhattan**

Commentary by
**Rabbi Mimon
Mamane**

Poetry by
Sasha Leshner

The Twelve Tribes Of Israel

Irene Mamiye

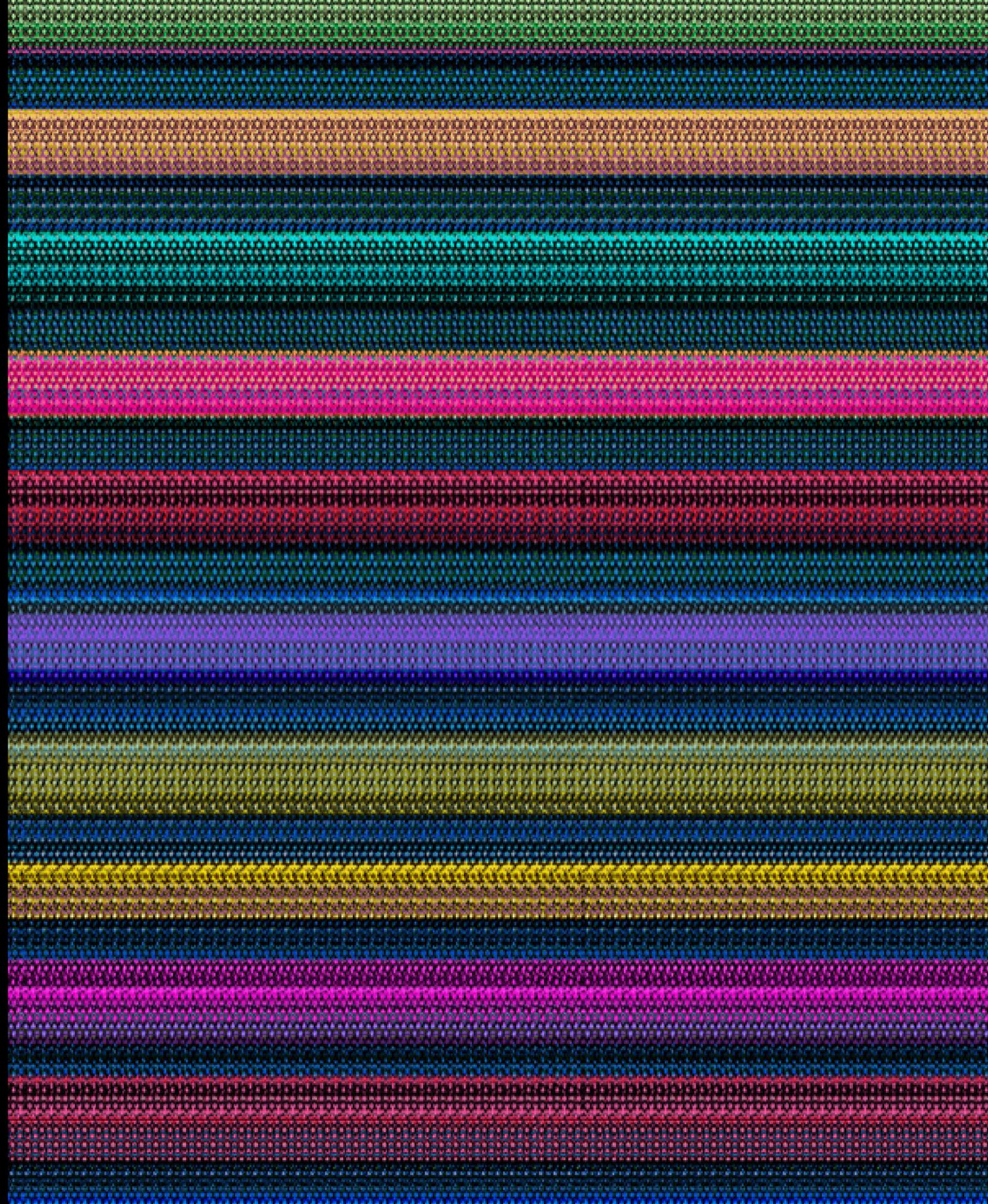
All works:

Irene Mamiye (b. 1957)

2019–2020

60 x 24 inches

Starlight glass,
Pigment Print on Duraclear



IN SEARCH OF THE ORIGINS OF SYNAGOGUE ART

RABBI MIMON MAMANE

REGARDLESS OF DENOMINATION OR AFFILIATION, today it is virtually impossible to find a single Synagogue in the world that is void of visual arts. Synagogue arcs are often embossed with lions and crowns, as are Torah scrolls. Images of Menorahs are ubiquitous in synagogues worldwide, and stained-glass windows that depict scenes of the Torah can be seen today in centuries-old synagogues-turned museums in Europe and America. Most spectacularly, we have the privilege today to see preserved paintings and mosaics from synagogues of the ancient world, in Israel, Syria and Egypt. Many of those were discovered only in recent years, and they bear testimony to Jewish life and worship in those regions 2,000 years ago.

If 2000-year-old synagogues have been excavated in northern Israel and Syria with their paintings and mosaics intact, it is appropriate to deduce that such visual art must have been commonplace in synagogues. To that effect, the sages of the Talmud must surely have commented on the phenomenon. Talmud's commentary, however, in contrast to contemporary practice, is surprising.

