

Chai Life

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This ensemble was inspired by two images common in Judaica, the tree of life, also important to many other religions and myths, and *chai*, which is not only the Hebrew word for life, but a symbol in and of itself. The tree of life, called *Etz Chaim* in Hebrew, is distinct from the Garden of Eden's tree of knowledge. It is found in Proverbs 3:17-18: "It is a tree of life to all who grasp it, and whoever holds on to it is happy; its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace." In addition to peace and happiness, tree of life signifies growth and longevity. Representations of the tree of life are featured frequently in Jewish art and architecture. It is also prevalent in many other theologies and a recurrent reference in popular culture.

The goals for this project were to creatively interpret these Jewish symbols and to explore new textile design techniques. The strapless cotton sateen dress features a digitally printed tree of life and two *chais*. The tree's branches, leaves, and roots were drawn using Illustrator. Once the paper pattern pieces were digitized into the computerized pattern-making software Optitex, the illustration was adjusted so that it was engineered print matching across all of the dress seams, continuing through the side panels, and onto the back. The *chais* at either side of the tree were also drawn in Illustrator and then aligned to match across the princess seams. After the design was finalized, the fabric was printed using a Mimaki TX2-1600 digital textile printer.

Following the garment's construction, clusters of three or four leaves were hand-stitched to the bodice of the dress to create texture and dimensionality. The leaves reach above the neckline of the dress, advancing skyward as the tree of life's branches do. The 97 leaf clusters on the bodice were made up of more than 300 individual leaves of four different fabrics (nylon sparkle sheer, nylon tulle, polyester crinkle, and polyester satin). An additional 21 leaves were hand-knit of acrylic yarn, and hand-sewn to the bodice. In



Hebrew, letters represent their numerical equivalents according to their place in the alphabet, and *chai*, comprised of the letters *chet* and *yud*, equals 18, which, because of its association with *chai*, is a celebrated number in Judaism. The number 18 multiplied by itself is 324, the number of leaves added to the surface of *Chai Life*, to further reflect the garment's inspiration.

Seven types of trim, including velvet, grosgrain, and varied braids, were hand-sewn to the garment. They represent branches, and the leaf clusters are stitched to them. They then extend past the hemline to form roots that continue towards the earth, swinging to provide movement. The digitally printed illustration, fabric and knit leaves, and dimensional branches and roots combine to create a garment emblematic of one of the most prominent symbols in Judaism.

Reference

Dosick, W. (1995) *Living Judaism*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.