

# contact



## EUROPEAN JEWISH MUSEUMS AT A TURNING POINT

by BRIGITTE SION

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THE STEINHARDT  
FOUNDATION  
FOR JEWISH LIFE

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.

Cover photograph by Brigitte Sion from the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum, Vilnius. Unless otherwise indicated, all other photographs in this issue appear courtesy of contributors.

**T**he Summer issue of CONTACT features a diverse array of personalities and perspectives exploring history, memory and cultural meaning in Jewish communities throughout the world. To start things off, Brigitte Sion visits European Jewish museums at a crossroads. Initially created as repositories of artifacts, they have transitioned to a new role in publicly-engaged pedagogy: Presenting the full spectrum of the Jewish experience in Europe as both a bulwark against anti-Semitism and as an instructive tool espousing inclusion and intercultural respect. The article examines an ongoing question: How should these museums balance the particular mandate of Jewish history with the more universalist educational potential of museums in contemporary European society?

The issue then explores two linguistic phenomena: Rabbi David Gedzelman on the retrofitting of classical and modern Hebrew poetry into popular, zeitgeist-defining Israeli songs, and Hilary Schumer on the subtle osmosis of once-uniquely Jewish terms into the American vernacular. Both phenomena are evidence of a thriving culture, in America and Israel, in which Jewish expression has become an intrinsic part of the landscape.

We return to Europe with Liam Hoare's profiles of three individuals exploring creative avenues of Jewish engagement and expression, and with Ari Goldman's pilgrimage to pray at the grave of his single personal link to the Holocaust. The issue closes with the thought-provoking, language-melding sculptures of Ghiora Aharoni. Taken together, the articles, profiles and art in this issue reveal a vibrant and diverse community reclaiming the past as it charts a dynamic future.

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Family Program at The Jewish Museum of Greece.

# EUROPEAN JEWISH MUSEUMS AT A TURNING POINT

by BRIGITTE SION

**T**here are more than 130 Jewish museums in Europe, from Portugal to the Ukraine and from Norway to Greece. Some are the creation of star architects, like the museums in Berlin and Copenhagen, both designed by Daniel Libeskind. Others are renovated buildings, like the synagogue in Cavaillon, France or the former *mikveh* in Rotenburg an der Fulda, Germany. Some collections entail more than 30,000 objects, like in

**Brigitte Sion** holds a Ph.D. in performance studies from NYU. She has written extensively about memorials in Germany, Argentina and Cambodia, and is an international expert on identity museums, particularly Jewish museums in Europe. She is based in Geneva, Switzerland. This article grew out of a comprehensive survey of Jewish museums in Europe conducted on behalf of the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe. The report will be published in Fall 2016 and will be available at [www.rothschildfoundation.eu](http://www.rothschildfoundation.eu).

London or Amsterdam, while others boast a historical building as their sole artifact, like the synagogues in Maribor, Slovenia or Jicin in the Czech Republic. Some museums struggle financially and may not be able to survive, while new museums open every year — in Warsaw, Poland (2014), Schwabach, Germany (2015) and Lecce, Italy (2016) — with more cornerstones already placed in other European cities.

This is certainly a varied and busy landscape, but its vast discrepancies raise some fundamental questions: Are Jewish museums relevant in the 21st Century? If so, what is their purpose, and what kind of audience do they serve?

For answers, we have to look at the 20th Century roots of these museums. Most Jewish museums in Europe started with a collection of ritual objects, books, photographs and other communal and

Museums that wish to remain relevant for the general public cannot afford to limit themselves to a repository role; they must engage with a diverse audience — local individuals, foreign tourists, school groups, researchers, etc. — with diverse knowledge and diverse expectations.



Synagogue in the Venice Ghetto, part of the Jewish Museum of Venice.

personal artifacts. The core collection of the Jewish Museum in Prague, founded in 1906, came from synagogues that had been demolished after the clearance of the Jewish ghetto. A significant number of Jewish museums in Germany and Italy were established after the local communities were destroyed or exiled, most notably after World War II. However, nowadays it is not enough to assemble silver candlesticks, Torah ornaments, old prayer books, photographs of local Jews and a few explanatory panels and call this display a relevant Jewish museum. A number of years ago a shift occurred; these days, many museums are no longer strictly collection spaces but rather sites for public programs, lectures, pedagogical tours for schools, academic conferences, concerts and performances, family activities and social programs. They include libraries, archives and open courtyards. As architect Francesca Lanz recently observed, “The interpretation of museums as static repositories of historical and artistic treasures and sites of worship is being gradually overtaken by a new comprehension of museums as public services and social agents.” (“Staging Migration (in) Museums: A Reflection on Exhibition Design Practices for the Representation of Migration in European Contemporary Museums,” *Museum & Society*, March 2016). These, Lanz adds, “not only have a preeminent conservation role, but also — and primarily — an important educational, political and social role within contemporary society.” What this means practically is that museums that wish to remain relevant for the general public cannot afford to

limit themselves to a repository role; they must engage with a diverse audience — local individuals, foreign tourists, school groups, researchers, etc. — with diverse knowledge and diverse expectations.

In a January 2016 interview to the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the newly appointed director of the Jewish Museum Frankfurt, Mirjam Wenzel, said she prefers to call her institution a “center for Jewish culture in history and in the present” rather than a “museum.” She added: “I would like to free the future Jewish museum from negative representations tied to the concept of ‘museum.’ I understand the museum as a social place, from which one can be inspired, a place that can foster conversation and invites further thinking.” (*Es gibt eine Unwohlsein*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 28 January 2016)

Some recent museums have included such programs as part of their original mission. Others have caught up with the public’s needs and changed their mission, space use and programming. The Mari-bor Synagogue in Slovenia, a museum that does not yet have a core exhibition, summarizes its multiple identities in the following terms: “We are neither a museum or a gallery in the traditional sense, as we do not possess a permanent collection of Judaica yet. On the other hand, we are housed in one of the oldest preserved synagogues in Central Europe — thus in a way, our core exhibition is in fact the building of the former synagogue. We also organize cultural events, exhibitions, meetings, colloquia, symposia and other programs.”