The Babylonian Talmud says almost nothing. It directs its attention only to specific types of images in synagogues. Namely, Menorahs, images of celestial bodies and images of human beings. In all cases, it inclines to forbid them but ultimately permits them in some forms, or permits them altogether, because in a public place such as a Synagogue, there is no concern for Idolatry.

The Jerusalem Talmud, however, tell a different story. It states the following:

ביומי דר' יוחנן שרון ציירין על כותלייה ולא מחי בידון; ביומי דר'
אבון שרון ציירין על פסיפס ולא מחי בידון

In the days of Rabbi Yohanan, they permitted drawings on [synagogue] walls, and he did not protest the matter. Later, in the days of Rabbi Abun, they permitted drawings on the mosaic floors, and he did not protest the matter.

In a comprehensive article on the topic, Joseph M. Baumgarten attests to archeological evidence of vandalism in many of the excavated synagogue murals, indicating that even when these were created and displayed, there were religious zealots, who disputed their legitimate place in the synagogue. Together with the above statement in Jerusalem Talmud, it has been argued that it took some time for

Rabbinic Judaism to warm up to the idea of placing visual art forms in the Synagogue. Probably, the concern was that it too closely resembled pagan practices. Alternatively, Jewish Hellenists, whose places of worship were also excavated throughout Israel in the 20th century, incorporated images of Roman and Greek mythological figures on their walls and floors. The rabbis may have feared that mainstream synagogues would too closely resemble their Hellenistic counterparts if they were to embrace visual arts. And finally, the Rabbis were likely concerned with the several verses in the Torah stating:

You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.

For your own sake, therefore, be most careful—since you saw no shape when the LORD your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire—not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever: the form of a man or a woman, the form of any beast on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth. And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them.

Most likely, the Rabbis were concerned that images on synagogue walls or floors would too closely resemble that which was prohibited in the above verses.

However, what the above statement in Jerusalem Talmud teaches us is that with time, the images started to speak for themselves. With time, the Rabbinic leaders of the generation of Rabbi Yohanan came to accept these additions as complementary, and not contrary, to the synagogue.

Finally, Babylonian Talmud, in Rosh Hashana 24B asserts that the great rabbis, Levi, Rav and Shemuel, prayed in the Synagogue of Nehardea, which contained paintings of human figures, and there was no concern about the matter, because such a public place as a Synagogue, would surely not have any idolatrous intentions with its art.

From that point on, it would seem, any objection to Synagogue art among mainstream rabbinic opinion ceased. The practice would soon gain much traction and leave behind an inspiring archeological history of Jewish art, that is well preserved to this day.

Reuben (259)

The firstborn cried
in carnelian, red streaked
and crowned with prophecy
before his hot tears could
blind him: See, a son.
Bloodred and breathing.
Pulled into the world
like a fistfull of mangroves,
his depths masked with a surface
of garden: flowering just above
where his roots clenched, cool
as dark soil and crucial. Groundwater.
Heir to the seeds of belief, grown up
on the same vine his father once planted.
His legacy is gemmed the way pressure
will burst open a stone to its own star.

