



Egyptian funerary figure dating from 650 BCE, from the Bible Lands Museum's permanent exhibition

Where the past meets the future

Angels and Demons. Three Faces of Monotheism. The Dawn of Civilization. No, these are not new Dan Brown novels or Steven Spielberg films. They are the names of exhibitions at the remarkable Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem, where visitors will find a treasure trove of antiquities from the beginning of the civilized world / Darryl Egnal

The Bible Lands Museum, located on Museum Row in the cultural heart of Jerusalem, is currently celebrating 18 years of existence. In Jewish numerology, 18 means “life” and life means looking to the future – and the team at the Bible Lands Museum indeed believes that educating children about their past, their common heritage and their differences will encourage them to become educated, pluralistic and culturally-aware adults in the future.

“At 18 years old, we are at a very interesting crossroads,” elaborates Amanda Weiss, director of the museum and daughter of co-founder Batya Borowski. “We have already established ourselves as a museum and now we are looking towards the future. And children are our future and our vision. They carry our hopes and our dreams. Therefore, providing them with a broad, open, balanced education is essential. In fact, it’s what keeps me here at the museum.”

Unique treasures

The museum’s permanent exhibition spans more than 20 galleries taking visitors through the chronological history of the Bible lands, whose geographical boundaries extend from Afghanistan in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, and from the Caucasian mountains in the north to Nubia in the south. The exhibition features rare and unique treasures from these lands dating from the earliest civilizations to the Byzantine period, enabling visitors to discover the remarkable wealth of the neighboring cultures and how they have influenced each other.

Then there are the temporary exhibitions. Each year, there is at least one major exhibition that continues throughout the year in order to create educational programs around the topic, such as the interesting and intriguing “Angels and Demons – Jewish Magic through the Ages.” There are also various shorter and smaller exhibitions at any given time.

The museum’s mission is to teach the past and understand where we come from in order to move forward into the future. According to its co-founder, the late Dr. Elie Borowski, the future of mankind has its roots in the past; only through understanding our history can we build a better future. And Elie, together with his wife Batya, moved mountains to enable a better understanding of ancient lands through the establishment of the Bible Lands

Museum in 1992.

“Since then, the museum has earned international acclaim as a universal center for cultural and educational programming,” says Weiss. “It is the only museum of its kind in the world where the civilizations of the Ancient Near East are brought to life from the dawn of civilization to the early Christian era.”

The Bible Lands Museum is in fact an interactive time capsule for visitors of all ages and faiths, laymen and scholars alike. Visitors from Israel and from around the world enjoy touring through the galleries and discovering the wonders of the ancient cultures and their inter-relationships.

“This museum is like a blank canvas in terms of what it has to offer, and you can paint the story that you want to tell,” says Weiss. “There is so much information here that you can choose, create and design your own tour, whether you want to do it through the footsteps of Abraham, through the footsteps of the Bible, following the development of art and communication, or perhaps delving into the history of language.”

A special legacy

Elie Borowski spent his entire adult life immersed in history and Judaism. Not only did he study at the finest *yeshivahs* in Poland, where he was born, but he also went on to study in Italy, France and Switzerland at some of the top universities. By the time war broke out, he was well-educated in a variety of areas, but his focus was the Ancient Near East and the lands of the Bible. “He was a Renaissance man,” says his step-daughter Amanda Weiss. “He really was from an era and a time and an education system that we don’t have the privilege of being part of today.”

Sadly, Elie Borowski is no longer with us, but his legacy remains, a legacy his family continues to develop and grow with passion, love and enthusiasm. He started to build this legacy after World War II, when he began collecting antiquities, and he started to realize his dream on the day he met Batya. It was in 1981 in the bar of Jerusalem’s King David Hotel. Batya and her daughter Amanda were travelling together and had attended an opening of an exhibition



Children on a guided tour of the museum led by costumed actors, Sukkoth 2009



Making history come alive

"These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations; and of these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood" (Genesis 10:32). As you walk into the first gallery of the Bible Lands Museum, this quote stands on the wall in front of you. It is the first part of the exhibit that shows we are all descendants of Noah, whether Jewish, Christian, Moslem, religious or secular.

With this in mind, the museum has embarked on a variety of educational programs that bring together people of different faiths. The adult education program for Arabs and Jews, for example, is in the form of teacher training courses that are coexistence-based, and it encourages teachers to open their eyes and the eyes of others to our shared common heritage by using the Bible Lands Museum as the foundation.

