

**Barbara Weiser**

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**A CANADIAN DESIGNER CREATES MANTLES FOR  
THE PROPHET SCROLLS AT HOLY BLOSSOM  
TEMPLE**

In 1990 Rabbi Gunther Plaut of Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto<sup>1</sup> commissioned nine mantles for scrolls which had been donated to the synagogue in honour of Abbey Muter, Maurice Young, and Rita Eisendrath. Rabbi Plaut had a particular interest in collecting Judaica for the congregation.<sup>2</sup> The nine scrolls, written by a scribe in New York in the early nineteenth century, were in need of new mantles. Estelle Latchman of Toronto, the Chair of the Arts and Acquisitions Committee at the Temple at the time, which curates the synagogue's art collection, selected Sue Krivel, a Canadian textile artist, for the commission. Krivel set about creating mantles which would present a Jewish historical memory within the context of modernity. This article will highlight how this particular collection of mantle coverings marks a turning point in the historical development of Jewish ceremonial textile art in Canada, most notably in the areas of iconography, fabrication, choice of colour, the size, and overall coordination of the visual presentation.

Prior to examining the creative expression of Krivel's collection, it is worth noting that mantles for scrolls date back to the first century of the Christian era (Gutman 1970, 87). Jews in premodern times bestowed care on their scrolls by keeping them in cases (a Sephardic tradition) and/or in cloth coverings. The practical use of mantles is a protective one, but there were

also decorative purposes, of which allusion is made in the Talmudic admonition, “have a beautiful scroll of the Law prepared, copied by an able scribe with fine ink, and wrap it in beautiful silk” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 133b; Gutman 1970, 91). The tradition behind the creation of Torah mantles stems from the rabbinic call for *hiddur mitzvah* or beautification, as an integral aspect of a Jew’s pious duties. The intent, however, was to ensure that Torahs and all sacred objects emphasize the element of beauty in holiness and would serve to enrich the simplest of traditional ritual acts. Abraham Joshua Heschel remarked that “we cannot make [God] visible to us, but we can make ourselves visible to him” by performing *mitzvot* in a beautiful way (Kanof 1990, 9). The mantles for Torahs and other scrolls serve as an expression of Jewish ritual art, but that expression in Canada has evolved dramatically since the early 1970s.



The Jews of the Middle Ages understood the decorative elements of the Torah within the context of Jewish art in general, as well as that of the world surrounding them. In this

way they vouchsafed to worshipers both religious edification and esthetic satisfaction (Gutman 1970, 105). The enhancement and symbolism of ritual objects by artists and craftsmen through the ages has produced a truly significant heritage of Jewish ceremonial art both in Europe and North America. The collections of ritual art in Canadian synagogues has reflected many European artistic influences and until the last three decades where there has been an abundance of interest on the part of patrons to include modern interpretations of Jewish thematic subject matter. More recently, textile artists are involving the patron's sentiments within the context of visual images stemming from a biblical narrative which has significance to them. This trend represents a departure from the common practice of purchasing Torah mantles commercially produced in New York, which many synagogues still possess. In addition, there is an increase in individual expression on the part of Canadian textile artists who create the mantles, deviating somewhat from the classical approach to decorating Torah mantles.

A review of seventeen Canadian congregations, for this study, revealed that Canadian congregations gained an interest in commissioning mantles from Canadian textile artists dating from the early 1970s. Vancouver textile artist Leni Freed, was the first to receive a commission for new mantles.<sup>3</sup> It was not until 1992, however, that we see a second major stylistic shift with Krivel's work in this commission. Most synagogue collections in Canada prior to 1992 included mantles which were made of light-weight velvet, or recycled upholstery and curtain fabrics which had been manufactured much in the style of the European tradition. The colours of the mantles tended to be in hues of dark burgundy and purple, as well as blue and gold. The visual references tended to include, for the most part, those from the European tradition dating from the 18th century which included references to the Lion of Judah and the Decalogue. Many Canadian synagogues still have this type of mantle in their collections and are readily available for purchase in the American marketplace.