Bereshit 49:4

ראובן בכרי אתה כחי
וראשית אוני יתר שאת
ויתר עז

**Reuben, you are my
first-born, My might
and first fruit of my
vigor, Exceeding in
rank and exceeding
in honor.**

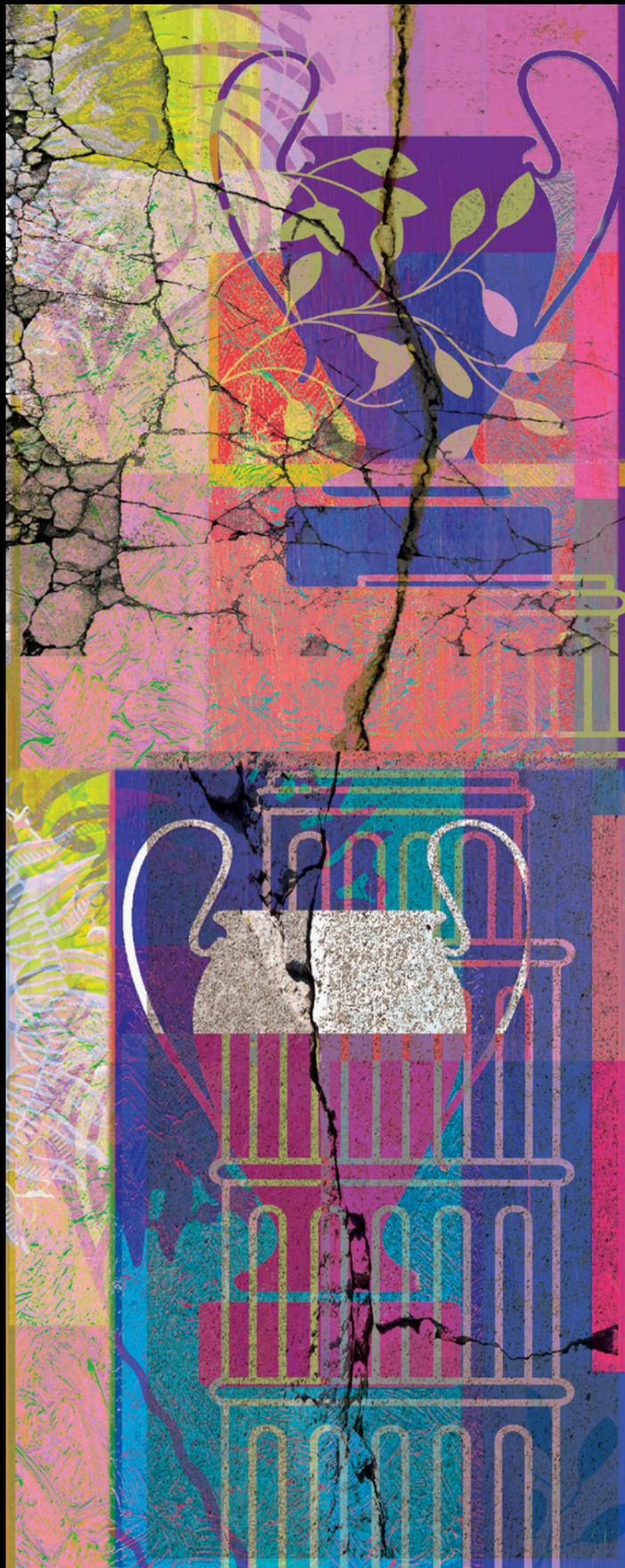
Reuben earned steadfastness and
profound empathy from his father.
The mandrakes, a gift for his
mother, were to lift her from her
sorrow, and for his father, he
would do anything to prevent grief,
first of Yosef, and then of Binyamin.
But life, like turbulent water, did
not steer Reuben to leadership.

—RABBI MAMANE



ראובן Reuben

שמעון Shimon



Shimon's legacy is most valuable for what it teaches us not to do. He had honorable intentions, but even the most noble intentions can only be expressed with patience, planning and empathy. Shimon had the potential, represented by the vessels in the mural, but his zealotry got in the way.

—RABBI MAMANE

Bereshit 49:5

שמעון ולוי אחים כלי
חמס מכרתיהם בסדם
אל־תבא נפשי בקהלם
אל־תחד כבדי כי באפם
הרגו איש וברצנם
עקרו־שור

Simeon and Levi are a pair; Their weapons are tools of wrath. Let not my soul enter their council, Let not my honor join their assembly. For when angry they slay men, And when pleased they maim oxen.

Shimon (466)

Born into brimstone, the second son of the quietest bride made silence roar in answer to that faith for the unbeloved: trust in someone, somewhere, listening. Hearing, though, is no translation for believing. A voice can only cast its citrine like a golden stone, thrown down that well of destiny and darkening with wishing: his fate was made as chinks of light hold the softening edges of great ruins, a devotion for the honey-throated, hoarse with violence voices that make monuments of what gets remembered: so did he break into his blessing. His curse hid like lightning in the sky's peeling ceiling, driving like storms through ancient cities and crackling with resemblance: that split reflection in the armor, palm-hearted with the fractures of the conquerer come home.

Levi (46)

An unbroken omen graced the temple of the third, the son whose gaze was lifted above uprooted ground and shattered road the others left him to his blessing: made endless by continuation, a symbolic order to return him to the prophetic. For his was the heart that holy plate of gold was fitted for, the vessel whose inner waters flecked with sacred meaning: that heritage is guided by what makes heirs of the believing, like light chasing the brightest edges of twelve emblematic stones.