"The museum itself is a classical museum," explains Yehuda Kaplan, the museum's education director. "The artifacts themselves don't speak, so if you're not a freak of archaeology or ancient Near Eastern studies, it's very hard to cope with all this information. It really is a vast amount of information – geographical, historical and archaeological – so you should have some sort of guidance in order to be led through this labyrinth of information. There should be some kind of story told that leads you, especially if you're leading young kids."

Enter a book starring Shamshi – one of the museum's newest creations. Weiss calls him her "newest grandson." "He's a *shlemazel* (an unlucky person) from ancient Bablus (a fictional place)," she says. "We made him up entirely. Artistically, he's the creation of a very brilliant young Russian immigrant animator. In the book, Shamshi walks into the museum and invites you to follow him, and the first thing he does, of course, is to fall down the stairs and say: 'Just watch out for the steps!' And then he goes down through the galleries and walks in the footsteps of the Bible, and he discovers the cultures that existed."

"Kids are not attracted to Biblical studies, to history, and I think that one of our tasks here is to help and support the educational system in Israel in order to make this world much friendlier, much more accessible," says Kaplan. "And we invest a lot in order to do it, to create something for the kids in those galleries, because most of these artifacts are not relevant to daily life today. So we have to make it alive and interesting for them. We have to create this link between the past and the present."

Discovering similarities

"In the Image of Abraham," a project which brings together Arab and Jewish children in the fourth and fifth grades, has been running very successfully since 1998. According to Kaplan, it is probably one of the few opportunities in Jerusalem for children of both sides to come together and learn about each other. "We're dealing with children who have real things in common, so we bring them together for a series of meetings to enable them to discover their similarities and appreciate and respect their differences – religious, cultural and linguistic."

The children don't speak a common language; the Arab children hardly know any Hebrew and the Jews don't know Arabic, but the group is led by two guides who are both bilingual so that everyone can be understood. They conduct workshops together, they play together, and there is a final event in which the parents come to hear about the project and see the interaction.

"It is called 'In the Image of Abraham' because Abraham is our common forefather and his characteristics symbolize many things for both people," elaborates

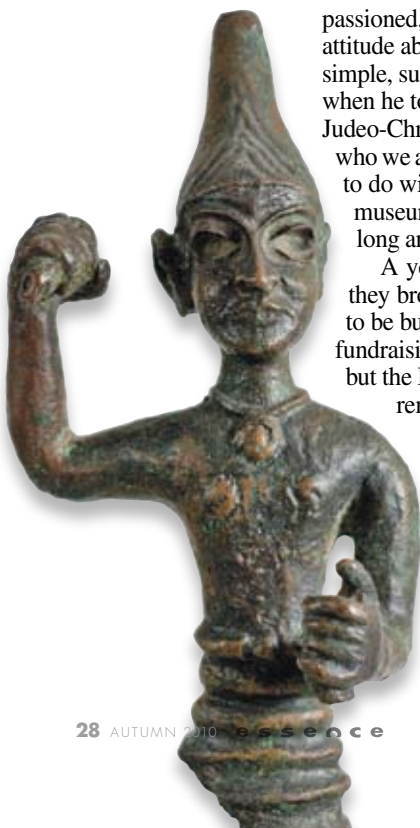
"IT IS THE ONLY MUSEUM OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD WHERE THE CIVILIZATIONS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST ARE BROUGHT TO LIFE FROM THE DAWN OF CIVILIZATION TO THE EARLY CHRISTIAN ERA."

at the Israel Museum. Both Elie and Batya knew the exhibitor and, after the opening, a group of them went to the King David together.

"Elie began talking about his collection and how he believed it was the most important collection for the history of the Jewish people," recalls Weiss. "He was a very impassioned, very serious, very dedicated man; no frivolous attitude about anything. Elie could never take things on a simple, superficial level. He had to go into the depths. So when he told Batya how important it was, that it was our Judeo-Christian heritage, it was where we came from and who we are as a people, she said: 'So what are you going to do with it?' And he answered: 'I'm going to build a museum in Toronto,' and she said 'no, it doesn't belong anywhere other than in Jerusalem.'"

