

Street in Tzfas



Shalom  
Beit Shemesh

# The Art of Dena Ackerman

**Artist Dena Ackerman's hometown was the Pico-Robertson neighborhood of Los Angeles, California. Now she lives in Eretz Yisrael in the growing community of Ramat Beit Shemesh where she enjoys being surrounded by warm, supportive people.**

**"I also love the warm desert climate here, which is similar to L.A. in many ways," she says.**

**Dena appreciates her parents' inspiration for many reasons. When she was young, they dedicated themselves to raising her and her siblings in the best way possible. Their mission was also to educate their fellow Jews in the beauty of Judaism.**

**"I admire their openness and love of learning, for being growth oriented and truth seeking, for having a great sense of humor, for their sensitivity, love of nature, appreciation of art and beauty, and endless support for myself and everyone in our family and community," she says fondly.**



The artist's son Noach

### From Hobby to Career

Dena has been drawing and painting for as long as she can remember. She took many art lessons growing up, including painting, calligraphy, and cartooning.

"But I didn't go to art school, so I consider myself mostly self-taught," she explains. "I've been privileged to work with some wonderful mentors and art directors, and I try to continue

learning, growing and experimenting."

At the age of just 16, she received her first commission to paint a picture of an English garden, for which she was paid the then-impressive sum of \$300. She continued to paint as a hobby and produced portraits, landscapes, monograms and illustrations for ads.

Despite this early success and her love of art, Dena never seriously considered art as a career until about





Shipwreck

“When you think you have nothing left to learn, that’s when you should start worrying that you don’t know that much in the first place.”

seven or eight years ago. By then married with three small children, she illustrated a children’s book called *Red Is my Rimon*. A mutual friend knew the author, Dvorah Glick, and recommended them to the publisher; the book proved to be a success.

That was Dena’s moment of realization that she could utilize her artistic talents as a profession. Because she works from home, she is able to do her artwork when her children (ranging in age from 3 to 13) are at school and then be available for them when they come home. She also teaches drawing, painting, and illustration to adults at the local art school called Start three mornings a week.

“Some days I have more time to work than others. I work as an illustrator — mostly for children’s books, chapter books and textbooks — and I do other types of illustration and accept commissioned artwork, mainly portraits. I also do Judaica-themed work, building renderings, and other types of fine art. My work is one of the things that keeps me sane, and being able to support my family with it is an extra blessing,” she points out.

Dena takes pride in personal projects such as portraits of her children and illustrations that capture an emotion or a moment in time.

Recently, one of her watercolor portraits was accepted into an

exhibit of the IWS Israel (International Watercolor Society). This is the first year they held a contest, and she is understandably excited by this fine achievement.

She is also gratified by the books she has illustrated because they show her growth as an artist, how her skills and styles are evolving and broadening. She illustrated two series of books by author David Adler, as well as *The Creation Book* published by Hachai. The stunning illustrations and brightly-colored paper cuts, which took two years to complete, have been described as “positively Edenic.”

Among other books illustrated by Dena is *Toba’s Passage*, about a Jewish immigrant family from Poland that relocates to the Lower East Side of New York. Coming out next will be a book about the early life of Sarah Schenirer, the founder of Bais Yaakov, called *Sarah Builds a School*.

The Breslov Institute recently published a series of five Rebbe Nachman stories which Dena illustrated in black and white and found to be very expressive. Each story was done in a different style and set in a different time period, which she describes as “fascinating and a great learning experience.”

Currently she is working on a picture book about Jewish names, a couple of chapter books for Menucha Publishers, and some personal writing and painting projects.

Asked about her future plans and projects, Dena explains they are “never-ending, so I guess I should be *davening* for a long and healthy life... I am exploring the area of self-publishing, working on my painting skills, developing the fine art side of my business, including more commission portrait work and figurative acrylic painting. Then there are whole series of paintings I dream of doing one day...”

Dena believes that the worst thing



Rabbi Dr. Zalman F. Ury, z"l

possible for an artist is to become complacent and stop experimenting and growing. “When you think you have nothing left to learn, that’s when you should start worrying that you don’t know that much in the first place.”

She goes on to explain that every artist’s inspiration comes from the life he or she is living: the beautiful parts, the painful parts, but most

often the simple, day-to-day parts of life. “When you look at my work, it should reflect who I am: a Jew, a woman, a mother, a thinker, a humorist, a people lover. No doubt my insecurities and imperfections make their way into my art as well. I try to communicate some sense of beauty in my work, with a dash of humor and a bit of drama. Those are the things that people respond to. To be effective, artists must paint themselves into their work.”

Dena feels that her greatest challenge is finding enough time to do everything she wants to do, learn, and explore.

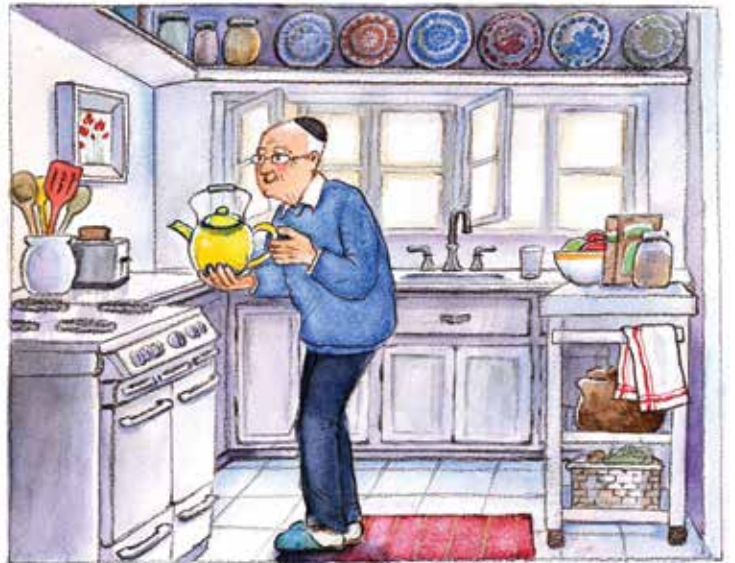
“I don’t know if there’s anything easy about being an artist, but it’s definitely a joy and a blessing to be able to do the things I love. I believe I can communicate my feelings and experiences through my art.

“Everyone wants to make the world a better place. As an artist, I want to bring



Love at First Sight





An illustration from *Toba's Passage* (Hachai)

something good to the world, whether it's beauty, laughter, inspiration, a connection to other people or to our history — to put our lives into perspective and to connect to others via the human experiences that we all experience.

“Being an artist is a solitary occupation, so I really appreciate getting feedback. For example, if I do a sketch of a household at bedtime, and 15 people comment to me how funny or how true it is (because bedtime is a challenge all parents face and it keeps recurring every single night), those are 15 lives I made slightly better by giving

them a laugh and making them feel like they're not alone in the struggle.

“Art also helps us to focus on the things we often take for granted. A child's face looks the most angelic when asleep... and when it's in a painting. I have seen breathtaking paintings of alleyways and truck stops. There is beauty to be seen literally everywhere. To be creative is to be G-d-like, because we are emulating our Creator.”

One of Dena's favorite quotes she believes to be true is this:

“*The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection*”  
— Michelangelo. ■