

Some glass provides a window onto the world. The glass sculptures and paintings by master artist Jeremy Langford provide a window into the Jewish soul.

Photos courtesy of Jeremy Langford

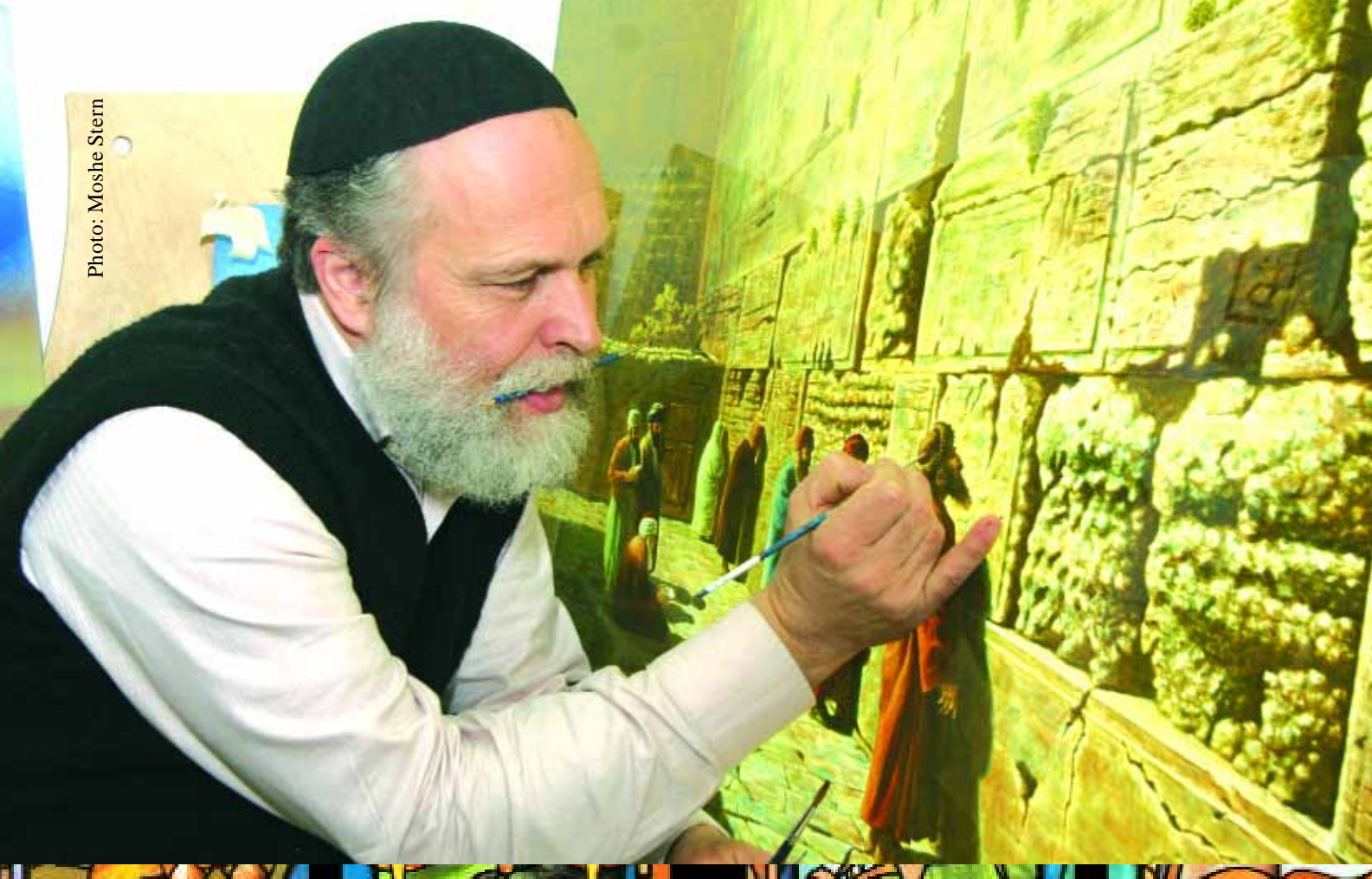
by Libi Astaire

Some thirty years ago, a young man with a talent for working in glass went looking for adventure in South America. His plan was simple: find a wealthy rancher, offer to do a glass sculpture or painting, get paid handsomely for his work, and then travel throughout the continent until his money ran out. At that point he would locate another wealthy rancher, and the cycle would begin anew.