The issue is about relevance, but can also be financial: by attracting a larger

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equality and peace.

and more diverse crop of visitors than the usual suspects, a museum can increase revenue from ticket sales, guided tours, cultural and educational activities and from café and shop sales. Of course, not every museum has the capacity or the will to undertake such major changes, nor is it worthwhile for every institution. For example, the Jewish Museum Gailingen in Germany fulfills its mission by showcasing past Jewish life of the High Rhine region. As museum consultant Elaine Heumann Gurian observed, “Some of these ‘object-focused’ museums might proudly remain what they wish to be: displayers of objects for their own sake, unabashedly and without apology. Without meaning to offer a ‘hidey-hole’ to museums too lazy to invigorate their displays, it may be time to allow stunning objects to take their place as just that. And if that is the intention of the museum, then the institution should say so and we will all understand.”

For small museums, the questions are: Would changes of programming give more exposure and recognition to the collection, or would they somehow underplay the collection in favor of programs? Can museums afford to change? How would the impact of such considerable change be measured and appraised? Such an exploration naturally leads to more radical questioning about the purpose and survival of some museums. Is the transformation into a dynamic multi-purpose hub a way for a Jewish museum to avoid being a “glass case for dead Jews” that displays ritual objects divorced from their actual use, or describes the Jewish experience as stuck in the past?

These difficult questions are driven by key stakeholders of Jewish museums: the visitors. Jewish museums cater to a very diverse audience: Jewish and not Jewish, local and international, students and tourists, scholars and random visitors. This conundrum has an impact on all museum activity: the mission statement, the core exhibition, the temporary exhibitions, the educational and cultural programs, as well as marketing and fundraising. While data is not available, it is clear that non-Jews make up a majority of visitors to Jewish museums, whether locals or foreigners. What is also evident is that most visitors come only once. This complicates the challenge faced by museums: How can they entice local and international visitors to make repeated visits, and how can they renew themselves often enough (and at what cost) to expand their visibility and win the public's loyalty?

And yet, Jewish museums do a poor job in monitoring their visitors, understanding their profiles, expectations, and needs. They use unreliable measurement methods (website views, Facebook followers, random questionnaires, informal conversations after a guided tour) and do not collect substantial metrics that could subsequently serve their mission.

Serious measurement of their visitor constituency would help train guides, design pedagogical materials and organize attractive public programs, among other uses. Indeed, some museums could probably increase their audience with more targeted offerings. A third of European Jewish museums welcome fewer than 5,000 visitors a year. In some cases, the relatively low number can be

explained by limited opening hours (one day a month, one day a week, only in the summer, etc.) or by the absence of monitoring tools. The bulk receives between 5,000 and 50,000, while a handful welcomes more than 100,000 visitors a year (Gerona, Amsterdam, Paris, Vienna, Budapest, Berlin, Prague, Warsaw, the last three boasting more than 500,000 visitors a year). However, these absolute attendance numbers are skewed: large urban museums tend to attract many more people than small renovated synagogues in the countryside. In capital cities, Jewish museums are often part of a tourism circuit, included in weekly passes, and they interest a wide array of visitors, including architecture fans who do not care about the content of the exhibition. In some museums, there is no entrance fee, while in others it can be symbolic (low) or as expensive as an art museum.

Two aspects that statistics do not show are the proportion of school groups and the ratio of national and international visitors. If we looked only at absolute numbers of visitors, a small museum in a medium-sized town that receives 10,000 visitors a year wouldn't survive. However, if 8,000 of the 10,000 visitors are school groups, we see that the museum fulfills a very important and unique pedagogical mission, and that it should remain active in the regional landscape. Picture this: the Jewish museums of Manchester (UK), Merano (Italy) and Trondheim (Norway) boast over 70 percent of school groups among its visitors. Similar discrepancies can be observed in the geographic origin of visitors: among museums that monitor their visitors, albeit imprecisely, a vast

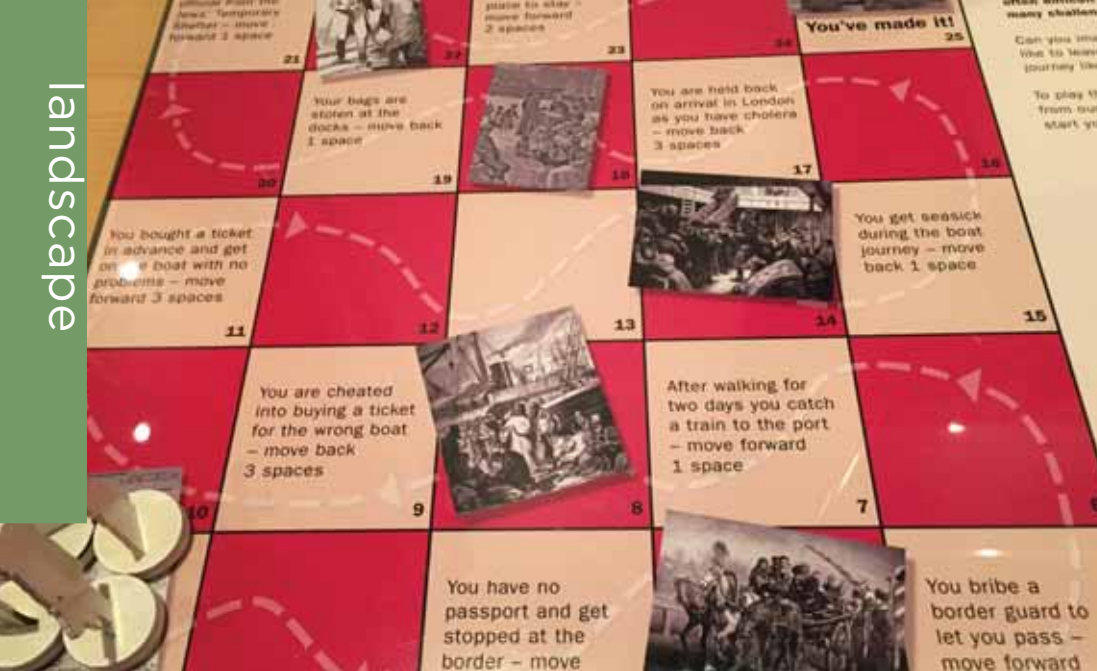
majority welcomes more national visitors. This ratio climbs to 90 percent nationals against 10 percent foreigners (in Parma, Frankfurt or Ben Uri in London). At the other end of the spectrum, some museums receive an overwhelming majority of foreign visitors, because they are located in highly touristic cities (Rhodes, Budapest, Sarajevo, Granada and Seville.)

