

# CAPTURING HOLINESS: PHOTOGRAPHY AND TORAH TEXT



Photography of Stewart Cherlin

Temple Shalom of Chicago

Mendelson Gallery Exhibit

October 29-December 17, 2010

**Capturing Holiness** is dedicated to my wife and life partner, Marilyn. Thank you for your love all these years.

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## Capturing Holiness: A Story

*Mishnah Ta'anit tells of Honi the Circle-maker who was renowned for his ability for having his prayers answered.*

*On one occasion when God did not send rain, Honi drew a circle in the dust, stood inside it, and informed God that he would not move until it rained.*

*When it began to drizzle, Honi told God that he was not satisfied and expected more rain; it became a strong downpour.*

*Honi was still not satisfied. He requested a calm rain.*

*The rain calmed to a steady gentle rain.*

***Capturing Holiness** juxtapositions Torah text with natural images such as landscapes and commonplace objects. Inner and outer worlds converge.*

*The exhibited photographs express my personal insights into the meaning of Torah text through visual commentary.*

*Each image explores borders and boundaries in the combined realm of photographic imagery and sacred text.*

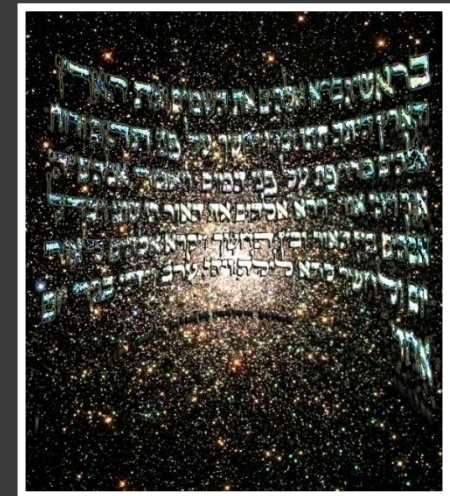
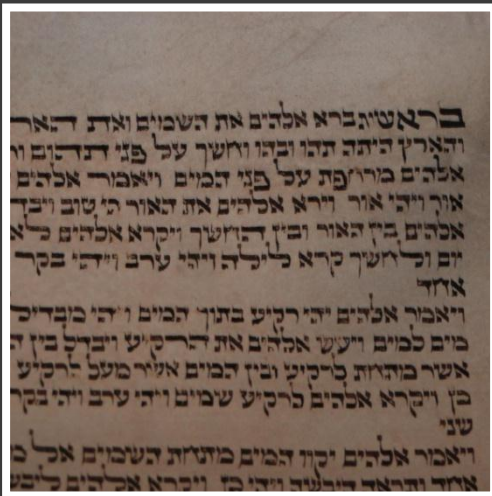
*The spirit of the work honors the prohibition against creating graven images by exploring the natural world and calling upon Torah text to illuminate it, to encircle its boundaries.*

*Like Honi the Circle-maker, one asks God for rain and prays for understanding.*



**Capturing Holiness** is based on Torah text. The thematic material consists of verses of Torah combined with photographic images mostly taken within the past five years although some pieces incorporate photos, drawings, painting, and objects captured over the past 35 years.



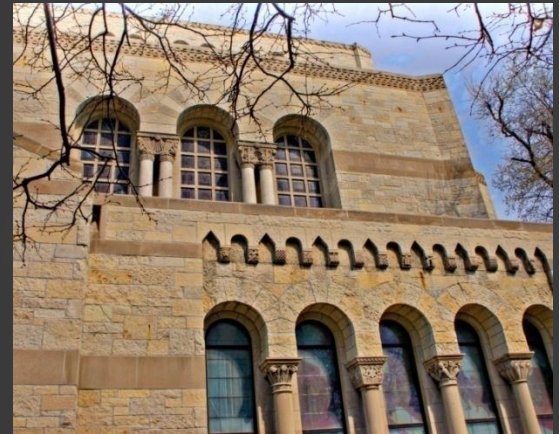


## TRANSFORMATION OF TEXT AND IMAGE

Text and photos are layered together to create a visual commentary, a personal vision and interpretation of Torah.