The plan actually worked, because the young man, Jeremy Langford, happened to be an extremely talented artist. One day he received a commission for an exceptionally large job: depict the fierce battles between the Spanish Conquistadors and the native Aztec people. It took him nearly a month and a half to coax the battle scene out of the glass, but in the end his employer was very

GLASS ENCOUNTERS OF THE JEWISH KIND

"Jerusalem" – Generations Center, the Kosel Tunnels, Jerusalem



Jeremy Langford at work in his Bnei Brak studio

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pleased with his work — which was a good thing, because it turned out that his employer possessed more than a passing interest in murder.

“The guy was a mercenary,” Jeremy says with a laugh. “He paid me very well, but I went off very quickly after I found out.”

It’s a good tale that is told well by the artist. Yet what gives the story an added layer of interest is the location where it is being told: inside the Western Wall Tunnels. We are there because the composition of Jeremy’s client list has changed radically over the years. Instead of creating works of art for the homes of South American ranchers and mercenaries, he now uses his considerable talents to create masterpieces for some of the Torah world’s leading yeshivos and shuls. And just a few yards away from where we are sitting is his

most monumental project to date, the eight epic glass sculptures he recently created for the Western Wall Heritage Foundation’s new Generations Center.

A Wandering Jew “It was *min haShamayim* [from Heaven] that glass and I found each other,” comments Jeremy, as he gives a quick tour of his early years.

The son of a BBC director and a mother who was involved with dance, one could say that the arts were in his blood. So was being on the move. Because of his father’s career, which took them from England to Australia and back again, the family was constantly moving from place to place. “I think I had attended about forty schools by the time I was eighteen,” he says. “Not exaggerating. We were the wandering Jews par excellence.”

He describes his family’s religious observance as being “zero-affiliation.” Yet his father’s love for the State of Israel inspired him to uproot his family once again and come on aliyah. For sixteen-year-old Jeremy, the move was a rousing failure. After finishing high school he returned to England, where he met a master glass craftsman who was impressed enough with the budding artist’s talents to take Jeremy on as an apprentice.

Next came the stint in South America, which was followed by a period of commuting between his studio in England and his family in Israel. It was during this period that he had another “*min haShamayim*” encounter, this time with Kabbalah, which turned out to be a matchmaker for two important turning points in his life.

“I’ve always had a mystic bent to me,” he comments. “I didn’t read much when I was young. I remember being eleven years old and my mother took me to a public library and said, ‘Look at all these books. Why don’t you read?’”

“I said, ‘If you want to know the answer why I don’t read, it’s very simple. I want to know why the universe exists, and nobody knows. It’s not in any of these books, and so I’m not going to read them.’”

It was this need to understand what’s beneath the surface that led him to the study of Kabbalah. “Kabbalah was something that showed me some profound depths of understanding. I got some very

deep realizations, one of them being that if I wanted to be serious about studying Kabbalah then I would have to take on the works. I started becoming Shabbos observant and keeping Torah and mitzvot. And that is how I came to Yiddishkeit.”

The second turning point was at Ben-Gurion University, where he had been invited to give some lectures on Kabbalah to a group of scientists who were interested in the connection between the metaphysical and the physical. One of those scientists was a young woman who was attempting to understand some of the deeper meanings of life through the study of quantum physics.

“We ended up getting married,” says Jeremy, obviously pleased with the way that particular chapter in his life’s story has turned out. “Today we’re living in Bnei Brak with our five kids.”