Such diverse audiences with different needs have direct influence on the mission of the museums. While all museums that have a mission statement aim at collecting, presenting and transmitting Jewish history and culture and their contribution to the local, regional and national environment (or variations thereof), and serve as a resource for schools, researchers and the general public, a significant number strive to promote understanding and tolerance between Jews and non-Jews and to fight anti-Semitism: "With its exhibitions the [Jewish] Museum [Frankfurt] shall promote the possibility of a dialogue for its predominantly non-Jewish visitors, elucidating the relationship between Jews and their environment against the background of the historical development in Frankfurt and highlighting the key elements of culture and religion, discrimination and animosity." The Manchester Jewish Museum extends its mission beyond the Jewish community: "To advance education for the public benefit in the subject of Judaism and Jewish heritage by the maintenance of a museum to preserve, collect and display material relating to Jewish heritage with a view to countering racism and prejudice and promoting tolerance." Or, as the Jewish Museum of Belgium says in fewer words: "combat all

**In a post-national and trans-cultural world, Jewish museums are moving towards a more universalistic perspective, updating their galleries and programs to reflect a reinterpretation of the Jewish experience through the lens of migration and cultural diversity.**



Exhibition in Doges' Palace, Venice, marking the 500th anniversary of the founding of the Jewish Ghetto.



Board game at The Jewish Museum London.

**Jewish museums, like other identity museums, are at a turning point. In order to remain relevant, visible and economically sustainable, they must be dynamic and not anchored solely in the past.**

forms of intolerance, particularly racism and anti-Semitism, by promoting democratic and humanistic values.”

A comparable tension between particularistic and universalistic missions has been observed in Holocaust museums or Holocaust-related sites that have begun to include other victims of Nazism (Romani, homosexuals, etc.) and victims of more recent genocides (in Cambodia, Rwanda and other places). The idea is that the horrific Jewish experience during the Holocaust shares unfortunate commonalities with the experience of other groups; particularistic history gives way to a universalistic message of warning against stigmatization, discrimination and persecution and to a hopeful message of tolerance, democracy, equality and peace. This is especially visible in Anne Frank’s House in Amsterdam, where, at the end of the exhibition, the visitor leaves the secret annex and is presented with interactive panels about xenophobia, cultural differences and coexistence.

We see now that the Jewish experience, particularly its Diasporic dimension and the Holocaust, has become a paradigm to study other minorities across the globe, especially at a time when migrants and refugees flee war zones and countries where they suffer from discrimination. In a post-national and trans-cultural world, Jewish museums are moving towards a more universalistic perspective, updating their galleries and programs to reflect a reinterpretation of the Jewish experience through the lens of migration and cultural diversity. The Jewish Museum of Greece in Athens exemplifies this attitude in

its mission statement: “To foster cross-cultural understanding among people, to promote public dialogue about tolerance and respect for people of all religions, races, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds, using lessons from the Holocaust.” The Jewish Museum Munich sees its mission as “fostering an awareness for social equality, opportunity and tolerance in the face of vast differences in religious, intellectual and everyday areas of life,” while the Museum Sjoel Elburg in the Netherlands seeks “to offer a historic background for present-day themes viz. integration, respect and tolerance.” As Jillian Weyman observed in her master’s thesis at HUC-JIR (Los Angeles), about Jewish museums and Jewish-themed exhibitions in the Los Angeles area, “While there exists overlap in how Jewish museums define their Jewishness in terms of their institutions’ founding, values, mission, leadership, and funding sources, there is no one Jewish or museum-related thread that unifies them. In that way, Jewish museums join in the struggle and ambiguity around what it means to be a Jewish institution.” (“Universalism in Jewish Museums Yields More Similarity to Jewish Communal Life, Not Difference,” *ejewishphilanthropy.com*, April 20, 2016)

Finally, one of the oldest Jewish museums in Europe, the Ben Uri Gallery and Museum in London, founded in 1915, has fully embraced the universalistic mission based on the particularistic Jewish experience: “Museums and Ben Uri in particular have a major opportunity to play a pivotal role within society expanding its audience engagement outside its traditional constituencies and

into the growing numbers of immigrant communities as economic migration and refugees from war seek a new life and opportunities in this country.” This position has been condemned by cultural critic Edward Rothstein, who argued in a recent opinion piece published by *Mosaic*, “Becoming a celebration of ersatz tolerance and fake universalism, the museum, like too many of its American counterparts, suggests that Jewish identity is best realized through its shrinkage.” (“The Problem with Jewish Museums,” *Mosaic*, February 1, 2016) Is this universalistic bent a museographical trend aligned with historical and ethnographic museums that universalize their mission, or is it that Jewish museums serve a wider audience that they need to attract, engage and fundraise with in the general public?

Jewish museums, like other identity museums, are at a turning point. In order to remain relevant, visible and economically sustainable, they must be dynamic and not anchored solely in the past. They cannot afford to be simply repositories of ritual objects or learning centers visited exclusively by scholars. They carry a crucial educational mission to teach about Jewish culture, history and religious practices. The burden falls on small and large museums alike: whether they cater primarily to schools, local visitors or international tourists, they are in a unique position to explain the cultural, social and economic contributions of Jews to the fabric of European culture to this day, and to fight anti-Semitic bias that is resurfacing in Europe 70 years after the liberation of Auschwitz. No mission can be more relevant or important. ■



# HIGH CULTURE, POPULAR CULTURE, HEBREW ALL OVER

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

One pervasive way in which high culture is made accessible through popular forms is how Hebrew literature, whether from classical Biblical verses or that of modern serious poetry, is put to music by popular artists and enjoyed throughout Israeli society.

Contemporary Israeli culture ties its highest expressions to its most popular forms using elements of the Hebrew language in ways that convey an ongoing enthusiasm for Hebrew as the central medium of the Zionist enterprise and the culture of Israel. This was true at Israel's founding and has continued through today. One pervasive way in which high culture is made accessible through popular forms is how Hebrew literature, whether from classical Biblical verses or that of modern serious poetry, is put to music by popular artists and enjoyed throughout Israeli society.