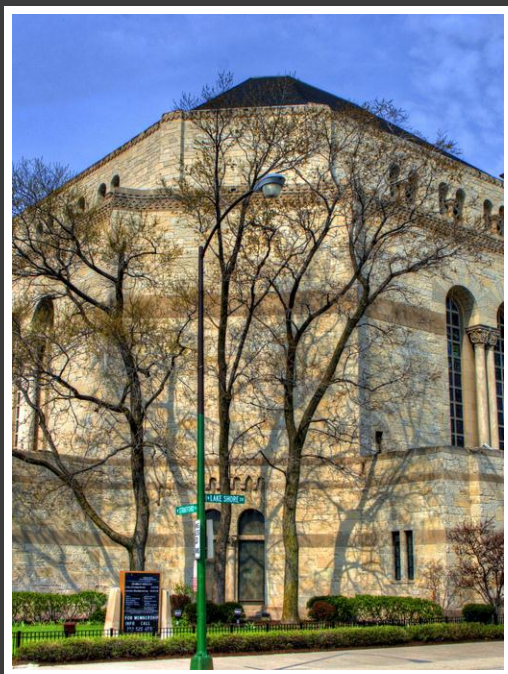


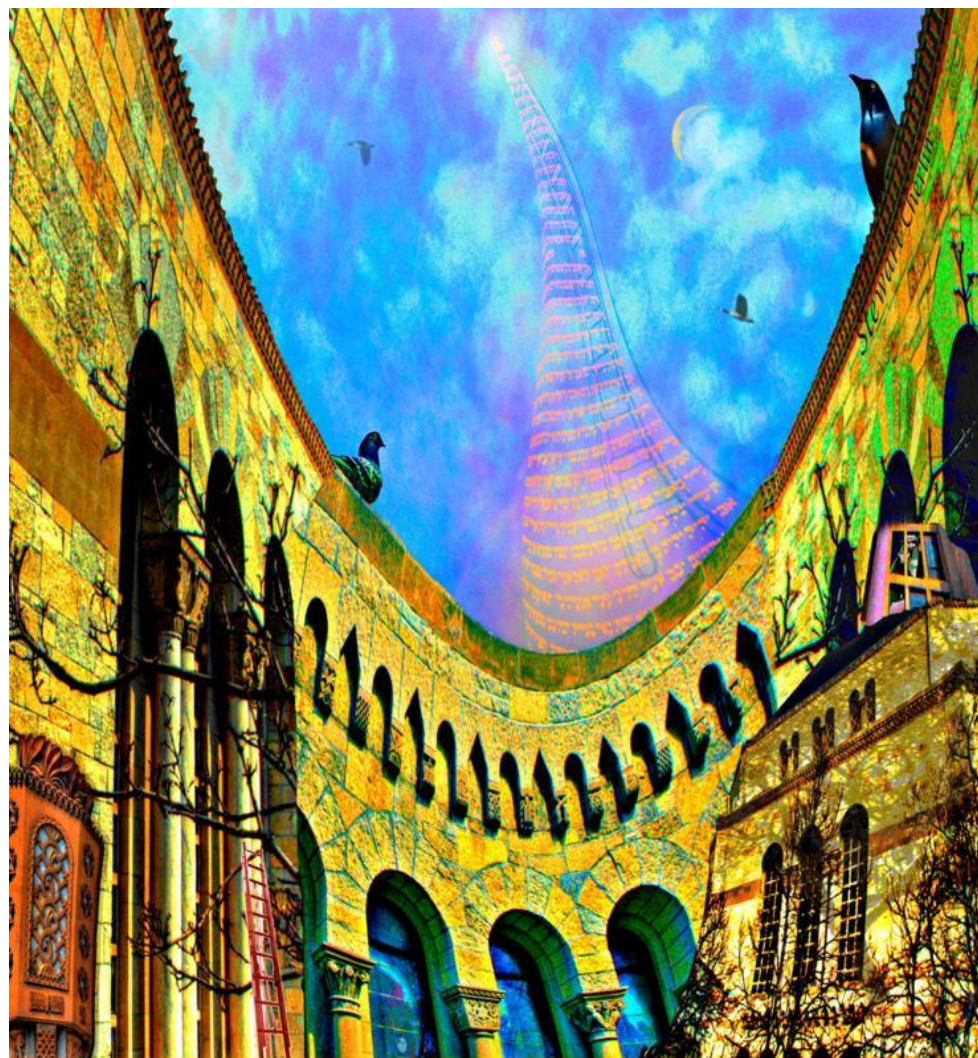
## How the photos are created

High definition photographs are taken, digitally processed and combined using imaging software.









29 October - 17 December 2010

Temple Sholom, Chicago

Stewart Cherlin

Capturing Holiness:  
Photography and Torah Text

Multiple layers are transformed to create a unified composition. Images are layered, reshaped, joined and spliced.

The poster illustrated here was created especially for the exhibit. It consists of 50 plus layers and objects mostly from the temple.

The Torah text ascending to the heavens is the passage Jacob's Ladder from parashat Vayetzei.





## Creative Development

Often the photographs are variations upon a theme.