Debarim 33:8

וללוי אמר תמיד
ואוריך לאיש חסידך

**And of Levi he said:
Let Your Thummim
and Urim Be with
Your faithful one.**

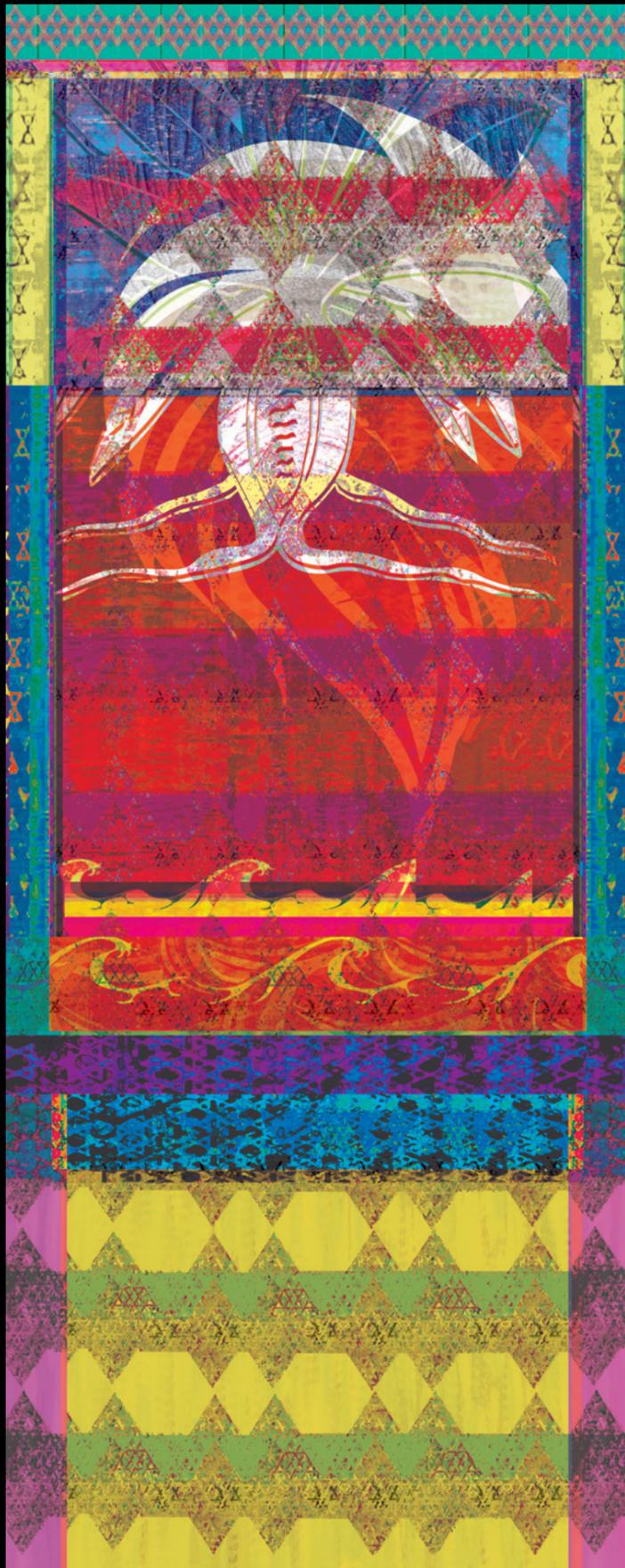
Like Shimon, Levi too was zealous. He, too had noble intentions and a will to fight for justice. But Levi learned that justice is earned, not with force, but with reason and tolerance. For this, Levi was the forefather of Moshe and Aharon. The colors in this mural represent the breastplate, with gems for each of the tribes, which the High priest wore in the Beit Hamikdash. The vessels are meant to convey service to God and to the Jewish nation. This was Levi's role.

—RABBI MAMANE



וי לוי

יהודה Judah



Jerusalem sat in Yehuda's land, and David was his direct descendent. Where Reuben and Shimon fell short, Yehuda triumphed, like a lion. By confronting Yosef and reuniting his brothers, he showed the true qualities of leadership. The mandrake in Yehudah's mural is symbolic of the fertility of his land. The deep red represents his rich wine. Indeed, the Judean Hills produce internationally acclaimed wines to this day.

—RABBI MAMANE

Bereshit 49:10

לא יסור שבט מיהודה
ומחקה מבין רגליו עד
כייבא שילו ולו יקחת
עמים

The reign shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the ruler from his territory. He will settle the capital city and earn the homage of his people.

Judah (30)

The fourth child his mother would bear and try to red the world with, her son was an ending to hunger: teeth bared, the bitten stain of a mouth that knows how to devour. The roar of heaven he made was a praise streaked like gold in the mane of pride that made a lion of his fate. He was fervent as prayer. Dark-eyed as wine and ruler of that streak of desert, so fertile as to seem already drenched in it. Grapeseed dripped from the hems of his robes, soaked the hollows of his footprints, tread with fortune by those who would follow. Present as omniscience is to the believer, he knew faith. He was born with it.

Issachar (530)

Between two burdens, a son is born already with his shoulder to the wheel. Carrying his blessing like a determined child, swaying with coltish legs into the westward shores that would find him starry-eyed, down halls of moonlight into the next generation, that promise made like lifelines in the palm of the hand that holds itself like a compass: he winds the hours of astronomy like an inheritance of numbers, a science of seasons, years, seconds between the straining arms of effort and the doors that open onto pasture, legacy, the future is a reward. His rumour is employed by an ancient logic to shade his children under a sky gone violet, his prophecy like a hot day cooled by the glint of stars to soften the white eye of the desert sun.

