

Tapestry of Spirit: The Torah Stitch by Stitch Project

Textile Museum of Canada
June 12-November 17, 2019
Exhibition Guide

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Torah Stitch by Stitch is a collaborative project to create a cross-stitched representation of the Torah. Initiated by textile artist Temma Gentles in 2013, the project is now 95% complete due to the involvement of volunteer stitchers from around the world. Tapestry of Spirit features over 900 completed panels, presenting texts from the books of Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy, along with selections from the Scriptures and Qur'an.

When finished, the tapestry will measure the length of a football field and represent over 150,000 hours of collaborative labour. The Torah was divided into four-verse sections, requiring 1464 people to complete the text alone; each four-verse panel typically requires 40-60 hours to complete. Stitchers had the opportunity to embellish their panel if space allowed or contribute illuminated panels to go between the text. Once the panels were returned to the organizers and corrections were made to the text, a small group in Toronto hand-sewed them into the panels that are displayed in the exhibition.

As the project is nearing completion, new participants are welcome to stitch the few remaining panels. Torah Stitch by Stitch organizers look forward to mounting an installation of the complete project, sharing it with audiences from around the world. The innovative installation mechanism developed by Martin Gaudet will allow the embroidery to be exhibited in a variety of settings when complete.

Cover Image: Sandy Leibovici, Galaxy; cross-stitch on aida cloth. Design: Ann Logan.
Image courtesy of Torah Stitch by Stitch

Image below: Sima Levy-Nahum, [God] "called out"; French knot and cross-stitch on aida cloth.



בְּ אֵת אֵת חֹשֶׁךְ וְאֵת אָרֶן הַשְׁמִיד
וְאֵת הַשְׁלָחָן וְאֵת כָּלְבִּיז וְאֵת הַמְּנִילָה
וְאֵת כָּלִיה וְאֵת מָבוֹח הַקְּטָרָת



Torah

Torah refers to the first five books of the Jewish Bible (Tanach) – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The word Torah is derived from a Hebrew root word meaning "teaching" or "instruction," and these books set out the Jewish accounts of cosmology, ancient history, and ethics. According to scholars, the first written version dates from 600 BCE. These books also comprise the first section of the Christian Bible, and several important figures in the Torah also appear in the Qur'an, the sacred text of Islam.

Genesis begins with the story of creation and tells the story of each generation descended from Adam and Eve, ending with Joseph and his brothers in Egypt. Exodus recounts Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt into the desert. In Leviticus, the people build the tabernacle, and priestly rules are established. In Numbers, the people spend 40 years in the desert, fearing entry into the Promised Land. Moses makes several speeches in Deuteronomy, recounting what has happened in the previous three books, and dies before entering Canaan.