As a composition progresses whimsical elements are introduced such as an unexpected peacock or a tallis covering a river bank.

Song of the Sea with Peacock





Song at the Sea

## Reoccurring Themes

The same text from Beshalach is re-cast inside a turbulent sea.

Birds are scattered in all directions as the waves tumble and turn.

Color bursts forward with the agitated waves.





Ma-Tovu

Tallit, a symbol of prayer appear in settings of Kedoshim and Ma-Tovu. The text and prayer shawl are expressive elements in the composition.



Kedoshim





Balak

In the story of Balak the words become an engraved bas relief similar to a cuneiform tablet.

Balak depicted as a Sumerian idol tries to mute the voice of the talking animal by grasping its mouth.



Akedah, the Binding of Isaac

In the Akedah, The Binding of Isaac the text becomes a wall or barrier in a dark landscape.

A vulture descends; symbolic of an angel.

The clouds and dark spaces represent a dream state.





In Lech l'cha the text is an unrolled scroll marking the journey of Abram.

The scroll serves as a passageway.

Birds add a element of movement or migration.

Lech l'cha



The Burning Bush

In the Burning Bush text fills a vibrant blue sky.

The bush is illuminated by lightning (fire) yet is not consumed.

The high contrast adds a sense of holiness to the moment.

The blazing light originating in the clouds and sky illuminates and transforms the text.





In Kol D'varim a white flame from a havdalah candle soars skyward into blazing clouds.

Birds, a frequent visitor to the photographs, ascend to the heavens. They are transformed by the fire.

Kol D'varim





Rebbes lost in thought

Irony and humor are also an important element in the photographs.

Here rebbes are lost in thought as they wander the foothills of Tibet, a yak looks at us in wonderment and dismay.

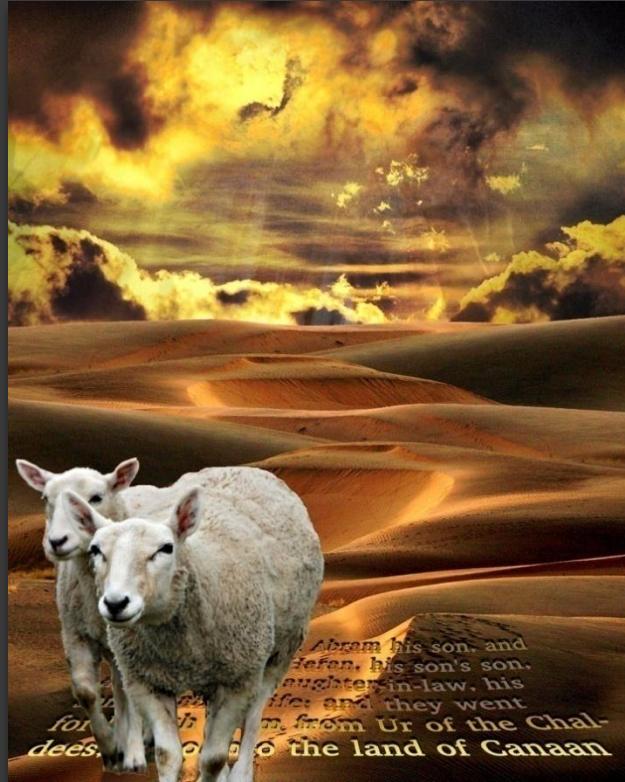


le miroir du destin - hommage a M. Chagall

Some of the photos introduce personal artistic influences such as the image of a rabbi from a Marc Chagall painting against a Paris backdrop.

A woman sweeps the street onto the same photo as a comet descends from the night sky.





The Journey of Abram and Terah

In the Journey of Abram and Terah text rests on the ground and becomes part of the journey like a carpet or roadmap. The sheep walk outside the boundary of the photo towards us.



Jacob's Dream

At times the photos implicitly invoke the underline text such as in Jacob's Dream. The landscape reflects the serenity experienced by Jacob upon realizing the holiness of place, as the text reads, "Jacob awoke from his sleep, and he said: 'God was in this place; and I did not know.'" Bereishit 28:16





Ma-tovu Torah text



Ma-tovu

In another setting of Ma-tovu a heron and transparent blue pigeons occupy a marshland landscape between the pages of parchment.

The seam, the blank space between the text, becomes alive as the images accompany the words.



Jacob, Esau and Isaac

Jacob, Esau, and Isaac from Toledot is a story of family reconciliation.

The image depicts Torah text reflected in a wine goblet. The opposite matching sides represent the brothers coming together for the last time.

The Hebrew language reflects unity of dual objects in words for face (panayim) or heavens (shamayim).