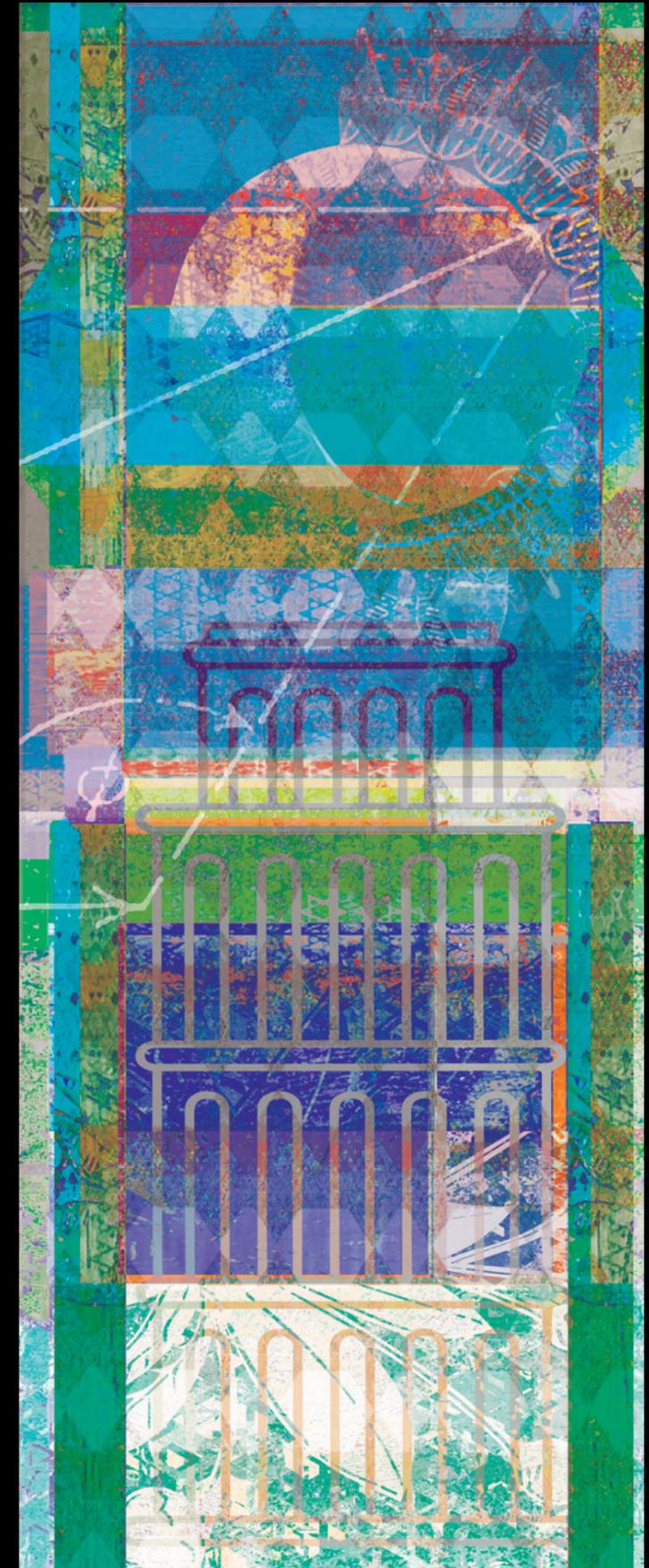
Dibreh Hayamim I 12:33

ומבני יששכר יודעי
בינה לעתים לדעת מה-
יעשה ישראל

**The sons of Issachar,
who knew how to
interpret the signs
of the times, to
determine how Israel
should act.**

Issachar was blessed for building fortified cities, and advancing Israel in the field of astronomy. That is represented by the two converging lines over images of the moon and sun. Additionally, the tribe of Issachar was praised for its Torah scholarship. It forged a partnership with the tribe of Zebulun, whose sailors and international tradesmen could not master the Torah, to carry the torch of spirituality and scholarship on their behalf.

—RABBI MAMANE



יששכר Issachar

זבולון Zebulun



Coastal Zebulun was blessed with immense wealth from seafaring, and international trade with the western Mediterranean and beyond. Zebulun exported the riches of Israel to international markets.

—RABBI MAMANE

Bereshit 49:13

זבולן לחוף ימים ישכן
והוא לחוף אניות
וירכתו על-צידן

**Zebulun shall dwell
by the seashore; He
shall be a haven for
ships, And his flank
shall rest on Sidon.**

Zebulun (95)

Words like wind in the white cheeks
of a sail, a ship turning itself
to face the shores of its prophecy.
A son whose profile cuts its coastline
like a diamond, a future generation
bursts like brilliance from desert coal.
With Jupiter redding the night skies
with fortune, his legacy is clear
to the bottom of the Mediterranean
sands, shelled and waving
with silvers and gold. Count the ways
a man is made, a household opened with prince-
white curtains, smelling of salt and cold water
tasting of the wind behind a generation passing
like uncut gems through hands to polish the hardest stone.

Dan (54)

The seventh son weighed a generation between scales of worship and justice. would mark new perimeters from the desert to the Danube with heels dropped like moons of a horse's hooves, scattered by that serpent's ring of righteousness that lies under the wild bird of judgement arcing over his birthright, like a warm shadow soaring across the blinded eyes of sand.

Bereshit 49:16

דן ידין עמו כאחד
שבטי ישראל יהי דן
נחש עלי דרך שפיפון
עלי ארח

**Dan shall govern his people, As one of the tribes of Israel.
Dan shall be a snake by the road; A serpent by the path.**