In 1982, Natan Zach, the acclaimed poet and scholar of Hebrew poetry, published the poem "For The Human Being is a Tree of the Field." It takes its opening phrase from Deuteronomy 20:19, a Biblical passage which mandates the preservation of fruit trees while laying siege to a city in a time of war, specifically because fruit trees are not human beings who can threaten one's army. In the Bible, "*Ki HaAdam Etz ha Sadeh*" is a rhetorical question, with the Hebrew word "*ki*" used interrogatively. In Zach's poem, the Biblical concern for fruit trees over the lives of the enemy population is turned around completely, and Zach uses the language of the Bible to emphasize the aspirations and yearnings of every person using the word "*ki*" at the beginning of the phrase to mean "because" or "for" in the affirmative

rather than the interrogative. Every person is like a tree of the field, solitary, yearning and growing.

In a 2011 interview, Zach claimed that he wrote the poem with the first Lebanon War on his mind and that the poem was one of protest. ("A Poet's Poet," by Eli Eliahu, *Haaretz*, May 20, 2011) The poem was put to music in 1983 by the popular rock and folk artist Shalom Hanoch, with a haunting slow melody that draws out the sense of human aloneness and yearning. In that same 2011 interview, Zach commented that when Hanoch first recorded the song, every time Zach heard it on the radio he feared it was in order to announce another casualty of war. In other words, his underlying message is just as we should take precautions to save trees in time of war, so should we take great pains to save human life. All of this is done with an intimate sense of the shifting meaning of ancient language in its contemporary use. The shift and play on a classical Hebrew source in a contemporary, high-level poem of subtle protest was not limited to the discussions of academics and esoteric poetry journals but was turned into a pop song and broadcast on the radio, reaching the widest arena of popular culture.

Likewise, musical artists of the Yishuv during the pre-state period often put Biblical verses to music outside of their contexts in ways that gave secular meaning to language which

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## This phenomenon in Israeli art and culture comes at a time of new openness in Israeli secular society over the past decade to reclaiming elements of Jewish spirituality, religion and life.

was decidedly theological in its original context. The well known “*Mayim, Mayim*” song and dance was created in 1937 by choreographer Else Dublin and composer Emanuel Pugashov Amiran to celebrate the discovery of water on Kibbutz Na’an after a seven-year search. It is thought of as the first Hebrew folk dance created by the secular pioneer culture in Eretz Yisrael. It celebrates the ingenuity and capacities of the young *Halutzim* (pioneers) to conquer the desert, make it bloom and to celebrate their accomplishments with great joy. The lyrics are from Isaiah 12:3, “And you shall draw forth water with joy from the springs of salvation.” The song decidedly leaves out the preceding verse 12:2, “Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; for God is my strength and song and has become for me salvation,” chanted together with the third verse every Saturday night as part of the traditional *Havdallah* service. The *Halutzim* knew what they were doing as they reconstructed the very notion of salvation, putting it firmly in the hands of the human, restructuring the refrain of the verse to emphasize water and joy, repeating the word *mayim* (water) over and over again as the dancers narrow their circle coming together in a hand clap to underscore their success together in finding water and joy. And so the Hebrew word, *yeshuah*, salvation, got redefined in a visceral way through a popular cultural expression that turned the Biblical source on its head but still kept the Biblical reference as an important cultural component nonetheless. In this way, language and meaning are changed but the ancient roots are not expunged.

In the ensuing decades, whether it was Yehudit Ravitz putting Leah Goldberg poems to music or Yoni Rechter and Arik Einstein doing the same for the poems of Avraham Halfi, it would seem that Modern Hebrew poetry was often written waiting

for music to take it in flight. The cadence, rhythm and rhyme of many contemporary Hebrew poets still lend themselves to music in ways that contemporary American poetry with its insistence on defying the repetition of form and meter does not. And consequently, the work of those poets who earn the respect and consideration of their field in Israel is known and accessed on a popular scale in ways that don’t happen in the US. And with that, a corpus of literature that purposely mines traditional language and sources while restructuring those sources in contemporary language and perspective moves popular culture in authentic ways.

In the past 20 years or so, various contemporary Israeli musical artists have introduced traditional cultural elements into their music in new ways that leave intact much more of the fabric of authentic traditional forms without necessarily completely reconstructing them as their predecessors may have done. A forerunner of this came as early as 1989, when Ehud Banai included references to traditional Jewish religious life on his *Karov* album. Remembering his grandfather’s house, the holy books on its shelves and the traditional holiday songs he would hear at his table, he fuses a contemporary sound with the traditional melody for “*Asader Li Seudata*,” not just any Shabbat song but a hymn of deep mystical meaning attributed to Rabbi Yitzchak Luria and written for that matter in Aramaic. At the time this was rather novel and would have been somewhat threatening to the Israeli secular music scene if not for Banai’s credibility in that scene and personal qualities of humility and warmth that had made him quite beloved. Banai was introducing third-generation secularists to the traditional forms their grandparents had known well but had transformed and secularized through the very processes I’ve tried to quickly outline above. He was doing this in the medium of popular culture, a classic Israeli rock album.

By the time Idan Raichel appeared on the music scene in 2002, Israeli culture was ready for a new formula of using traditional forms in the context of contemporary expression. And those traditional forms were not only what would be familiar to those knowledgeable of Biblical and Rabbinic sources. Traditional Ethiopian elements, Yemenite sources and other traditions are fused with Middle Eastern and contemporary rock sounds in interesting new ways that celebrate a range of authentic expressions, sending a message that on the platform of Hebrew music a

wide range of cultures can be celebrated in an Israel that no longer feels the need to be homogenous. On his debut album, traditional sources and concepts are treated throughout. Of special note is the love song “*Hinech Yafah*,” which incorporates phrases from the Biblical *Song of Songs* into lyrics phrased in colloquial, contemporary Hebrew in interesting ways. Unlike the case with various Land of Israel songs from earlier decades which took whole passages from the *Song of Songs* and set them to music, Raichel is cutting and pasting where he wants to in an effort to say that he can take from the tradition on his own terms and feel comfortable in a contemporary idiom. His second Album, *Mi’ma’amakim*, released in 2005, plays with the language of Psalm 130 in its title song, using a traditional Hebrew expression of calling out to God but in order to speak of a romantic relationship. Again, Raichel does this while forging new possibilities of Hebrew phraseology, contributing to the language’s flexibility. The album is sprinkled with Hebrew, Amharic, Arabic, Zulu, Hindi and Yemenite Hebrew. What Raichel continues to do through his latest album, *At the Edge of the Beginning*, released in early 2016, is to celebrate a range of traditions and cultures but firmly in an overall Hebrew context. He doesn’t bracket classical sources and treat them separately from his overall work but cuts them down to the pieces he can use and fuses them into a new Israeli contemporary culture.