Ritual artists across the country now no longer appear to be interested in traditional religious imagery and symbolism, having seemingly moved away from the classic images of the Middle Ages. (Apostolos-Cappadona 1998, 180) The traditional embroidered embellishments on mantles relating to the classic motifs of the Decalogue or the Lion of Judah as the central focus have all but disappeared. Biblical quotations are still used but the patrons name and life cycle event being commemorated are not included in the design. Contemporary artists prefer metallic threads, fabrics with no motifs, and have shied away from the use of brocade and velvet. They are comfortable using the technique of machine appliqué and, as a group, appear to have relegated dedicatory inscriptions to the inside linings of the mantles. The particular collection of dresses examined in this article stands apart from many of the dresses in Canadian synagogues because it consists of a unified visual presentation where, generally, individual dresses of different thematic descriptions and colours have been placed in synagogue arks. This collection also represents a revolutionary approach in decorating Torah mantles in Canada, as the artist has elected to break away from the classical choices in iconography, fabrication, and colour. As well, the collection covers scrolls for books which are usually not read from scrolls in synagogue, offering a unique collection of art work within the context of ritual art in Canada.

The scrolls in question have their own space in the in the lobby of the Temple on Ava Avenue, behind a glass window surrounded by a plain wooden case. The images on the dresses are meant to evoke ancient Israel, but the artist's use of materials and choice of colours brings the viewer in touch with a postmodern spiritual experience. Krivel's innovation at Holy Blossom broadened the creative concepts of Freed through her choice of lighter-weight silk fabrics, her exploration of using non-representational images, and her experimenting with tones of grey. Since these mantles are for display purposes only, the choice of silk enhances the overall visual impact due to its surface qualities, and removes the possibility of quick deterior-

ration were they to be used on a daily basis. In addition, the use of appliqué on duppioni silk offers a dramatic contrast between the representational elements. This collection of mantles is the first of its kind in Canada to deal with the thematic subject of the prophetic periods, the use of a post modern non-representational style and the concept of one coordinated visual presentation. The work appears to recall biblical history and relates its relevance within the context of modern times. Each scroll contains the writings of the biblical book whose name has been embroidered on the mantle covering it.

The subject which Krivel has chosen for her presentation recalls the stories of the time of the Prophets, and highlights the changing relationship the Jews had with God during the different prophetic periods. Krivel selected biblical quotations as a source of inspiration, and offered abstract images to reflect her interpretations within the guidelines of the Second Commandment which prohibits graven images. The placement of the mantles is in chronological order from left to right. It was deemed appropriate to place them in this way considering the comfort, in western culture, of viewing objects from left to right. Starting from left to right, one finds Joshua/*Yehoshuah*, Judges/*Shoftim*, Samuel/*Shmuel*, Kings/*Melachim*, Isaiah/*Yishaya*, Jeremiah/*Yirmiahu*, and Ezekiel/*Yehezkel*. The *Megillot* scrolls, Ruth/*Rut*, Song of Songs/*Shir ha-Shirim*, and Ecclesiastes/*Kohelet* are designed to stand to the right of the prophets. The mantle on the extreme right covers the scroll containing the writings of the twelve prophets or *Trai Asar*. The artist was never consulted about the exterior display after the initial discussions, which considered putting a banner over the entire presentation intended suggesting a finished look and adding to the ascetic of the presentation. This was never implemented. The visual concept is intended to convey the impact of the prophetic period in antiquity and relate its lessons for contemporary times.

The monochromatic colour scheme and, the preponderance of grey and black emphasize the message of the prophets. There were many gloomy periods in antiquity related to issue of

the Jews' acceptance of their religious obligations or their lack of observance. The repeated visual theme speaks to the consequences of transgression, the rejection of the Law, and the inevitability of punishment and doom. At the same time, the artist has chosen shades of steel grey and an absence of soft curved lines, preferring the presence of multiple angular shapes, presenting the ascetic of post-modern times reminiscent of industrial architecture. The colour selection of shades of grey is a dramatic break from classic torah mantles which, for the most part, have tended to be royal blue or deep purple. Each mantle has one element of colour added to it, representing the prophets' hope for the redemption of the Jewish people, and their insistence that Jews return to Torah. To complete the coordinated look of the mantles, the artist has lined each dress with the same colour that is featured on the front of the mantle which was another innovation for the time.