One of his most important teachers during this time was Rav Baruch Shalom HaLevi Ashlag, the eldest son and successor of Rav Yehuda Leib HaLevi Ashlag, author of *HaSulam*, a commentary on the *Zohar* and who was considered to be one of the foremost Kabbalists of the twentieth century.

“I got to Rav Baruch Shalom Ashlag after a lot of searching around. He was a scholar in Kabbalah and Gemara, and had a deep and comprehensive understanding, of all parts of the Torah. In order to learn there, we had to be married. We had to study Gemara and halachah, as well. And it was very important that we worked. He said that he wanted people who had their feet on the ground and were balanced. If they were going to be studying such deep things in Heaven, they needed to be grounded and not angels flying in Heaven.”

The Language of Art Although during his younger years his interest in glass and his interest in Yiddishkeit followed separate paths, there did come a point when the two began to fuse. Today, he is not only the master of some thirty different techniques for glassworking, but he is also an expert in the halachos of synagogue-related art, as well as the customs of the many different communities that make up the tapestry of the Jewish People.

“I do a great deal of work with stained glass in synagogues,” he explains. “I’ve done work for basically all the chassidic groups, and everyone has different nuances in their approach. I did a commission for Nadvorna, and the rebbe was very specific about what he wanted. I also did a job for the shul of the Sadigura Rebbe in Tel Aviv, a depiction of the Twelve Tribes, and the rebbe had a different interpretation than what I would normally do.

“Rabbi Ovadia Yosef has a halachic ruling about not putting images of animals in synagogues. There are Sephardic shuls that are taking down the curtains that cover the Holy Ark that have images of lions on them and replacing them. So the Twelve Tribes that I do today for a Sephardic shul is very different than what I would do for an Ashkenazic shul.”

He has also done commissions for the *litvish* community, including the Ponevezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. When asked how beautiful glass paintings fit in with the rigid approach to materialism that is often associated with yeshivos like Ponevezh, he explains, “Even in Ponevezh there is a need, and I have an understanding of their approach as well.

“They asked me to do a hall of remembrance for the yeshiva, a very large memorial to the Lita community that was destroyed during the Holocaust. They originally wanted it to be a huge hall that would be a remembrance of the Shoah. However, I said to Rav Kahaneman, ‘This is Ponevezh. The greatest remembrance of the Shoah is what is happening here, that people are sitting and learning.’”

So instead of making an area that would be exclusively used as a memorial hall, they decided to use the hall as a study hall where the students learn.

“Even in the most stark environment, sometimes an expression needs to be made that can only be made through art,” he explains. “Art is a language, like Hebrew, like Yiddish, like French. But it’s a non-verbal language, and sometimes you can convey so much more emotional expression through the language of art than

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“The Sadigura Twelve Tribes Window” – Magen Avraham Synagogue, New Jersey, USA



"Jerusalem Heritage Doors" – New Jersey, USA



Photo: Moshe Stern

Jeremy Langford

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Connecting the Generations Jeremy’s studio, which is located in the industrial zone of Bnei Brak, employs a permanent staff of ten highly trained glass

artists. The artists are all new immigrants who have been educated outside of Israel, since Israel doesn’t yet offer a level of art instruction high enough to meet Jeremy’s exacting standards.

In addition to his work for shuls, Jeremy receives commissions from all over the world to create architectural glass work for high-end real estate projects and public buildings, as well as commissions for glass sculptures and paintings for private residences. He also finds time to “commission” artwork from himself, and create sculptures and paintings that reflect his artistic vision alone. Yet even though his non-*frum* work gives him more artistic freedom, in theory, two works of his in Jerusalem’s Jewish Quarter show just how far a creative spirit can soar while still remaining firmly within the traditional four cubits of Jewish law.

When Aish HaTorah asked him to create an *aron kodesh* for a space in their Jerusalem yeshivah, which was designed by world-renowned architect Moshe Safdie, he was given a challenging mission: create an *aron kodesh* that had never been done before.