This phenomenon in Israeli art and culture comes at a time of new openness in Israeli secular society over the past decade to reclaiming elements of Jewish spirituality, religion and life. During this period, a range of “Secular Yeshivot” have opened. Young Israelis have evidenced all kinds of interest in expressing themselves through religious explorations on their own secular terms that would have been unthinkable 30 years ago. The informal *Hitchadshut* (“renewal,” not be confused with the American Jewish Renewal) movement has been growing and it finds openness to religious forms on a popular footing where there was hostility in previous times. This exploration finds resonance in forms of popular culture perhaps because there has always been an Israeli inclination to treat the serious questions embodied in high cultural expressions in the arena of broad popular forms with an enthusiasm for playing with the Hebrew language which ends up being the constant barometer of Israeli cultural development and change. ■



# BECOMING BAR MITZVAH(ed): A PHRASE COMES OF AGE

by HILARY SCHUMER

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016, in the midst of the 2016 Democratic primary campaign, *The New York Times* ran an article titled “Bernie Sanders is Jewish, but He Doesn’t Like to Talk About It.” As part of its discussion of Sanders’s Jewish upbringing in Brooklyn, the article noted that the Senator from Vermont “took Sunday Hebrew and Bible classes at an Orthodox synagogue, the Kingsway Jewish Center in the Midwood neighborhood, and was bar mitzvahed there.”

I had an immediate, negative response to reading this sentence; the phrase the *Times* was looking for was “became a bar mitzvah” or “celebrated his bar mitzvah” or even “was called to the Torah as a bar mitzvah.” To say that someone was “bar mitzvahed” is not grammatically correct. *The New York Times* had taken a noun and turned it into a verb.

In the midst of my righteous indignation, I paused to wonder: Is this actually bad grammar? *The New York Times* is a major national publication, and often writes about Judaism and Jewish life — surely some editor should have caught a mistake of this nature. So I checked the dictionary, only to find that Merriam-Webster has two entries for the phrase “Bar Mitzvah.” The first is as a noun: “(1) a Jewish boy who reaches his 13th birthday and attains the age of religious duty and responsibility; (2) the initiatory ceremony recognizing a boy as a bar mitzvah.” The second entry is as a verb: “to administer the ceremony of bar mitzvah to [someone].”

I was astounded to find that bar mitzvah existed — in technically correct English — as a verb. More interesting, this verb form refers not to the boy or girl becoming a bar or bat mitzvah, but to the person (most

likely a rabbi) officiating at the all-important ceremony. The implications of this verb form of bar mitzvah are intriguing, as the focus of the action shifts from the young person onto the rabbi. That is, when *The New York Times* says, “this is the synagogue where Bernie Sanders was bar mitzvahed,” what the article is actually saying is that “this is the place where some rabbi administered the ceremony of bar mitzvah to Bernie Sanders.”

*The Oxford English Dictionary* also lists multiple entries for bar mitzvah, one a noun and one a verb, though it differs in its latter entry, which states: “(usually be bar mitzvahed) Celebrate the bar mitzvah of (a boy).” This definition removes the focus from the rabbi, though it is not at all clear who is the subject of “to celebrate the bar mitzvah.” It does clarify that the words “to be” are generally added to form the past participle form of bar mitzvah (to be bar mitzvahed), addressing the awkwardness of the phrase, “to bar mitzvah.”

Turning nouns into verbs is apparently typical behavior for English-speakers. In 2013, the blog of the Oxford University press wrote about the “conversion of nouns to verbs [which] is known as ‘verbing’ and it has been around for as long as the English language itself.” The blog post goes on to say that even very old verbs “such as *rain* and *thunder*... were all originally used only as nouns before they became verbs.”

So when does a foreign word become an English word? And once it becomes an English word, does it stop being governed by the grammar of its language of origin? Because it is clear that at this point, bar mitzvah is indeed an English phrase. It is included in the Wikipedia entry for “List of English words of Hebrew Origin,” though it is also important to note that “bar” is in fact an Aramaic word, rather than Hebrew.

If only from an anecdotal perspective, it seems that many Yiddish words have also found their way into the English language: *chutzpah*, *schlep*, *maven*. All of these words have their own dictionary entries. A quick look at the news coverage of the 2016

Presidential Campaign reveals just how common these words have become in English: A January 7, 2016 article in *Slate* referred to Hillary Clinton as “Secretary of Schmooze,” while a July 19, 2016 *Atlantic* piece covered the “The Chutzpah of Paul Manafort and the Trump Campaign.” Most of these words have retained their original grammar (though one could argue that as a Germanic language, Yiddish structurally has significantly more in common with English than Hebrew).

All of this raises the question: Who owns words? If these words are now English phrases, subject to the rules of English grammar, does that make them somehow less Jewish?

With the caveat that this not an academically researched thesis, it seems to me that the answer is no. After all, it is not only *The New York Times* that uses the phrase “bar mitzvahed” — plenty of young Jews do as well. In fact, one could argue that the Anglicizing of Hebrew, Aramaic or Yiddish words implies that Jewish Americans feel a sense of ownership over them. We notice the proliferation of Yiddishisms in American parlance and smile. We say, “I was bar mitzvahed” because it is comfortable to talk about our Jewish identities in colloquial English. We do so without thought, because it is close to us. We like to talk about our Judaism and our Jewish experiences — and have them be understood by our non-Jewish friends and colleagues — and so we do so in a way that feels natural and authentic to who we are as American Jews.

So while the use of phrases like “bar mitzvahed” will continue to feel wrong to many Jews, it can also be seen as an outgrowth of a positive, proud American Jewish identity. After all, adapting important words from other languages is a very Jewish thing to do. For all my concern over the phrase “bar mitzvahed,” it is significant that the problematic sentence in the *Times* contained another English word that has foreign origins: synagogue, which the ancient Jews took from Greek. ■

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# THREE PROFILES

In this issue we visit three young Europeans paving original paths towards Jewish community, engagement and expression.

by LIAM HOARE

## DEBORAH BLAUSTEN A Scientific Spirit



“The idea that your identity is simply handed down to you is at odds with the predominant social narrative.”

