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## ART GOES KOSHER

MR. BARUCH NACHSHON

The first person to spot my artistic ability was my kindergarten teacher. A rowdy child growing up in 1940s Haifa, I showed little interest in the regular games. But, when she brought me some paper and colored pencils, I found myself.

In school, the only thing that interested me was the ceiling; I could imagine anything on that empty white space. Biblical studies interested me least of all; our teacher was less concerned with the soul of the prophets and their messages, than with analyzing the text with the tools of biblical criticism, a kind of scriptural autopsy. When I was eleven, my father brought me to the artist and photographer Shlomo Narinsky. I would go out into the fields or the Carmel forest to paint, and then come to him once a week to receive his criticism and guidance.

After high school, I went to Kerem B'Yavneh, a religious Zionist *yeshivah*, where one day, a few friends suggested making a trip to Kfar Chabad. I didn't know where that was, but I was curious. We went to a *farbrengen* there and the songs I heard that night captivated me; they came from the heart and penetrated straight into mine. *This is what I have been longing for*, I thought. Seeing the children with that pure look in their eyes alongside elderly *chasidim* was enchanting. I transferred to the Chabad *yeshivah* in nearby Lod where I was introduced to *chasidic* teachings. With them, I probed deep, I reached high, and I broadened my horizons.

I also began a correspondence with the Rebbe, writing my questions and doubts and receiving detailed responses from him. When I met my wife, I told her of my dream to meet the Rebbe in person.

"I do not think it is appropriate to consider traveling here," wrote the Rebbe when I told him of my wish. "Nevertheless, since you have twice asked for an affidavit, I have instructed that one be sent to you." With this document, the immigration authorities would allow us to stay in America. Over the course of the next year, we saved money for a ticket: Not by plane, which was too expensive, but by ship.



We arrived in the summer of 1964, after a three-week ordeal at sea, and went straight to 770 Eastern Parkway. We put down our suitcases there, and I saw a very dignified looking man walk past and smile at us. "I believe that's the Rebbe," I told my wife. In those days, there was only one picture of him in circulation.

The very next day, I had a three-hour audience with the Rebbe.

"What brought you here?" he inquired at the start of our meeting. The Rebbe seemed like a father to whom one could tell everything; instead of rebuking, he would react with a loving smile. I unloaded everything that was burdening me.

There was one line that the Rebbe told me, towards the end, that is seared into my memory: "Many generations have passed, but the capacity to create art in a kosher way, has yet to be been rectified. You will be able to do it." I felt as though a great burden had been placed on my shoulders: Could I achieve something that had not been achieved by all the generations before me? How?

continued on reverse

MY ENCOUNTER  
with the REBBE

An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in over 1,700 videotaped interviews conducted to date. While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the listener's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words.



continued from reverse

"What does 'kosher' mean here?" I asked. The Rebbe directed me to consult with a rabbi. He also informed me that he would sponsor a full year of studies, including my living expenses, and advised me to focus on learning practical skills rather than art history and the like. Not knowing the language, I was put in touch with someone to help me find an appropriate place to learn.

After consulting with Rabbis Zalman Shimon Dvorkin and Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, who explained what was Halachically permitted and what was not, I had a definition of "kosher art." I was then introduced to a Jewish artist named Chaim Gross, who offered me a scholarship in one of three art courses. But, then I discovered that these courses did not comport with those guidelines. "Thank you, but this isn't for me," I declined.

"Young man," the artist replied, "the Lubavitcher Rebbe knows Halacha, but Chaim Gross knows art."

Still, I felt a great sense of responsibility towards the historic mission that the Rebbe had assigned to me. I had to do it properly, even if that meant making sacrifices. I met Gross again, years later, and when he saw my portfolio, he admitted that the Rebbe was right. "Because you took your inspiration from Heaven, you are not bound by the conventions of professors. You are a free man!" To me, those words were worth more than any diploma.

After finding an appropriate program there, I spent a year studying at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, and then another year looking for work, after which the Rebbe told us that our place was in Israel. After the Six Day War, we settled in Chevron.

I continued to paint, but making a living off it was difficult and our family was growing. In 1978, I was invited to make an exhibition for Lubavitch in London and then had the idea to take my paintings to New York.

When I offered to show some of them to the Rebbe, he asked, "Why only one or two pictures?" Instead, he suggested putting on an exhibition next door to 770 — and he would open it.

He spent some fifty minutes going from one painting to another, making various remarks, questions, and even suggestions. On one painting, he noted that the wings of the cherubim should be covering the Holy Ark instead of being extended above it, following the biblical description rather than the Christian interpretation of it, and that they should have young faces. On an image contrasting a *tzaddik* with the forces of darkness, he suggested that the *tzaddik* should be on top.

"But it represents the time of exile," I explained.

"Nevertheless," he said, "a Jew is above everything."

The Rebbe also noticed some tiny details where I had made mistakes; a hand with six fingers, *tefillin* without separate compartments, or a crescent moon facing the wrong direction in my piece *Red Moon*. In *King Solomon's Palace*, he noticed that one of the figures had been depicted in Assyrian, rather than Egyptian style. At one

point, he asked, "Where are the dancing *chasidim*?" Later, I would frequently include that image in my work.

"Have they bought anything?" he inquired before leaving, to which I replied, "When people heard the prices, they fainted..."

"If so," said the Rebbe with a smile, "make sure to sell to healthy people." He then asked his secretary, Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, to help me make a catalog of my work and suggested that I prepare some lithographs for sale.

The humanity he showed me then gave me a wonderful feeling. In the years since, I have exhibited around the world and seen how my work has uplifted people. I have also tried to bring the stories of the Torah, as they are illuminated by Midrashic and *chasidic* sources, to life; perhaps this was what the Rebbe meant by "rectifying art."

*Mr. Baruch Nachshon was an internationally acclaimed artist and a founding member of the renewed Jewish settlement in Chevron, living nearby until his passing in 2021. He was interviewed in his Kiryat Arba home in June of 2010.*

## This week in....

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין  
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחי

> **5732-1972**, the Rebbe met with the young leadership cabinet of the United Jewish Appeal for several hours until sunrise. "My request is for each of you to become more Jewish than you are today," the Rebbe said, "by beginning to perform at least one more *mitzvah*." The Rebbe also told them that the main benefits awaiting immigrants from the Soviet Union were not materialistic — immigrating to a new country is, after all, rife with difficulty — rather, they were in the realm of religious freedom and Jewish education.<sup>1</sup>  
19 Adar

> **5744-1984**, the Rebbe told the story of Choni Hame'agel from the Talmud which occurred on this date. He described how Choni announced to G-d that he would not budge from his spot until rain fell. Once the rain began, he only let up once there was the right amount: neither a drizzle nor a destructive downpour. The lesson, the Rebbe taught, is that as children of G-d, every Jew can stubbornly implore G-d for his needs, especially for the coming of Mashiach.  
20 Adar II

1. Dyedushka: Harabi Melubavitch Viyahadut Rusia page 516; Maaseh Berebi page  
2. Torat Menachem 5744 vol. 2, p. 1307

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