Throughout the books of the Prophets, *Nevi'im*, one can trace the development of communal and personal faith. A history of a nation on its land which the Israelites attempt to conquer and settle, the experiences of the prophets who witnessed the exile and subsequently taught a renewed monotheism to a chastened Israel emerges from the writings of the prophets. The imagery on each mantle is based on the historical and spiritual content of the scroll it covers, and is an interpretation of selected quotes from the texts.

The mantle for the first book of the Prophets, *Yehoshua* (Joshua), interprets the verse, "behold, this stone will be a witness" (Joshua 24:27). It depicts the Jews flight from Egyptian bondage, the renewal of the Sinai covenant, the conquest of Canaan, the developing sense of unity between the tribes, and the subsequent division of the land. These themes are recalled by the upward, linear movement on the mantle depicting the Jews leaving *Mitzrayim*, and the tribes who had a sense of coming together. The Decalogue is peeking out of the lower portion of the mantle, signifying its presence and the Jews' movement away from Paganism. The tribes, represented by

groups of linear bead formations, emerge as unified entities traveling over the immense desert which in turn is depicted by a horizontal textured appliqué. *Yehoshua* is inscribed in a vertical curve and appears to be floating on a rainbow towards the upper part of the mantle, suggestive of the Jews becoming spiritually closer to the heavenly elements.

The mantle of *Shoftim*, or Judges, details Jewish history dating from Joshua to the era of the first kings. There was no permanent leadership following the death of Joshua but heroic individuals would, when necessary, assume leadership during discordant times, and deliver the people from their enemies. The verse featured is, "In those days there was no king in Israel" (Judges 17:6). Judges represent a period of discord and confusion, and this mantle picks up on the theme of discordance between the Jews and God by the apparently aimless, floating elements appliquéd onto the mantle. The Decalogue, representing God's law, is not present, having been replaced by a large space between the images depicting heaven and earth, where the word "*Shoftim*" has been placed. The tribes are not represented, indicative of the discordance which existed among the people of Israel.

*Shmuel*, or Samuel, stepped forward to heed the call of God: "Here I am ... *hineni* ... speak, your servant is listening" (Samuel 3: 4-10). There is a maturation and consolidation of communal faith and nationhood in Samuel that continues through to the Book of Kings. *Shmuel* represents the emergence of a Jewish spiritual nature. This mantle indicates the presence of the Decalogue, and includes the presence of the tribes which have been grouped together by small columns of beads placed on the textured cloth suggestive of the desert. *Shmuel* has been stitched on the side of the mantle allowing the elements to work their way towards coming together. It is as if he is standing on the side offering support but not interference, representing a leader who is not in the centre of things, but one who is watching the Jewish people from the sidelines.

*Melachim*, or Kings, was the period when Solomon ruled over Israel, and brought a time peace and prosperity, as

well as the First Temple. However, after King Solomon's death, Israel splits into two separate kingdoms, Judah and Israel. As a result, during this period, Israel was ruled by many dynasties coming from different tribes, and we see the ultimate destruction of the temple. The artist has placed the tribes together in the lower part of the mantle, against a backdrop of the mountains of Israel, leading towards Jerusalem, and towards the ramparts which surrounded the city. The word *Melachim* is placed in the middle of the mantle above the city, suggesting that there was a void between the Jewish people and God which was filled by the leadership of the Kings.

The prophet *Yeshayah*, or Isaiah, warned of the destruction of the Temple. As well, the Jews were comforted by him while in exile, and prepared for their imminent return to Israel in the hope of restoring their special relationship with God. Isaiah spoke of a messianic age when a peaceful world would come to be "and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares ... neither shall they learn war any more ..." (Isaiah 2:4). The mantle shows a power or force pushing through the earth, surging towards the heavens. All the elements are aligned and a modern depiction of the Star of David reveals itself from behind the force which connects the celestial with the earthly forces. Krivel creates a vertical link between the Jews and God, suggesting that the events of the generation of the prophets are as relevant today as in ancient times. The use of the symbolic Star of David<sup>4</sup> is a reminder of the star worn by Jews all over Europe during the Second World War, when issues of faith were questioned by many survivors. It is noteworthy that the star is only partially revealed suggesting that not all Jews were believers in a spiritual force, which is true in postmodern times as well. The definitive vertical movement towards the celestial appears to be volcanic in nature, with the name of Isaiah being placed squarely in the centre of the force.