The first thing I wanted to know about Deborah Blausten — the 25-year-old rabbinical student and one of *The Jewish Chronicle’s* 16 young British Jews to watch in 2016 — is what it was like growing up Jewish in London’s Hampstead Garden Suburb, going to a Church of England day school.

“It was really interesting. I’ve never been in a Jewish school environment, which in some ways is actually how most people live,” she told me. “Their daily lives are in the secular world but their Judaism is something that’s much more about how they are and how they navigate that world — and that was always my way of being. I was always ‘the Jewish one’ — or one of the Jewish ones.” It was one of the experiences that helped her grow her Judaism and her understanding of what makes it distinct.

Her family belonged to a Reform synagogue when she was a child but never attended regularly — more like two or three times a year. Judaism, she said, “was never thrust on me. It was something I could explore and understand why it made me different.” Judaism, or perhaps the extent of her Judaism, was a matter of choice. Her first real involvement came through Reform Synagogue Youth when she was a teenager — a community she described as being akin to having another home or family, a safe space.

When I asked what it was about the Reform movement back then that she identified with, Blausten said, “I think a focus on action” as well as “a sense of intellectual honesty, a desire for a congruity between one’s belief and one’s actions,” and the notion that Judaism can be as equally

driven and influenced by new as well as ancient texts — that there should be a dialogue between the two. Blausten studied medicine at University College London, and this was one environment where her Judaism came into conversation with different sources.

“There’s sometimes a concept that religion and science are diametrically opposed to each other, but the vocabulary I got through Progressive Judaism was that science is part of this way of discovering unfolding revelation”; that “what was known in every time builds generation by generation. I found that in tune with what I felt about the nature of knowledge and the world.” In other words, she said, “there is majesty, awe, and wonder in the details that science uncovers,” while believing this reveals something about the nature of the world and how it’s knitted together.

After taking a sabbatical from medical school, Blausten went to work for Jeneration, a Reform student movement on British university campuses. Jeneration sought to challenge the idea that Jewish societies were nominally Orthodox spaces, to build non-Orthodox communities, and to change the atmosphere in these societies by staking a claim to them on behalf of non-Orthodox students. Today, Blausten is the youngest student rabbi at Leo Baeck College, and her immediate ambition is to work in a synagogue and to continue to focus on technology and its role in education and community building.

“I’ll be a rabbi by the time I’m 30, and I don’t know what the Jewish community is going to look like in five years, let alone

40 years,” she said, adding that the character of rabbinic jobs is changing all the time. Still, Blausten said she “can’t imagine having a career that doesn’t involve working in a synagogue,” and that there is something amazing about a communal space that doesn’t discriminate or divide people into categories on the basis of age or gender. “Where else do you see a three-month-old and a ninety-year-old in the same place? The gift of community is to be with people who are different than you but in a sustained way where we model relationships across generations because we have a broader tie to each other.

“I think Progressive Judaism is the answer to the challenge of Judaism and modernity,” she told me. “Whether all parts of our movement have yet created a vocabulary to carry that out, I don’t know.” Blausten suggested that the number of conversions into Progressive Judaism was healthy, but that we — meaning world Jewry — “must be broader in terms of understanding what constitutes a successful Jewish community.” It’s more than just a numbers game. In particular, communities need to be more open to intermarried families, to understand that this presents an opportunity as opposed to a threat to Jewish continuity.

“We live in a world where identity is constructed as a choice in secular society,” she said. “The idea that your identity is simply handed down to you is at odds with the predominant social narrative. When we have young Jews who know they are part of the community by choice, they feel a lot more empowered.” ■

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## EDUARD FREUDMANN

# Archives of Memory



**V**iennese artist Eduard Freudmann describes The White Elephant Archive as his “most important project.” Beginning in 1979, his grandmother began to assemble an archive of objects and documents — “texts and poems, photographs, letters of correspondence, Super 8 recordings, audio recordings” — related to her family’s history during both the Holocaust and, later, in Austria’s Communist movement. Freudmann’s grandmother died in 1987, and in 2004, via Eduard’s uncle, her archive — this White Elephant — came into Eduard’s possession. He then made plans on how best to deal with it artistically.

Important, too, was to “work artistically with my Jewish identity and family history. Art has been an important tool in my family, I think, to talk about the Holocaust, especially for my grandfather,” who wrote poetry.

“I choose my media and format according to the subject that I work with,” Freudmann explained, and in the case of The White Elephant Archive, “I understood for a couple of reasons that the theatrical format as an art discipline would make the most sense.” Freudmann first presented the material as documentary the-

ater in the summer of 2012 while as artist-in-residence at Artport Tel Aviv. The piece is performed in English, in order to “speak to people who share the same family stories as me, coming from families that had a relationship with Vienna” — second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors in Britain, the United States and Israel.

Born in 1979, Freudmann lives in the city where he grew up, Vienna, which he described as having “very few Jews but a lot of Jewish accents.” Though he was only six or seven, he remembers the Waldheim Affair as a “very important moment in history” that affected, engaged and mobilized his family. “I remember that, with a friend, we drew election campaign material and handed it out to people” and “went to demonstrations,” he said. His family “stopped being Jewish for political reasons in the late 1940s.” After the Holocaust his grandparents, following a pattern of many survivors who chose to remain in Europe, subscribed to Communism, negated their Jewish identity and assimilated.

Coming from an assimilated background, then, Freudmann spoke of having to go through a process of reconnecting with Jewish identity, which started “very early as a kid. I understood I was Jewish but for quite a long time it was hard for me. I had a scattered identity,” he said, principally because his family “was not related to the community. I couldn’t find anybody to exchange with about it.” In that respect, it was important for Freudmann to leave Vienna and experience Jewish life in other countries — Israel, the United States and Canada — where Jewishness isn’t exclusively characterized by its relationship to negative aspects, like the Holocaust and anti-Semitism.

Important, too, was to “work artistically with my Jewish identity and family history. Art has been an important tool in my family, I think, to talk about the Holocaust, especially for my grandfather,” who wrote poetry. “He wrote

poems in the concentration camps and these poems enabled him to survive.” Although his grandmother did not have an artistic aim in mind when compiling it, Freudmann considers her archive a way of dealing with “family history using artistic tools and strategies.” The ways in which “my family had dealt with art became very relevant at a certain point when I studied,” he said. Freudmann studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and Bauhaus-Universität Weimar.

