

TORAH SCROLLS hang from a ceiling with nooses wrapped around their handles. (Photos courtesy)



Escaping the gallows of history

A small museum in the historic Heichal Shlomo building on Jerusalem's King George Avenue reveals a little-known collection of Judaica awaiting visitors

• ELIA BERGER

In early 2002, following a meeting with US president George W. Bush, Lithuanian prime minister Algirdas Brazauskas agreed to hand over 300 Torah scrolls to an Israeli delegation at a ceremony in Vilnius (Vilna). The sacred texts, some of which date back to the 17th century, were confiscated by the Nazis during World War II and kept in a church cellar by the Lithuanian government.

"They killed the rabbis and students but they could not kill the spirituality of the Jewish people, and it is back today in our eternal capital of Jerusalem," said then-deputy foreign minister Rabbi Michael Melchior - who headed the delegation - when the scrolls finally returned home.

This theme of survival, of defying a history of persecution, reverberates throughout the Wolfson Museum of Jewish Art, where 120 of these scrolls hang from a ceiling with nooses wrapped around their handles as if awaiting execution. The rows of gray bloodstained sacks, in which the scrolls were found, wane into darkness from the "gallows" and evoke the memory of Lithuanian Jewry, 94 percent of whom perished in the Holocaust. It is also a parable for Jewish identity as a whole.

The small museum - veiled within the historic Heichal Shlomo building on Jerusalem's bustling King George Avenue - provokes visitors with its symbolism. In the same dimly lit space where the scrolls hang defeated, stands a floor-to-ceiling bookcase with texts shelved sideways and backwards - turned in the wrong direction to cover their titles and names. The loss of identity weaves into the museum's theme of preservation in the face of annihilation.

"We are trying to discover the secret of the survival of the Jewish nation," says the museum's curator Nurit Sirkis Bank, who recalls this famous quote from Mark Twain: "All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

"One of the secrets," according to Bank, "is the book," around which the museum is skillfully crafted. The Jews are the People of the Book, which refers to the Bible in particular and to learning in general.



THE TALLIT of the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th-century rabbi and founder of hassidic Judaism.



TALLIT CANDLE holders.

The building, with its marble floors, stained-glass windows and majestic wooden doors inset with bronze reliefs, was designed by Hungarian architect Alexander Friedman and completed in 1958. It was originally the setting for the Chief Rabbinate – a spiritual center envisioned by the country’s first chief rabbi, Isaac Herzog.

From the tomes of Herzog’s study to the 100,000th book lent out from the Vilna Ghetto library, “the bookcase is a visual image of Jewish knowledge and thought that is built on history,” says Bank. “While Jews were being massacred in the Holocaust, Jewish life continued.”

The rabbi also conceived of a museum with Jewish artifacts from all over the world, which materialized in 1958 with the help of visionary Yehuda Leib Bialer. In his efforts to rebuild the Jewish nation after the Holocaust, Bialer went to the destroyed synagogues and communities of war-torn Europe and collected their treasures, distributing them to congregations and institutions in the Diaspora. In 1949 he came to Israel, and with funds provided by British philanthropist Sir Isaac Wolfson, he created the museum which today houses one of the world’s most important collections of Jewish art.

When the rabbinate left the building in 1998, it marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. “We want something that is relevant to our lives today,” asserts Bank. “While many Jewish museums focus on holidays, the calendar and life cycle, my idea came from a different direction: ‘The One and the Oneness,’ a delicate tapestry of relations between the individual and the community.”

This exhibition juxtaposes the beauty and grandeur of organized religious ceremonies

with the simplicity of individual prayer. One side of the room features elaborate Torah decorations used in the synagogue: the silver shields and crowns, ivory pointers and velvet covers, from 17th-century Europe to 19th-century North Africa. These contrast with a display on the opposite side: a sculpture of a Jew studying the Torah, as well as personal prayer books and notes from the Holocaust – such as a siddur written by three young people from memory while in hiding, and a man imprisoned in Poland who wrote his prayers on medicine wrappers with pens made from fish bones.

“What we want to show is that praying to God is not just something that one has to do in an official way, in a community, in a synagogue,” says Bank. “It can be individual.”

European artist Abel Pann captures this idea in his 20th-century oil painting of King David praying in a field as he tends his sheep, which represents individual piety, the ability to be alone with God and pray from the heart. It is also embodied by the 18th-century rabbi and founder of hassidic Judaism, the Baal Shem Tov, whose tallit is on display.