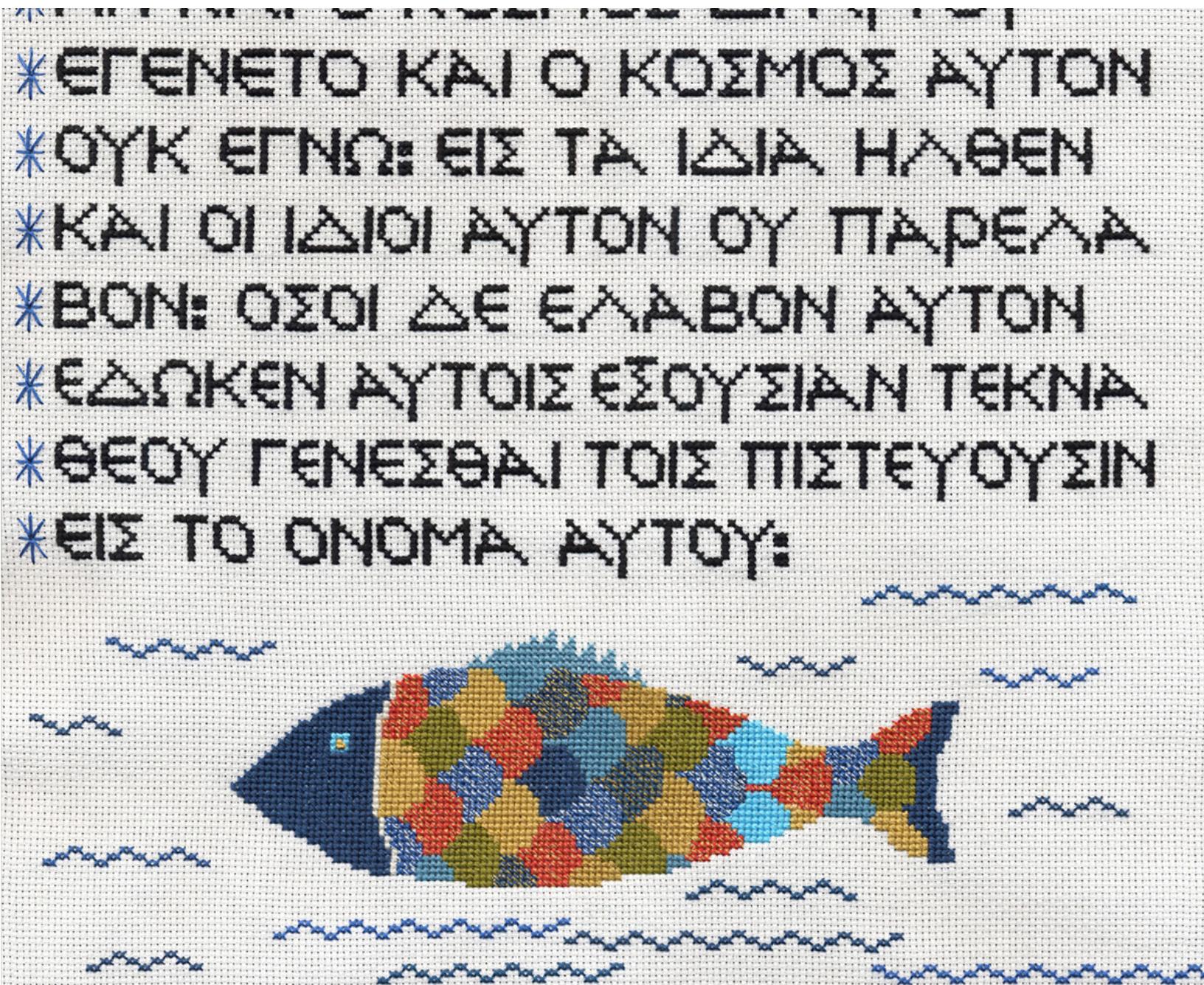
The Torah is divided into 54 sections that are chanted in Hebrew every Shabbat and on holy days; passages are also read in the synagogue on Mondays and Thursdays. Over the course of the year, the Torah will be read in its entirety.

Image: Linda Wells. Cross-stitch on aida cloth.

Illuminations

The Torah Stitch by Stitch project references illuminated manuscripts, early books of sacred texts that pre-date the invention of the printing press. Christians texts included a wide range of imagery amongst the written text, whereas the Qur'an was decorated only with non-figurative ornamental designs, and Torah scrolls were only embellished with little crowns (taggim) over certain letters. "The embellishments by the Torah Stitch by Stitch artists enable the viewer to connect with the text at an expressive level, rather than just a literal transmission of content through words," writes Soheila Esfahani in the exhibition catalogue. "This is how the piece shifts from simply text to contemporary art."

Image: Patricia Little and Linda Wells, John 1:9-12; cross-stitch on aida cloth.



Narrative Highlights

Creation

There are two creation stories in the Book of Genesis: the creation of the universe out of chaos over a period of six days, and story of Adam and Eve. Genesis 1:2 includes the words "tohu vebohu," which means "unformed and void," referring to the state of the earth at the start of the creation narrative. Miriam Wyman felt that a satellite image of Hurricane Sandy, which struck North America the year before she stitched her panel, captured these words, and Temma Gentles formatted the image into a cross-stitch pattern.

Noah's Ark

Stories involving floods can be found in cultures from around the world, including ancient Mesopotamia and Australian Aboriginals. In the Torah, a flood destroys civilization as an act of divine retribution; only faithful Noah, his family and the pairs of animals that he gathers together on the ark are spared. As the floodwaters begin to subside, Noah first sends a raven out of the ark to find dry land, not a dove as in other accounts of the story. Saraj Cory has stitched an illumination of the raven according to a design by Giovanna Peel. Other stitchers of this story have created their own representations of the ark; these panels also depict the dove that Noah later sent out from the ark.



Image: Gerbrig Berman, *Noah's Ark with "vanity plate"*; embroidery and cross-stitch on aida cloth.