Indeed, if one examines Freudmann’s body of work, a consistent theme is the ways in which art can deal with historical memory, especially in relation to the Holocaust. One of his earliest projects, *Niemals Vergessen* (Never Forget), was a kind of guerilla project, providing a counter-narrative at Austrian sites of relevance to the Holocaust, in response to the government’s sanctioned program of public art projects responding to the anniversary of the end of World War II. Other projects of his have responded to anti-Semitism during the time of empire, the expulsion of Jews from Vienna under Nazism, and the treatment of minorities such as Romani and Albanians in Europe.

“Art has been a very important tool in Austria in order to deal with the past,” Freudmann said, although fine arts — as opposed to literature, film and theater — has not traditionally fulfilled such a role, perhaps because “in the past, it was considered harder to deal with explicitly political subjects in fine arts.” Freudmann made these artistic interventions, however, “out of necessity” and in reaction to the ways in which Austria has failed to come to terms with and acknowledge its associations with Nazism and its role in the Holocaust.

It is The White Elephant Archive, though, which is closest to Freudmann’s heart. Although he did not undertake it to please anyone, “The reactions in Israel and Europe have been very positive. It is something that gives me a lot of strength.” ■

## NIRIT BIALER

# A Home Away From Home



**N**irit Bialer, born and raised in Ra'anana, moved to Berlin in March 2006 when — like an increasing number of Israelis — she received a job offer and the opportunity to live in Europe.

“I started learning German when I was 14 — which was at the beginning of the 1990s — and I was always very much interested in Germany.” Bialer took part in a youth exchange project during her teenage years and was always “intrigued by the issue of the so-called third generation of Israelis and Germans today in terms of how they have come to terms with their pasts.” She studied international relations at university, much of her studies having to do with German-Israeli relations, and once she was

“It’s a way to show my home. I feel at home in Berlin — most of the time, at least — and I want Berliners to experience my home” too.

finished, she wanted to move to Berlin either for work or further study. “When it happened, I took the step.”

Bialer’s move came at the beginning of a change in Israel in terms of attitudes towards living in Europe and Germany specifically. “For an Israeli or Jew, to live in Germany, you’re confronted with questions like, ‘Why are you learning the language of the perpetrators?’ When I could come to Israel to visit, I was often asked, ‘Why do you live there with the Nazis?’” Now, she is more likely to

be asked what she’s doing back in Israel, since today, Israelis have had increased contact with Berlin and know a lot more about it. “Everyone has something positive to say about Berlin,” she said.

In the summer of 2011, after five years in Berlin, Bialer and a group of friends — who were meeting up from time-to-time in order to speak Hebrew, share jokes and discuss politics — began work on a project called *Habitat*. Although the name translates to home, *Habitat* does not refer to a physical space so much as an idea. “I’m not a religious person and I’m not some kind of political activist,” she said, but she still connects with Israeli-ness through culture. “I enjoy reading in Hebrew and watching Israeli films, because I can relate to the characters.”

*Habitat* is designed to promote contemporary Israeli culture in Berlin, not only to the Israeli community there but to anyone who wishes to experience Israel, get to know Israel and engage in a dialogue about the country. Many members of the Israeli expat scene in Berlin are artists and musicians, designers and photographers, and Bialer and her friends wanted to use their networks in order to show off their work, especially to help newcomers from Israel. “We’re really happy to give it a stage. It’s about letting the average German see Israeli culture, something different from what they get from history books or watching politics.”

The events take place in English or German, since it’s about enlarging the audience for Israeli culture beyond Israelis themselves. “It’s a way to show my home. I feel at home in Berlin — most of the time, at least — and I want Berliners to experience my home” too, Bialer said. One of *Habitat*’s

successful recent events was *Mimouna*, held in collaboration with Fraenkelufer Synagogue, bringing this distinctly Middle Eastern festival to Kreuzberg, an area of Berlin with a large immigrant population. That Moroccans from the local community turned up at the event, to hear and dance to the music they know but which is also ubiquitous in Israel, made it an especially touching event for Bialer.

To be an Israeli in Berlin is to be constantly confronted with questions pertaining to one’s identity. Israelis in Berlin are, need it be said, normal young people who shouldn’t be viewed only through the prism of the Holocaust. That said, to live as an Israeli Jew in Berlin is a “challenge,” Bialer said, where one is “confronted with provoking thoughts and encounters” all the time, noting as an example the *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones, a form of memorialization) that she sees almost every day on the street where she resides. The experience is one of “self-reflections no Jew can encounter anywhere else in the world.”

Living in Europe, in Diaspora, was also for Bialer the first time she had reflected on her Jewish identity. “I come from a secular background” in Israel, where one has what she called “the Jewish daily life. You get in trouble if you want to buy pork or go out on Yom Kippur. In Diaspora, you have the choice” all of a sudden about how you wish to be Jewish. In this respect, the transition from being in the majority to being a minority in another society can be jarring. “It’s exactly the opposite of living in Israel,” she said. “I never really thought about it before.” Only living abroad, in Berlin, created the conditions for Bialer to have this experience. ■

**OSWIECIM, POLAND** — Soon after the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, the Jews of this little southern Polish town were sent to their death or to forced labor. At the same time, the Nazis commenced building a death camp on the outskirts of the town that they called by its German name, Auschwitz.

After the Second World War, only a handful of Jews returned to Oswiecim. After

daughter's marriage. The answer is simple. I am a third-generation American Jew with no direct link to the Holocaust. I studied that era, read dozens of books about it and got to know many survivors and their families. But I regarded the Holocaust as a national Jewish tragedy, and not a personal one.

I finally got to visit Kluger's grave this summer thanks to an organization known as FASPE (Fellowships at Auschwitz for the

photographing victims to political cartooning to sex abuse among the clergy.

Similar discussions were going on in the other disciplines. All told, some 60 fellows participated this summer. Among the places we visited in Germany were Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe; the Topography of Terror, a museum built on the site where the headquarters of the Gestapo and SS once stood; and the House of the Wannsee Conference, where a group of Nazi leaders plotted the details of the "Final Solution."