“This is one of the most important pieces that we have here in our collection,” says Bank, pointing to the white silk prayer shawl with a burgundy rim, shining solemnly from a glass case. “The Baal Shem Tov came with a new vision of Judaism that starts from within: that the most simple people who only know how to read Psalms and say a few prayers are no less important than the sages and geniuses of Israel. He started the idea of singing, of happiness, of delving deep into our souls to find God within us. Even in the worst conditions people try to attach >>>



AMERICAN ARTIST Tobi Kahn's sculpture, 'Saphyr', is about the counting of the Omer. The 49 sculpted forms, set in a grid, tie in the concept of the individual and society. A peg is added each day, symbolizing individual building blocks that meld into a nation.

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A conceptual piece by American artist Tobi Kahn relates to "the meaning of beauty," as he calls it. "The centrality of beauty to holiness is not only authentic but essential to Jewish tradition."

The sculpture, called *Saphyr* (Counting), is about the counting of the Omer, the 49-day interval between Passover and Shavuot, marking the period between the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai – or the path from physical freedom to spiritual freedom. The 49 sculpted forms, set in a grid, tie in the concept of the individual and society. A peg is added each day, symbolizing individual building blocks that meld into a nation.

"Each day is its own holiday, but it's part of a larger holiday," Kahn told *The Jerusalem Post Magazine* in a telephone interview from New York. "Each piece works off the piece next to it. Everyone builds their own home and environment. Each person is its own institution. Together they form a community."

This piece will be featured in the Biennale for Contemporary Jewish Art, a biannual show that will be held in Jerusalem for the first time later this year. Kahn, a child of Holocaust survivors who describes himself as "a traditional Jew," lived in Israel in his early 20s before moving back to the US for art school.

"I continually come back to Israel because I'm obsessed with it by now," he says. "Israel continues to be a huge part of my life." In fact, his first exhibition was in the quaint Jerusalem neighborhood of Ein Kerem in 1978.

The works of Kahn and other contemporary artists are displayed in the museum's eight exhibits alongside earlier pieces, which is a key motif. "Together with the old and ancient, we have the new and modern," explains Bank. "We're hoping to move the museum into the elevator of time, from past to present to future."

Austro-Hungarian painter Isidor Kaufmann traveled through 19th-century Eastern Europe hoping to capture the face of the Jewish community with his portraits of hassidim, rabbis and ordinary people. He believed the world of Ukrainian, Polish and Russian Jewry, among others, was vanishing through assimilation, and he sought to recreate it for posterity.

These are contrasted with modern figures, with a similar attention to detail that Kaufman is so famous for. The message is clear.

"No, we weren't extinguished, we didn't evaporate," says Bank. "Yes, we had very hard

times, but we're here and these are portraits of people that live now, today, in Jerusalem."

Continuity and restoration come together in a glass case featuring the prickly white shells of the *hilazon* (sea snail) with pointy tails. This creature is the source of the biblical *techelet*, the sky blue dye used in the clothing of the high priest, the tapestries in the Tabernacle and the tzitzit of the tallit. The formula for this precious dye was lost after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, but was rediscovered through the work of Israeli archeologists and scientists in recent times.

Artist Avi Biran brings this ancient-modern theme to fruition with candlestick holders dubbed *Pamotchelet* – a combination of the words *pamot* (candleholders) and *techelet*. "The tallit is often used as a *huppa*," Biran told the *Magazine*. "And this piece unites the man and the woman."

"I am continuing with the tradition of Judaica that is meant to praise the commandments," he continues. "This artwork connects generations and contributes to the development of the current generation. I hope that children who see this will ask questions, and it will lead to the study of the Torah."

Indeed, the museum mainly caters to pupils from around the country, from the first grade through high school.

"The vision was to establish a heritage center for the Jewish people," said museum director Shlomit Sabbagh. "We want to try to draw in those who might be wavering between religion and secularism and are trying to connect."

Finally, there is the miniature *aron kodesh* (holy ark) that housed a tiny Torah scroll taken into space by Israel's first astronaut Ilan Ramon, who died in the *Columbia* shuttle disaster in 2003. The scroll was given to a bar-mitzva boy, Joachim Joseph, in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Nazi Germany by the chief rabbi of Amsterdam, a fellow prisoner. They woke up every night so the boy could learn his Torah portion from this palm-sized treasure.

After the Holocaust, Joseph became an Israeli astrophysicist who later worked with Ramon when he was selected for the *Columbia* mission. The astronaut asked the professor if he could take the scroll into space, and during the odyssey, he showed off the sacred scroll to the world.

"I think this represents, more than anything, the ability of the Jewish people to survive," Ramon said at the time. "It represents their ability to go from black days, from periods of darkness, to reach periods of hope and faith in the future." ■