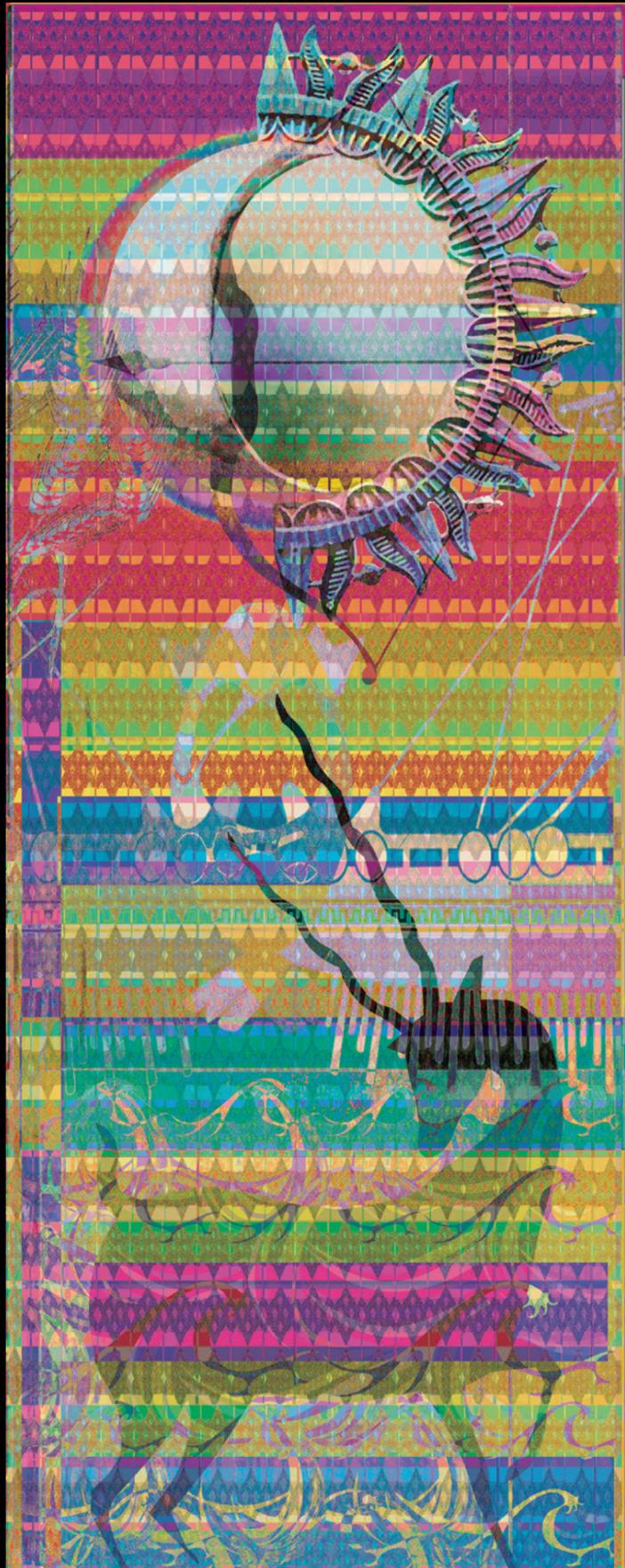
Torah tells us very little about the tribe of Dan, but the imagery of two snakes actually refers to two vital rivers in Dan's territories; the Hermon river in the northernmost point of Israel, and the Yarkon river in Dan's coastal territory in present day Tel Aviv. These were both essential entry points into Israel, and Dan bore the essential responsibility to determine who may enter the promised land. These rivers were equally essential to the economic and agricultural strength of Israel.

—RABBI MAMANE



דן Dan

נפתלי Naphtali



Naphtali had ingenuity to flatten the peaks of mountains and make them fertile fields. Its elevation made it essential for communication between Jerusalem to the Jewish Diaspora via fire signals; good news of a coming holiday, or bad news of impending war. This is why Yaacob called Naphtali the bearer of good news.

—RABBI MAMANE

Bereshit 49:21

נפתלי אילה שלוחה
הנתן אמרי שפר

**Naphtali is a gazelle
let loose; a bearer
of good news.**

Naphtali (570)

A son born with swiftness is blessed with eyes fawned by inspiration, bright-minded as the innocence that lights behind the animal outline of his namesake: that wrestle a prayer makes of the air, sparking with intention. Like shots of violet in the mosaic. His faith chases what bites into the doe to feed its curious, caring heart. He knows fate is what crystallizes, twists the tapestry to see the way the world will weave behind him, like the scholar still reading the myth of dawn to a wide-eyed sky of ancient stars.

Gad (7)

When the last light chases past that amber horizon, see how this son's blessing was scattered: silhouettes of tents, some smoke. Generations of might in numbers. The bow of mothers armed with coriander, the arrows like a bloodline passing hand to hand to place fate in the palm of what a son may become for a father. See the city of his future, the nation in his name.