“I said, ‘Aish HaTorah is a place for outreach. It wants to allow people access to the Torah. So we’re not going to set the *aron kodesh* into the wall. We’ll bring it all the way out, so that people can walk all the way around it.’”

Jeremy also wanted the *aron kodesh* to be transparent so that people could see the Torah scrolls when they were sitting inside the closed ark. However, when the question was posed to Rav Elyashiv as to whether or not a transparent *aron kodesh* was permissible, the answer was no: according to halachah the Torah scrolls should be concealed.

“This *aron kodesh* is really pushing the envelope, but it’s within halachah,” Jeremy comments, pointing to a photograph of the *aron kodesh*, which was eventually constructed from non-transparent glass. “The work is always within the halachah.”

Halachic issues were also at the core of an artistic challenge that involved five years of his life: the design, creation, and installation of eight monumental glass sculptures for the Generations Center, a project of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, located just a few steps away from the Kosel. Here, Jeremy’s brief was to present the entire history of the Jewish people — from the time of the Avos to the present day — through artwork that is accompanied by a sound and light presentation.

According to Jeremy, the purpose of the hour-long presentation at the Gener-

ations Center is to reach out to people who come to the Kosel, but are far away from Yiddishkeit, and show them that their roots in Jerusalem and Eretz Yisrael are very, very deep. However, in order to satisfy all halachic opinions, he had to come up with a way to depict a history of a people without drawing any figures or people.

“I came to the site with great trembling. I said, ‘This is the Kotel. This is not just another art project. I’ve really got to be careful about what I do here. This site has been here for 3,000 years. I’m going to add on another layer to what has been organically growing here for over 3,000 years ... I have to respect the archaeology, the history, and the holiness of the site.’”

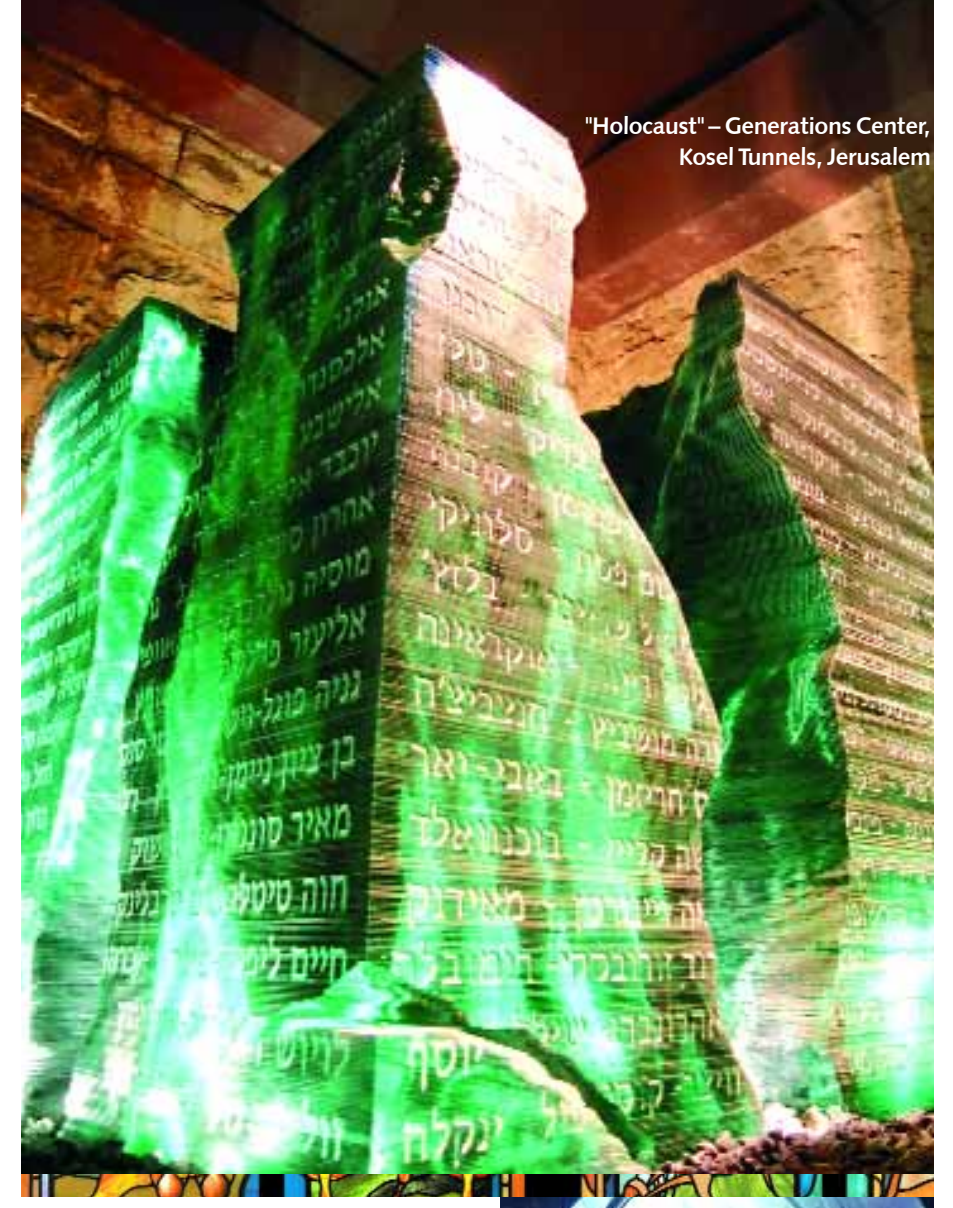
“Sometimes I would sit in the tunnels at night to try feeling what was going on here. It took me a year to design the sculptures. I threw away so many designs, until I felt what was right and the rabbis and everyone agreed that this was it.”

