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Hunter Levinsohn, whose art speaks with a strong voice, has chosen to tell Bible stories for her show at the Rosenzweig Gallery at Judea Reform Congregation: not the whole story, but its essence, which she finds in one phrase or thought. Her materials are as diverse as torn and dyed T-shirts, shredded newspaper lists of American fatalities in Iraq and cigarette butts.

In mining the Bible for thematic material, Levinsohn joins a distinguished line of artists in a daunting pursuit. After all, some of the greatest art in the Western world includes illustrations of the Bible, created by the giants of art history. Yet Levinsohn probably began exactly where Michelangelo and Raphael did. Each read the scripture and imagined how best to tell the particular story.

While she recreates passages about Jacob and Deborah in this exhibit, it is Joseph that she pursues. Perhaps the fact that the text talks in terms of colors draws the artist to it. In any event, Levinsohn's versions of the boy's coat, which include major pieces and studies for each, are the most visually enticing.

For example, "And he made for him a coat of many colors" is a large piece designed to fit against a wall. She used dozens of T-shirts, bought at a discount sale, dyed them into a rainbow of colors, cut them into strips and looped them with a rag rug stitch into the shape of a heavy garment. In a note about the piece, Levinsohn wrote that the passage in Genesis 37:9 about Joseph's dream of the moon and stars bowing to him sounds like the normal swaggering of an adolescent, but as she worked on the piece and it became heavier and heavier, she found new meaning in the words. She believes that the story is really about "the expectations we as parents put upon our children and what the repercussions of those expectations can do."

The artist was born in Charleston, S.C., and has lived in Chapel Hill since 1967, when she entered UNC as a graduate student. At the exhibit opening and in response to a question, she said that early on she was told she had no talent for art, so her training has come in the form of workshops on various artistic problems, and special lessons on the formal principles of still-life painting. She said that her father was a conservationist long before it was popular to be one, so that when she rescued things from the trash, it was as much to recycle them as it was to gather up discarded materials for her art.

She also told a story about an important lesson she learned in a class of 4-year-olds. She was showing the children how to make Jell-O, when one of the little girls ran to the trash, pulled out the empty cartons and began making delightful pocket books out of the boxes. It was something she never forgot.

"Jacob's Ladder I" (Genesis 28:12), is a straightforward version of the story. A small blue ladder lays cater-cornered on a framed flat surface. However, her interpretation of the text about Deborah (Judges 5:27) is the densest of all her pieces and the most difficult to understand. According to the Bible, the Judge Deborah lures Sisera, the leader of the Canaanites, to the top of Mount Tabor. There the army is destroyed by the Israelites, but Sisera escapes to the house of an ally. Jael agrees to hide Sisera, but ultimately kills him, and her bravery has earned her a place among the heroines of Biblical history.

"Where He Sank, There He Lay -- Destroyed," is Levinsohn's attempt to make this story, a seduction that ends in death, a metaphor for war. The piece is large, with wide strips of black cloth that hang loosely from a rod at the top. The edges of the material are heavily fringed, and close examination reveals that the fringe is made of shredded printed paper.

Her wall notes tell us that the paper is covered with the names of Americans who have died in Iraq. During her gallery talk, she spoke about the connection between the causalities of today and an uncle in World War II. This uncle, whose memory is part of her family lore, was captured by the Japanese only to be killed when the prisoner ship he was on was bombed by Americans. Although understanding the many layers of meaning surrounding this mixed-media piece might be impossible, the beauty of it, the careful attention to detail and the imaginative use of materials is immediately obvious.

Artists have been illustrating religious stories since human beings began to make pictures. From prehistoric caves to the Egyptians, from early Jews to early Christians to early Muslims, artists have found glorious ways to enhance their religious beliefs. Levinsohn now joins this group. Her show is small, but each piece is a jewel and deserves careful attention.

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"Hunter Levinsohn: Of Jacob, Joseph & Deborah"

Rosenzweig Gallery, Judea Reform Congregation, 1933 W. Cornwallis Road, through Oct. 18. Gallery hours are 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday, from 8:30 to 3:30 p.m. on Friday, and Sunday during religious school hours. Admission is free to the public.