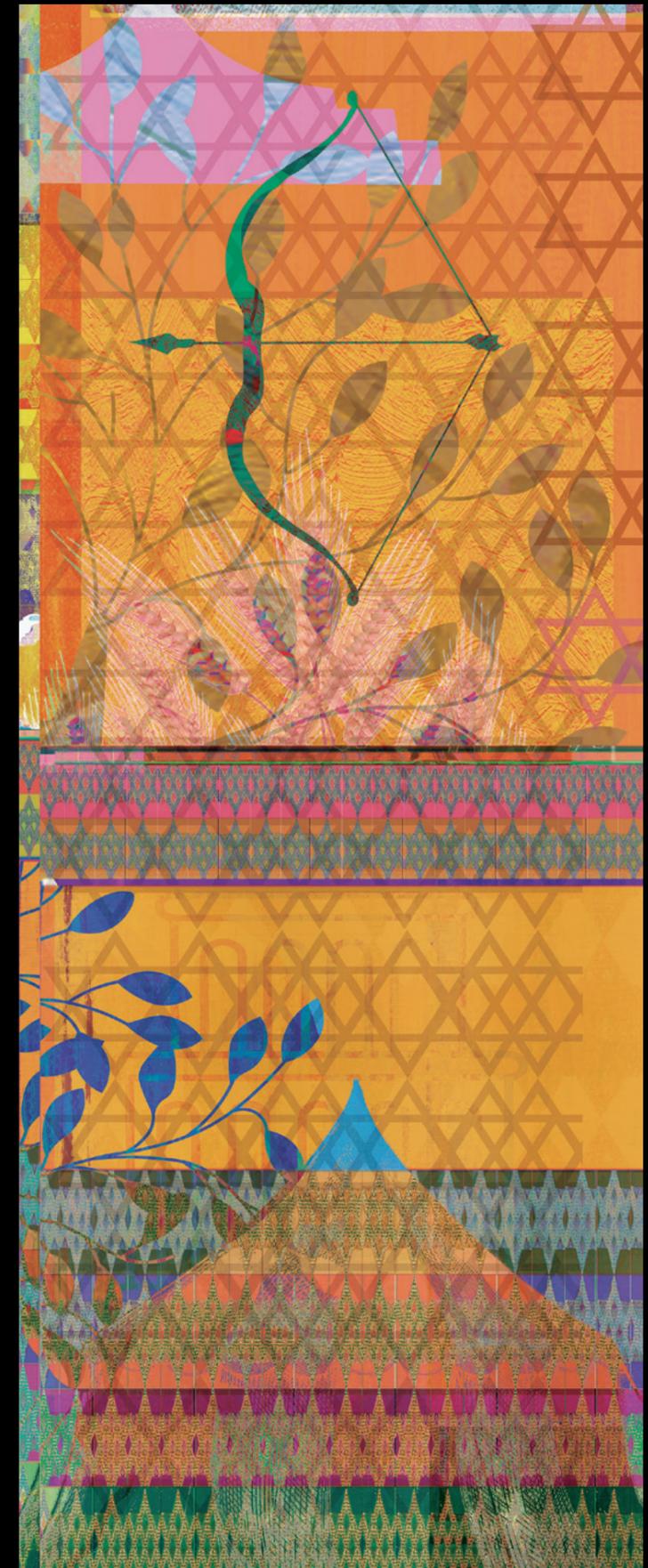
Bereshit 49:19

גַּד גָּדוֹד יִגְדְּנוּ וְהוּא
יִגַּד עַקְבֹּ

**Gad shall be raided
by raiders,
But he shall raid
at their heels.**

The most mysterious of tribes gave birth to the most mysterious of Jewish leaders: Eliyahu Hanabi. Eliyahu, who graces every Brit Milah, every Passover Seder, whose life, leadership and departure from this world remain misunderstood. Like Gad's Prophecy, Eliyahu entered a world in conflict and left it still in conflict, yet his leadership filled Israel with optimism that went on to carry the Jewish People through the remainder of it's history.

—RABBI MAMANE



גַּד
גַּד

אָשֶׁר Asher



Asher, whose territory was in the western Galilee, from modern day Haifa to southern Lebanon, had some of the most fertile and rainy land in Israel. Asher was therefore among the wealthiest of tribes, and prized for the fruit of its land. Most symbolic was the olive oil Asher produced.

—RABBI MAMANE

Bereshit 49:20

מֵאֲשֶׁר שֶׁמֶנֶה לַחֲמוֹ
וְהוּא יִתֵּן מֵעֵדְנֵי־מֶלֶךְ

Asher's bread shall be rich, And he shall yield royal delicacies.

Debarim 33:24

וְלֵאשֶׁר אָמַר בְּרוּךְ
מִבְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה רַצוּי
אֲחִיו וְטָבַל בְּשֶׁמֶן רַגְלוֹ

**And of Asher he said:
Most blessed of sons be Asher; May he be the favorite of his brothers, May he dip his foot in oil.**

Asher (501)

If the wind could carry the memory of when first he heard his blessing, it would whisper at the edges of winged leaves in olive trees, in the oldest language, sighing and swaying with his name as though to taste another word for joy. His favor shone like gold, striking light from lids of oil. The hills bowed their heads of tall grasses, the sun's long arms drew back over the sea at twilight, dappling like those little gasps of air in amber stone. An odor of paradise filled his sleeves, familiar as hope and for generations: that endless well a prayer will follow from an ancient grove.

Joseph (156)

The first dream of the dreamer: his blessing would carry his name into elsewhere, the edgeless promise of any road that leads away from home. So his horizon would gold with more than the apparent: wheat feathering the limits of his vision, his desert cast its orange eye over the endless like a sun turns to another day open, another night that won't remain closed. He drew the symbolic furls that hid like laurel in the pillars of the mind, let the moon turn their shapes silver. What was dark was mere brocade over the face of sleeping omens, its secret revealing itself in the half-moons of half-remembered dreams.