In Poland we visited Krakow, where we got a small taste of what Jewish life was like before the Holocaust, and the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. We also visited Oswiecim, a town that once had ten functioning synagogues and now has none.

Oswiecim does, however, have the Auschwitz Jewish Center, which is in an old synagogue building in the center of town. The center is a museum and documentation center that is largely used by groups of Jewish visitors to Auschwitz. The building once housed the Chevra Lomedi Mishnayot Synagogue. My distant relative Szymson Kluger was the grandson of a rabbi who taught in the congregation; the family lived in a small house next to the synagogue. When Kluger returned to Auschwitz after the war, he was able to reclaim the house, and that is where he lived until his death in 2000. The house, which is now part of the Auschwitz Jewish Center, currently houses a vegetarian café called Café Bergson.

My son-in-law's mother, Marsha Goldberg, told me that her father, who found refuge in Israel and then New York after the Holocaust, at first tried to persuade his younger brother Szymson to leave Poland for either America or Israel, but that he came to accept his brother's decision to remain in Oswiecim.

"I truly believe that he was meant to be this symbol," Marcia told me of her uncle. "In a way, he was saying 'We Jews were here. We existed. We carry on.'"

Szymson is buried beneath a white monument shaped like a house, in Hebrew an *ohel*, in the Jewish cemetery in Oswiecim. When I visited, I gathered together a *minyan* and said *Kaddish* for him and the others buried there.

I was there on May 29. I noted on the tombstone that the anniversary of his death was May 26. I took a photo of the grave and texted it to my son-in-law. "Amazing," I said. "But I missed his *yartzeit* by just a few days."

Michael texted back, "look at the Hebrew date, the 21<sup>st</sup> of Iyar. That is today! Truly amazing!"

His mother, Marsha, likes to say "there are no coincidences." I don't know about that, but I do know that the day I visited Szymson Kluger's grave and said *Kaddish*, it was his *yartzeit*. I will always feel a connection to him and the tragedy that shaped his life and the lives of so many millions of others. ■

# THE LAST JEW OF AUSCHWITZ

by ARI L. GOLDMAN



all, who would want to live in the shadow of Auschwitz, where one million Jews were murdered by the Nazis? By the 1960s, nearly all of the Jews left Oswiecim to settle as new immigrants in Israel. But there was one man who remained. His name was Szymson Kluger and he became known as "the last Jew of Auschwitz." He died in 2000.

I had heard the story of Szymson Kluger many times, but to me he seemed to be more of an eccentric curiosity than a real person. And then, two years ago, in 2014, my daughter Emma married Szymson Kluger's great nephew, Michael Goldberg. Suddenly, I was somewhat related to this enigmatic man and wanted to know more about him.

The idea of visiting Szymson Kluger's grave became something of an obsession for me, a personal pilgrimage. Why should such a distant connection be so meaningful? I was only related to him, if at all, through my

Study of Professional Ethics). FASPE is the brainchild of a New York lawyer named C. David Goldman who, together with a core group of philanthropists and other donors, enables young professionals in five disciplines to visit Germany and Poland to study the Hitler era and draw lessons about ethical decision-making today.

Goldman, who is not a relative of mine, started FASPE in 2009 by taking young lawyers, doctors and seminarians on the journey. In 2011, he added journalists and asked me to develop the curriculum. Last summer he added a track in business ethics.

Since its inception, FASPE has operated under the auspices of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in lower Manhattan. FASPE is not a faith-based organization and, in fact, only a small percentage of the fellows are Jews. The program draws Christians, Jews, Muslims and people who profess no faith at all.

I have travelled three times with FASPE, most recently this summer. While our discussions inevitably begin with the Holocaust, our journalism conversations range from the Black Lives Matter movement to the ethics of

**Ari L. Goldman**, a professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, is an editorial consultant for CONTACT. He is the author of four books, including *The Search for God at Harvard* and *The Late Starters Orchestra*.

# GHIORA AHARONI: FUSING SCRIPTS, SCULPTURES AND CULTURES



Above: "Genesis." Opposite, top: "Genesis" detail. Bottom: "GER Grand Canal" detail, "GER" side view.

In exhibitions from Mumbai to Venice to New York, multi-disciplinary artist and designer Ghiora Aharoni parses the meaning of language, identity, religion and science, the social and spiritual significance of artifacts, and the imperative of intercultural understanding and respect.

Born and raised in Rehovot, Israel, Aharoni opened his multi-disciplinary studio in Manhattan in 2004, after having worked at several distinguished architecture firms in New York and receiving his Master's Degree in Architecture from Yale University.

A major component of Aharoni's art involves the intricate interweaving of scripts and texts. In 2010, inspired by the shared etymology of the word "home," he began fusing Hebrew and Arabic, creating a script for which he coined the term "Hebrabic/Arabrew®" and received a copyright. Sacred texts in the script, which are sometimes altered to extricate new meaning, appear throughout Aharoni's work in glass, wood, steel, aluminum and paper.

In his *Genesis Series*, a collection of seven sculptures investigating the dialogue between the empirical world and religious belief, Aharoni explores the seven days described in the story of creation through an assemblage of vintage laboratory equipment, iconic symbols, 18th and 19th century Torah finials from Yemen, Iraq and Morocco, and the Genesis text from the Torah. The work invites ruminations on the dichotomy of science and religion, with the unifying presence of light embodying a duality: the rational light of scientific truth on the one hand, divine illumination on the other.

His *GER/The Stranger* is currently on view in Venice in the exhibition "Divided Waters," as part of the official municipal events commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Jewish Ghetto. In the sculpture, Jewish and Christian religious iconography and two nearly identical glass spheres conjoined by vintage Torah finials evoke the parallel existences engendered by the historical segregation of the Jews of Venice. The sculpture's totemic, hourglass shape conveys a sense of time and of repetition, recalling the enduring struggle of humanity's relationship with otherness. But the sculpture is not resigned to defeatism. Engraved on the spheres is Hebrabic/Arabrew® script:

"The stranger shall not lodge in the street: I will open my doors to the traveller" (Job 31:32) and "Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10:19)

The passages bring a message of compassion, inclusion and coexistence as resonant and relevant today as it was in 1492, when Jews and Muslims sought refuge elsewhere in Europe and throughout the world after the Spanish Inquisition. ■



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