Tower of Babel

The story of the Tower of Babel is an origin myth to explain how humanity became scattered across the world and adopted many languages after the Flood. Humans constructed a city with a tower that extended up into the sky as a means of showing their dominance. Because they all shared the same language, God felt that nothing would be out of their reach, and so he scattered them across the Earth and made them incomprehensible to each other. Amy Delacretaz includes an illumination of a tall brick tower as a literal interpretation of the story in her text panel. Wordplay and puns are incorporated in the telling of this story, as "confound" is an anagram for the Hebrew word for "brick." The name "Babel" resembles the word for confound "balal," and this pun likely gave rise to the adaptation of the word "babble" into many different languages to mean a meaningless utterance.

Jacob and Esau

Esau and Jacob were the twin sons of Isaac. As the eldest brother, Esau was entitled to a blessing from his father, but Jacob and his mother Rebekah tricked Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing instead. The Victorians developed codes for sending messages through the iconography of flowers, and Angela Friedman and Linda Kruhman illustrate this text with images of the flowers Foxglove and Viper's Bugloss as they represent insincerity and falsehood.



Plagues in Egypt

In order to force Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to depart, ten plagues befell Egypt. The fourth plague describes a "swarm" of creatures capable of harming people and livestock descending on the Israelites. This passage is often interpreted as a swarm of insects , and Dwayne and Wendy Padgett include a border of flies around their adjoining panels. The couple's sense of humour is integrated into their illumination – if you look carefully you can see a dead bug under a traditional yellow plastic flyswatter. Wendy explained this artistic choice: "When you have that many insects, it's OK to swat a few!"

Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments are referenced twice in the Torah, once in the Book of Exodus (20:2-14) and once in the Book of Deuteronomy (5:6-18), with slight variations. Wendy Fitzgerald, who stitched the text of the first commandment, and Robin Stern, who stitched the text of commandments 5-10, include an image of the stone tablets on which the words were inscribed.

Glossary

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are often referred to as the **Abrahamic Faiths**.

Shabbat is derived from a Hebrew word meaning "to rest." It is a holy day for Jews and a day of rest to commemorate the day of rest that God took after creating the world according to the creation story

A **yad** is a pointer used by the reader of the Torah scroll, allowing them to follow the text without touching the parchment; literally translates as "hand" in Hebrew, it is shaped like a pointing hand at the top.

Cross stitch is a popular form of counted-thread embroidery in which X-shaped stitches are used to form letters and images.

Aida cloth is a cotton fabric with an open and even weave structure that is commonly used in cross-stitch projects.

Tapestry is a hand-weaving technique where horizontal weft threads are tightly packed to cover vertical warp threads. Weft threads are woven into blocks of colour, forming images and patterns. The term however has come to be used to describe large-scale narrative textile projects – the Bayeux Tapestry, like the Torah Stitch by Stitch Project, is actually an embroidery rather than a tapestry.

The **Qur'an** is the central text of Islam. Muslims believe that the text was orally revealed to the Prophet Muhammed between the years 609 and 632 CE; according to tradition Muhammad's companions served as scribes and recorded the revelations. Qur'an translates to "recitation" in Arabic, highlighting how the text was intended to be recited, heard and experienced.

Scriptures are religious texts or writings considered to be central to a practice or belief system. In Tapestry of Spirit, scriptures refers to verses from the New Testament in the Christian Bible.