*Yirmiyahu*, or Jeremiah, warned of the Temple's destruction, which came about in his lifetime. He comforted the Jewish people in exile and counseled them about their behavior, prepar-

ing them for their imminent return to Israel. "I will make a new covenant ... I shall write it upon their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:32). During this period, there was to be a restoration of faith on the part of the Jewish people and a new covenant, which was to be written, not in stone, but 'with fire' upon the hearts of man. The abstract letter *shin* and the placement of the tablets, as well as the depiction of God's power radiating from the *shin*, represented the new covenant for the Jewish people. The Hebrew letter *shin* covers the Decalogue peering out from behind, and emanates its luminescent rays of light towards the earth, connecting the celestial and earthly realms with God's influence. This mantle stands in the middle of the collection presenting a powerful visual image of the presence of God as the centre of the entire narrative. The prophet's name is placed on the side of the mantle out of direct line with God's emanating rays of light, but is aligned with the outer ray to show that Jeremiah was present and a party to the Jewish people's acceptance of the covenant.

*Yechezkel*, or Ezekiel, lived during the time of the destruction of the First Temple and was exiled together with the Jewish people to Babylon. He also warned them of the imminent destruction of the Temple and gave them hope with his prophecies of the return to Zion and the messianic age: "and I will bring you back to your own land" (Ezekiel 36:24). At the bottom of the mantle, the Judean Hills appear and the forces emanating from them are vertically aligned. The tribes are at the top of the mantle standing together near the celestial realm, having renewed their covenant with God. Krivel has added a barbed wire fence reminiscent of the fences of the concentration camps (interview with Krivel). Modern Jews were faced with having to reaffirm their faith in God in light of the events of the Holocaust, as did the Jews during the time of the prophets, though in different circumstances and for different theological reasons. The artist illustrates that faith for Jews throughout the ages has been reassessed and renewed by the placement of one small green leaf on the left side of the mantle symbolizing the

return, rebuilding, renewal, and growth of the Jewish people – green representing hope, rebirth, and the greening of the land of Israel (interview with Krivel).

*Trai Asar*, the Twelve Prophets, contains the words of the minor prophets, spanning 350 years, from the middle of the period of the First Temple to the early years of the Second Temple. “From Zion shall go forth the Torah and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Micah 4:2). The artist affirms the relevance of the covenant with God by presenting five images of the Decalogue, each one larger than the next. *Trai Asar* is stitched in a lyrical fashion near the celestial elements, suggesting that everything is in balance. The five images of the Decalogue represent the five books of Moses, which comprise the Torah.

The mantle on the extreme right contains the Hebrew names of *Rut*, *Kohelet* and *Shir Hashirim*, which cover the scroll holding these texts. The images include an apple, reminiscent of the orchard in *Shir Hashirim* (Song of Songs), tall sheaves of wheat which Ruth gathered and as well as a moving pendulum in *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes), a sweeping image representing the passage of time “for every thing there is a season” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). This book discusses the meaning of life and the artist’s interpretation shows images with a sense of movement smoothly almost in a circular fashion, as in the circle of life pushing the Jewish people forward in time (Jacobs).

One of the most profound aspects of the artist’s interpretation of the era of the prophets is the placement of the Decalogue within each period, intended to reflect the Jewish people’s commitment to God’s covenant. Krivel has placed the image in different positions to reflect the state of the Jewish people within each prophetic period. There are tablets which are discretely hidden among the natural elements of the earth and sky, and others which appear in light and dark shadows. Another artistic innovation for mantles is her use of movement which flows between each border, as well as upwards towards God, the very source of inspiration for this body of writings. The entire

mantle is the artist's canvas. Discernable images are minimal, representing only those which come from nature: trees, clouds, mountains, and the force of light. The artist uses embossed silver thread to dramatize the points of contact between the earth and sky, which brightens up an otherwise somber colour pallet. The red bolt of colour representing the burning bush on Sinai provides a focus on which to contemplate the provocative events in ancient Israel, and makes God's presence ever more apparent. The symbols and motifs comply with the concern of the Second Commandment against using graven images, all the while evoking a sense of reverence for the Jewish past.