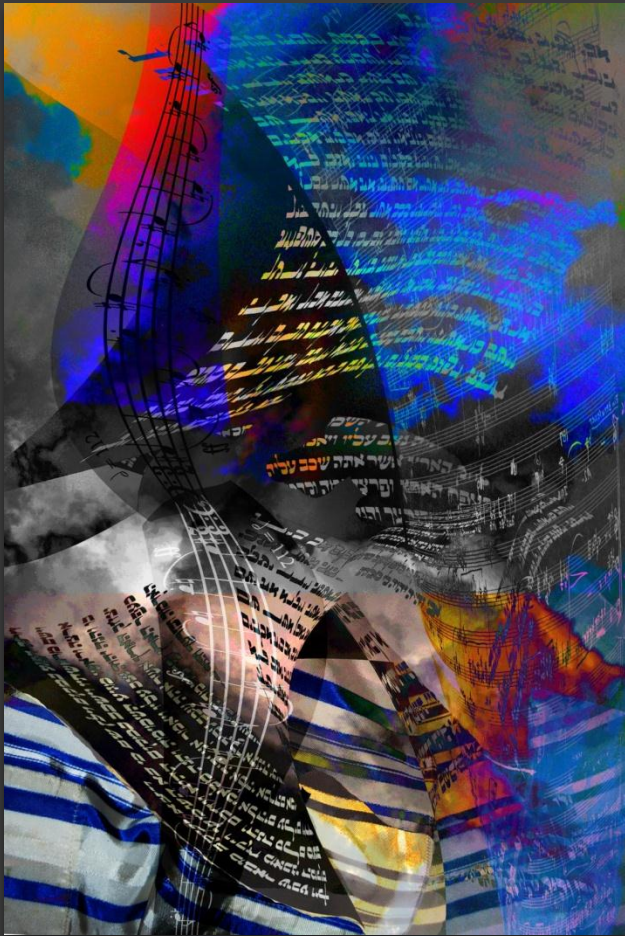
Joseph's Dream, Shabbos Goats

Joseph's Dream, Shabbos Goats explores the realm and of fantasy and dreams.

Goats descend the side of a building as if on a staircase or escalator. The goats are symbolic of the seven years of abundance that are followed by seven years of famine in Joseph's dream.

The tallis in the upper corners of the image sway in the cool night breeze towards the heavens.

The objects on the table represent Shabbos including candles, a tallis bag, a prayer book, and folded glasses. A time to be thankful to God, a time to rest.



Jakobsleiter



Moses und Aron

Music is also a central component reflected in many of the photographs. The two examples here are based on works by the composer Arnold Schoenberg. Pages of his music manuscripts are part of the graphic composition.



To recap, *Capturing Holiness* juxtapositions Torah text with natural images such as landscapes and commonplace objects. Inner and outer worlds converge.

Objects such as trees, birds, tallit, and text are symbolic components of the overall work.

The exhibited photographs express my personal insights into the meaning of Torah text through visual commentary.

Each image explores borders and boundaries in the combined realm of photographic imagery and sacred text.

The spirit of the work honors the prohibition against creating graven images by exploring the natural world and calling upon Torah text to illuminate it, to encircle its boundaries.

Like Honi the Circle-maker, one asks God for rain and prays for understanding.

*I would like to thank Temple Sholom for hosting **Capturing Holiness**, you provide Kedushat Makom (sanctity of place). I hope you will enjoy the exhibit and capture a spark of holiness from my work.*

*The exhibit works are available for sale. A portion of each sale is donated to Temple Sholom.*

*Special thanks to:*

*Marilyn, Adam, and Danny Cherlin for allowing me to pursue my art  
Dan Koch, who introduced me to Temple Sholom, Dan you are a dear friend  
Netiva Caftori who opened a door*

*Rabbi Amy Memis-Foler and Temple Judea Mizpah for allowing me to  
photograph the congregations' holocaust scroll; the very special sacred text  
Mat MacCumber and Lisa Kaplan who helped me step by step to realize the  
exhibit*

*Cantor Aviva Katzman for inspiring music and prayer*

*Rabbi Aaron Petuchowski and the Temple Sholom congregational family for  
a special Shabbat. Temple Sholom is truly one of Chicago's great treasures.  
And lastly thanks to my friends and colleagues who are here supporting my  
work.*

*October 29, 2010 – Chesvan 22, 5771*



This concludes a brief overview of **Capturing Holiness**. Thank you for providing a place to exhibit my work. I hope you'll enjoy the exhibit.

*Good Shabbos / Shabbat Shalom!*