

Visual Prayer Posters: Bringing Jewish Art Into Our Homes

by: **Michele Machles** on January 4th, 2012 | [2 Comments](#) »



Courtesy of Michele Machles

As a supplementary Hebrew School teacher, I had only seen my students on an average of about four and a half hours a week. Most of the students are together in the classroom on Sunday mornings, one afternoon a week after school, or when they attended the synagogue Shabbat service or holiday gathering during the year. (Realize that this is the maximum school time allotted, and many of my students often had to leave early to participate in sports or theatre programs.)

During our allotted time together, Supplementary Hebrew School teachers are expected to teach 5000 years of history, life cycles, the holidays, instill values, and help to shape their relationship with God – all the while being sure that when our students leave the synagogue and return home, we have implanted a strong connection with our community. Because of this limited amount of time devoted to synagogue study, many congregations are also finding ways to address this by creating family education programs. My way of bringing a bit more Jewish culture into our Jewish home was the creation of Visual Prayer Posters.



Courtesy of Michele Machles

Visual Prayer Artwork is the students' visual interpretation of a traditional Jewish prayer from the siddur. Each poster is an expression of what the student thought to be most important and wanted to be reminded about daily in their home. I can trace my ideas for Visual Prayer Posters to a workshop that I had taken with Jo Milgrom, author of *Handmade Midrash*. Right before Milgrom's book was published in 1999, my mother and I attended her workshop at the Gershan YM/YHA in Philadelphia.

In this class, Jo Milgrom introduced text from Genesis to explore its meaning. Then she had us visually interpret the text. We used ripped paper so as not to inhibit our ability to express ourselves if we were lacking in rendering ability. We also did this to free ourselves up so that we could think more abstractly to explain some feelings of spirituality or metaphysical experiences we had experienced that couldn't be expressed in words. The seeds from her teachings took root that day and remained with me. Jo explains about the experience of visually engaging with the text in *Handmade Midrash*: "This book is about making a deep, living connection between the narratives of the Bible and the most important aspects of our personal experience. This guide includes innovative workshop experiences which assume no skill or training in art on the part of the participants."



Courtesy of Michele Machles

When I needed to find a way to reach my students and connect them to Jewish Prayer, I thought about what I had learned from Jo's class. My goals were the same in that we were to examine and express our personal experience and interpretation of traditional text, and I wanted my students to be uninhibited in expressing themselves. To address this challenge, I introduced simple Jewish symbols and easily rendered icons from nature. I also wanted to get students in touch with experiencing God in nature. The painting/drawing classroom time together allows for personal conversation time among the students at Hebrew School. They are grateful for it.



Courtesy of Michele Machles

In order for the students to be able to draw their own meaning from the prayers found in the siddur used in our daily services, they first had to learn about them. For this I used Jeffrey Salkin's [*Putting God On The Guest List: How To Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning Of Your Child's*](#)

[Bar or Bat Mitzvah](#). Salkin's section on the prayer service, includes meditations and stories to enhance the children's ability to understand and find meaning in our siddur prayers. We began class by studying this text together. Again, because of the time factor, I broke the children into cooperative learning groups of three to five and had them select a prayer most meaningful and then present to the class.

Once traditional prayer meanings were firmly grasped and personal interpretations made, we began our visual expressions. As a class we reviewed simple visual representations of traditional Jewish symbols and forms from nature so that the students could easily create these renderings in their prayer interpretations. Next, each child created four thumbnail sketches sampling layout and design while exploring their ideas for expressing their chosen prayer. I acted as their art director, helping them to make selections for best representation.

When the pieces were finished, they were shown at The Abramson Center for Jewish Life, a facility that assists with the care of our elderly and also with the Chabad Art Gallery in Philadelphia. The pieces, which can be viewed at [this link](#), serve as a holy reminder of something sacred we wanted to include in our lives everyday.



2 Responses to “Visual Prayer Posters: Bringing Jewish Art Into Our Homes”

1. **nikihanna**

January 9, 2012 at 10:19 am

This is so wonderful! We do a lot of work among ourselves with discussion and words but I love the deepening of using another medium. I can really see using this with adults too.

Toda Rabbah!

2. **Michele Machles**

January 16, 2012 at 8:19 am

Thank you, glad to share. I used to teach a beginners class on Hebrew prayer that had both children and adults. You are correct, this would work well for any age student. This is a beautiful way to bridge the gap whenever you find yourself in a situation where there is a diverse class grouping of various ages and abilities.

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