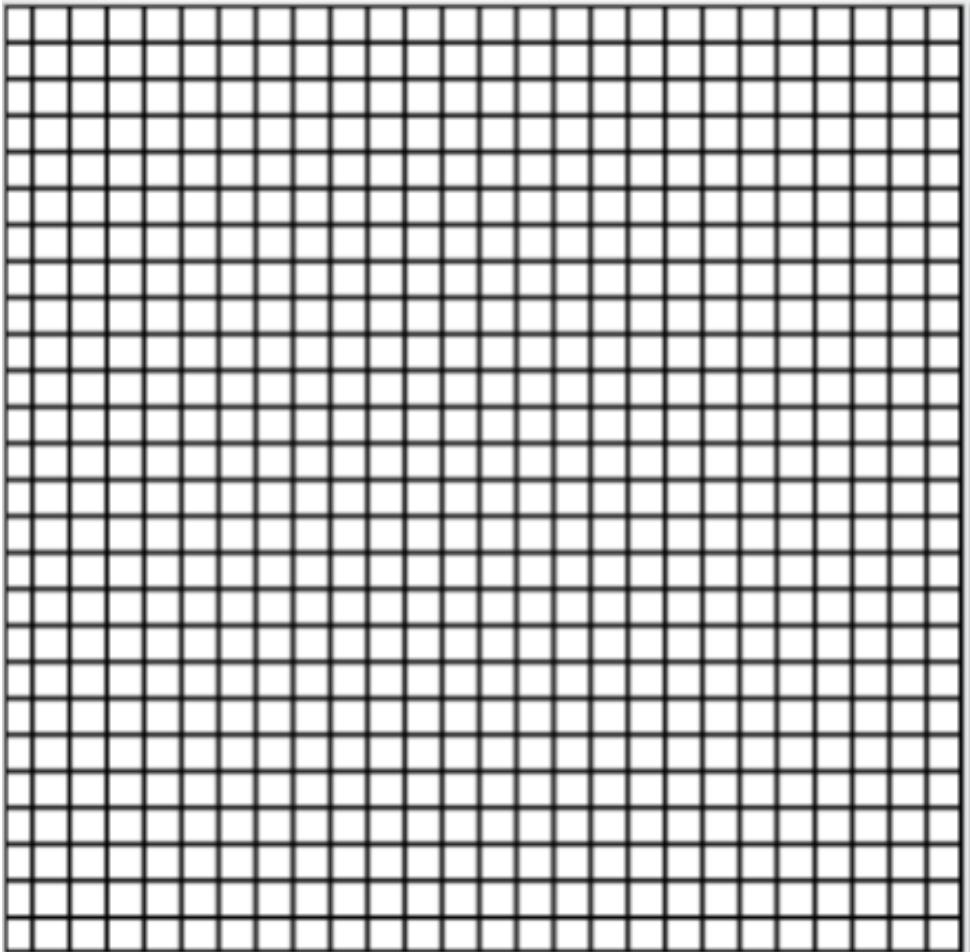
Image on previous page: Dwayne Padgett. Embroidery and cross-stitch on aida cloth.

Image below: Leslie Molder. Embroidery and cross-stitch on aida cloth.



Activities and Discussion Questions

1. The stories of the Torah are foundational in Jewish culture. What is a story that's special to you or your community?
2. Cross-stitch designs are like digital images in that they can be mapped out using graph paper; each square in the grid, like a pixel, represents one stitch. The following exercise explores the mathematical relationships in cross-stitch designs through the creative activity of drawing, abstracting the drawing, and creating a needlepoint square.
 - a) With a pencil, sketch a simple image within the square template below. Keep your drawing inside the template.
 - b) Pick two or three coloured pencils and colour in your sketch, following this rule: fill in all of a cell, or none of it. Only whole cells of the grid may be coloured in.
 - c) Holding your needlepoint square against the template you created, fill in the design with yarns of the same colours by sewing the yarns with a tapestry needle.





3. What is a project that your class can work together collaboratively? How can each member of your class make a contribution that will add to the final project?

4. Torah Stitch by Stitch was in part inspired by needlework samplers, a tradition that allowed stitchers, most often women to practice and demonstrate their skill in a range of embroidery techniques. They also provided an opportunity to teach literacy and moral codes through the stitching of letters and verses. Search the Textile Museum of Canada's collection of "needlework samplers," focusing on those from Europe and North America. How have these historical textiles informed Torah Stitch by Stitch?

5. Many Hebrew words have been adopted into English -- sabbatical, jubilee, alphabet. Can you write a definition for these words using as few English words as you can?

6. Research other collaborative and largescale textile projects – examples include the Bayeux Tapestry, The Dinner Party, the AIDS Quilt, and the Quilt of Belonging. How are these projects similar to Torah Stitch by Stitch? How are they different?

Image: Installation view, Textile Museum of Canada.



Resources

Learn more about Torah Stitch By Stitch through the project's website.
<http://www.torahstitchbystitch.org>

A searchable English translation of the Torah with commentary is available at
<http://sefaria.org/texts/Tanakh>

The Textile Museum of Canada's online collections database is available at
<http://collections.textilemuseum.ca/>

The *Tapestry of Spirit: The Torah Stitch by Stitch Project* exhibition catalogue includes images of all the panels included in the exhibition, attributions and dedications to the participating stitchers.

Special thanks to Simon Glass, Lili Shain and Temma Gentles, as well as all the contributors to the exhibition catalogue, for proving content for this resource guide.

Image: Arlene Witty, Caravan; cross-stitch on aida cloth. Rendering: Temma Gentles.