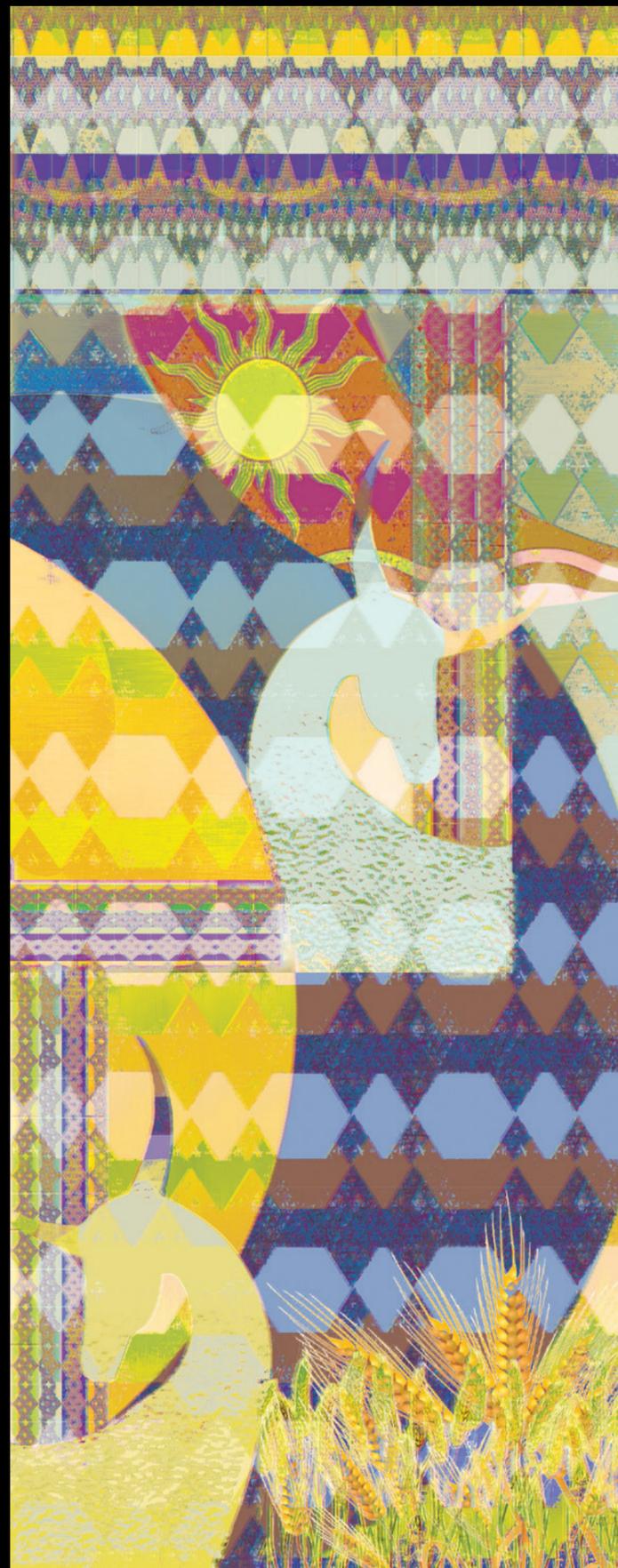
Bereshit 39:2

לבנימן אמר ידיד
יהויהי ה' את יוסף ויהי
איש מצליח ויהי בבית
אדניו המצרי

**Hashem was with
Joseph, and he grew
to be a successful
man in the house of
his Egyptian master.**

Yosef was the dreamer who saved a nation. Yosef's two dreams, of bowing wheat and bowing stars, and Pharaoh's two dreams of famine and prosperity, are all depicted in this mural. Yosef proved that no amount of adversity or abuse can destroy the human spirit, that Hashem's blessings are always within reach, that God guides our intuitions, and directs us to prosperity. Every bottomless pit, jail cell, and broken promise, is just a stop on the road to transforming the world for the better.

—RABBI MAMANE



יוסף יוסף

בנימין Benjamin



Binyamin was the only son of Yaacob born in the land of Israel. He was also the only one born in the context of tragedy - the death of Rahel in childbirth. Unlike his brothers, for most of his childhood, his father was in grief, first of Rahel then of Yosef. The image of a ravenous wolf makes sense when you consider his descendants: king Saul who led significant victories over the Pelishtim, and Mordechai, whose assertiveness led to the triumph in the book of Esther. Bearing witness to Yaacob's tragedy, the tribe of Binyamin sought vigilantly to protect Israel.

—RABBI MAMANE

Debarim 33:12

לבנימן אמר ידיד יהוה
ישכן לבטח עליו חפף
עליו כל-היום ובין
כתיפיו שכן

**To Benjamin he said:
Beloved of God,
He rests securely
beside Him; Ever
does He protect him,
As he rests between
His shoulders.**

Benjamin (152)

Then, the last fate was a moon held in a boy's right hand. Like a crescent, his blessing was curved around the place given over to shadow for sorrow. As the last flame of prophecy, his was cast in the lowlight of jasper: spotted with dark flecks of solitude, courage, a sense of home and a lucky side to right the direction he turned his faith to. Shifting his weight, his legacy would never be lonesome for hero, or forget what it takes to be brave.