The artistic concept he finally decided upon was to use a pillar created from sculpted glass to tell the story. “The pillar is a development,” he explains. “It starts with a point, which develops into a line, which then thickens into a pillar. Each pillar is built from layers of glass, which represents the contribution of each Jew over the years, everything he had to do. Each individual Yid, the Jewish spark, is part of the pillar. Each individual layer creates this ebb and flow over the generations.”

Another integral part of the artwork is the use of names, which are carved into the sculpted glass pillars. The names of Avraham Avinu, Moshe Rabbeinu, and Dovid HaMelech are obviously a part of the panorama. However, also etched into the glass are less familiar names, but the names of our people, nonetheless: Jews who were slaughtered during the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, Jews who perished in Auschwitz, and Jews who died fighting for Jerusalem during our own era.

The idea of using names to convey the flow of Jewish history was a part of the Generation Center’s concept even before Jeremy was invited to work on the project. However, it was something that he was very happy to incorporate into his design.

“The names are really showing our connection with our past. Look what happened in Egypt. We didn’t change our names. The generations are passed on through the names. We can see our connection with the past. We’ve got Avrahams today. We’ve got Yitzchaks



"Holocaust" – Generations Center, Kosel Tunnels, Jerusalem

today. So the names are a very important, emotive part of the experience.”

If he had any hesitations about doing the project, which involved transporting some 165 tons of glass into the newly excavated area by hand, he says that the hesitations disappeared one day when he was installing the sculptures.

“It was the time of the Olympic Games in Greece, and one of the radio stations here interviewed a young Israeli girl who was nineteen years old. The girl said, ‘I’m so jealous of those Greeks.’ And the interviewer said, ‘Why?’ She said, ‘Look what history they’ve got. What do we have? Sixty years?’”

“When I heard that, I thought, ‘If I had any doubts about what we’re doing here, this dispels everything, because people don’t know where they’re coming from.’ If we can get people to understand where we’ve come from — that we’re one of the most ancient people around, and that the Torah has kept us here for all this time, and that there was always a yearning for Zion — then we will have given them a sense of identity. They’ll see that we’re not sixty years in Israel. We’re more than 3,000 years on this planet.” ■



Aron Kodesh, Aish HaTorah Yeshivah, Jerusalem