

Life & Times

Writing on the wall

Calligrapher plans illuminating weekend

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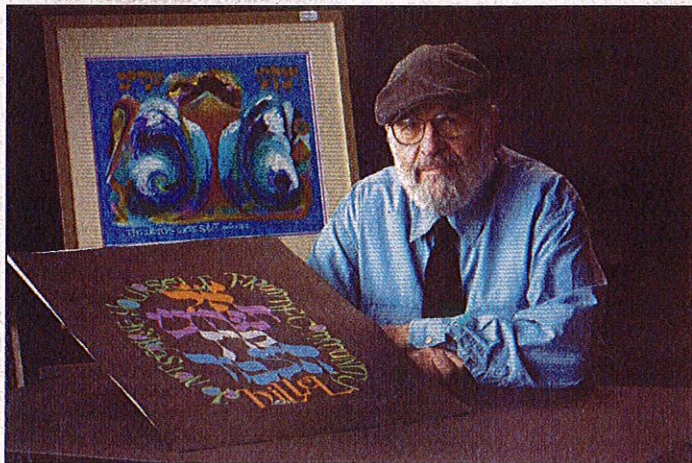
The flowing shapes and vibrant colors of Mordechai Rosenstein's Hebrew calligraphy make it instantly recognizable to those familiar with his work.

His works of brightly illuminated verses from the Torah and other Jewish texts grace the walls of many Jewish offices, homes, and institutions, as do his tapestries, silkscreens, paintings, and murals. Many a Jewish attorney has received a version of Rosenstein's *Deuteronomy 16:20* ("Justice, justice shall thou pursue") upon graduating law school.

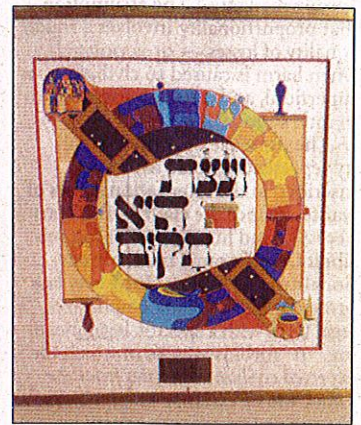
Rosenstein, now 80, told NJIN that just as his style emerged organically, it continues to evolve over time. "Otherwise, I'd still be reproducing the first piece of art I ever made," he said in a phone conversation from his home in Elkins Park, Pa.

He will serve as artist-in-residence Wednesday-Sunday, Sept. 17-21, at Congregation Agudath Israel in Caldwell, whose religious leader, Rabbi Alan Silverstein, said, "Mordechai Rosenstein has served the world of Jewish art and spiritual insight for decades. We are honored to host him and to bask in the inspiration he certainly will provide."

Rosenstein's career was launched 50 years ago when, as a young artist and graduate of the Philadelphia College of Art, he was moved to add color to Hebrew calligraphy. "I guess



Mordechai Rosenstein said the essence of his work is the *alef-bet*: "The flowing forms of the letters have been an inspiration to me since my youth."



This work by Mordechai Rosenstein was commissioned in 1989 as a gift marking the 10th anniversary of Rabbi Alan Silverstein's arrival at Congregation Agudath Israel.

it grabbed the imagination," he said. At that time, "There was no color in any Jewish bookstore. You could have calligraphy but only in black and white. Now, you go into a bookstore and it's a *mechaya*; you see color everywhere, in baby names and *ketubot* and sayings. The whole thing has changed."

He's the first to admit he wasn't alone in recognizing the need for color in Jewish text. But he also knew how to sell his work. "I knew you can't sit in a gallery in Philadelphia and wait for someone to wander in every four hours. We went on the road," he said.

In 1979 he took three of his works

to a show at the Concord Hotel in the Catskills, where United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (then United Synagogue of America) was having a national convention. His art was a hit.

A graduate of the first class of Akiba Hebrew Academy in Merion, Pa., Rosenstein said he was also influenced by abstract expressionist Franz Kline during his studies.

Rosenstein's stay at the synagogue will include interactive art projects for congregants of all ages and a *Selihot* program on his art through the decades. He will find a number of his works at the synagogue, but one

of particular significance was commissioned by CAI in honor of Silverstein's 10th anniversary year with the congregation in 1989. The rabbi said, "I selected a favorite verse, *Proverbs 19:21* — chanted by friends when I walked down the aisle at my wedding: 'Many are the thoughts in a man's heart, but ultimately it is the verdict of God which shall prevail.'"

"Mordechai artfully crafted this piece in my honor — a combination of a well of human ideas ascending a ladder toward heaven — all in the context of the messages embedded in the Torah scroll," said Silverstein. ■



If you go

During the artist-in-residence program at Agudath Israel in Caldwell, Mordechai Rosenstein will lead activities with congregants of all ages, from preschoolers to seniors, including giving a *d'var Torah* at Shabbat services on Saturday. The following events are open to the public:

Thursday, Sept. 18, 7:45 p.m.: Wine and cheese reception and hands-on art project for adults

Saturday, Sept. 20, 9 p.m.: *Selihot* program — Rosenstein will share examples of his artwork through the decades, along with interesting stories of the owners of some of his pieces. Adults will have the opportunity to create artwork, and there will be a display and sale of Rosenstein's work. *Selihot* services will begin at midnight.