The choice of fabric for this presentation is most unusual. There is a combination of raw silk, synthetic fabrics, and metallic threads, where generally polyester-cotton and velvet fabrications are used for mantles. The selection of fabrics is delicate and the appliqué has not been stuffed or embellished as they were in classical mantles. The choice of monochromatic colours is stunning and sets the grouping apart from all other mantles in Canada at the time, which were usually bright deep hues or white when used for the High Holidays.

As a coordinated group, the individual dresses are superbly handcrafted. The attention to stitching detail both by machine and hand is accurate, so that no stitch has been wasted, the sign of a skilled craftsman. The choice of threads offsets the fabric to create boundaries between visual spaces, forming part of the narrative. This group of dresses stands out as an exceptional representation of what is being commissioned for Canadian synagogues. The fact that we see these dresses on display in a case does detract from their beauty, since mantles are meant to be held and carried as part of the ritual, as well as to provide a source of reflection. Placing them behind a glass removes their immediacy and serves to lessen their artistic appreciation.

Krivel has retained the use of simple lines, uncomplicated design, and a tone-on-tone colour palette for the entire collection. The overall colour impression of the grouping represents two levels of consciousness. At first, it appears that the

shapes and colours are very modern, geometric, free in form, and almost impressionistic, representing the here and now. Yet the stories are ancient, taking the viewer back in time to the origins of man when there was light and dark and the earth was being formed, and everything was in a primary state. There is a simplicity and honesty in the colours and forms, which bring to mind the purpose for which the covers are used. We are reminded of an ancient Jewish heritage standing before these mantles. Kandinsky's discussion of the language of form and colour suggests that black is a colour of the least harmony. It is motionless, representing a profound pause, yet offers a neutral background against which the minutest shades of other colours stand out clearly. White symbolizes spotless purity, and a combination of the two inactive colours is restful, offering a source of reflection when performing Jewish ritual acts around the Torah (Kandinsky 1977, 39). Yet the shades of whites blacks and grays creates a harmonious visual impact and holds the collection together.

The diverse prophetic leaders represent different Biblical times. Their experiences encompassed periods of chaos and calm; dark periods in the history of the Jews as well as stable ones. There are also periods of coming together as a people which are represented by the grays, and punches of colour signifying hope. Sue Krivel tells these stories through her choice of images and colours on each mantle. Her workmanship is stellar and is a fine example of an ancient tradition in modern times. Her presentation will continue to captivate those in the community at Temple Holy Blossom who seek a common identity with their Jewish ancestors, and who are fascinated by the artistic evocation of religious life in modern times. Jewish ritual art is the art of the soul and Krivel has accomplished the task of teaching, inspiring, and weaving the stories of the prophets, while reflecting modern dilemmas intended to touch our souls (Wiener, 260).

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Textile Artist Sue Krivel born in Regina in 1944 currently resides in Toronto.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Gunther Plaut is a prolific writer, orator and Judaic scholar. He occupied pulpits in Chicago and St. Paul before coming to Toronto to serve as senior rabbi of Holy Blossom Temple from 1961 to 1977. He now serves the Temple as Senior Scholar. His contribution to the community, and commitment to international human rights, prompted Holy Blossom Temple in 1997, to establish a Humanitarian Award in his name. He was awarded the title, Companion of the Order of Canada, in 1999 for his service to the country.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Plaut was instrumental in establishing the Temple's Arts and Acquisitions Committee which consisted of art historians and members of the congregation who had a wide exposure to Canadian artists and art history. This committee was established in an effort to set a standard of workmanship and creativity which would be deemed acceptable for the synagogue collection. The other purpose of this committee was to evaluate donations that members of the congregation offered. This committee is still mounting exhibitions in an effort to support local Jewish ceremonial artists. To date, research has indicated that this committee is the only one of its kind in Canada.

<sup>3</sup> Leni Freed was commissioned by Rabbi Solomon of Congregation Beth Israel in 1972 to replace their collection of worn mantles. She chose to appliqué the symbols of the Jewish holidays on colourful cotton fabrics and

simplified the overall design by removing donors' names and the occasion of the dedication from the front of the mantle. Her collection was well received by the congregation and was a departure from her portfolio of Christian vestments.

<sup>4</sup> The Star of David was a product of the Middle Ages and not a symbol of the Biblical period (Jacobs).