A year later they were married, and in May 1985 they broke ground on the site where the museum was to be built. It took seven years of hard work and major fundraising campaigns to bring the museum to fruition, but the Borowskis' achievements since then have been remarkable, as proved at the 18th anniversary gala dinner in May this year.

On that occasion, Nir Barkat, the mayor of Jerusalem, awarded Batya Borowski, co-founder and chair of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, the highest and most honorable title of the city – "Guardian of the City of Jerusalem." In receiving this award, Batya joins her late husband Elie, who received the same title 12 years earlier from Ehud Olmert during his tenure as mayor.





Part of the museum's permanent exhibition

THE NEW ROSH HASHANAH EXHIBIT, "MAY WE BE AS THE HEAD AND NOT AS THE TAIL," IS AN EXCITING DISPLAY OF THE SYMBOLS AND IMPORTANCE OF THE FISH IN THE HIGH HOLIDAYS' RITUALS



Kaplan. "We talk about the stories of Abraham, both in the Bible and in the Koran, and in the legends that developed afterwards. It's great material to work with. The children learn about the different festivals in both religions; they play all kinds of games and they learn words that are similar in both languages. For example, the Arab kids will learn what the *kippah* symbolizes and the Jewish kids will learn what the carpet is used for in the Moslem prayers, and so on."

Three years ago, the museum's education department created a similar pilot program for teenagers. "We wanted to move one step forward because you're limited when you work with fourth graders. Our main goal is really to bring them together. We don't have the time and they don't have the tools to speak about their politics and about their situation," he says.

"So we brought together a group of teenagers using the same concept – to learn through what we have in the museum, but to speak more about their lives today in Jerusalem, with all the problems of Jerusalem, with the history, with the archaeology. We held the pilot meeting at the end of the school year two years ago. It was amazing to see the openness of the kids; they had more tools with which to communicate because they spoke some English and some of the Arab teenagers knew Hebrew. The things they brought up in this meeting, for me it was really touching. Unfortunately, the war in Gaza stopped it, but it's something we want to start over again."

One of the aims of the program is to create a team of young people, of young leadership who will do something for their own communities that will enable them to continue this message of co-existence and living together in Jerusalem. "We know it's very complicated, we're not that naive, but this gave us the opportunity to see that there is a chance to do something like this here," says Kaplan.

Other exciting events

The second major education project on which the Bible Lands Museum is about to embark is the olim community project. The museum's education department wants to reach out to new immigrants who come to Israel without a deep sense of who they are, without the background and knowledge of their Jewish roots. In a joint project with the Ministry of Absorption, the museum will work with immigrant communities in Jerusalem, such as the Ethiopian and French communities, among others, to create an after-

school program involving a series of nine or ten visits.

"The other element of this project is similar to the previous one in that we hope to work with young teenagers to create a young leadership of kids that will be part of the project," explains Kaplan. "We will train them to work with the younger kids, to assist the guides in the museum and, later on, they will be incorporated into our activities throughout the year, with payment, as guides."

"There's a lot of excitement about the pilot project in the ministry. They really want to work with us. The teenagers (16 and 17-year-olds), who have been through a selection process to get into the program, will eventually serve as role models for the younger children to show them what can be achieved if they work hard." The pilot project will start in the beginning of the next school year.

These major educational projects are not the only events for youth. There are summer day camps, theater shows, films, Bible stories which are brought to life, and more. Every holiday throughout the year is approached with enthusiasm and excitement by the artistic, creative and experienced staff in the education department. This year, there is a host of exciting events for the *chagim*, not least of which is the Sukkot family fun day, where children are invited to "come save the Land of Wishes." The program includes a search for ancient amulets, spells and New Year's blessings in an enchanted, guided tour led by costumed actors.

But the events and educational programs are not limited to children. Lectures, films, gallery tours, courses for tour guides, the summer concert series and many other entertaining experiences are available for adults. And the new Rosh Hashanah exhibit, "May we be as the head and not as the tail," is an exciting display of the symbols and importance of the fish in the High Holidays' rituals.

In a film screened at the 18th anniversary dinner, which also celebrated Batya Borowski's 80th birthday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised Batya for her diligence and commitment to the museum, which he said "has become a vital part of Israel's cultural landscape and has rightfully taken its place among Israel's leading cultural and educational institutions." Netanyahu also emphasized the importance of the connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel and added: "If you want to understand the extent and depth of this connection, read the Bible. If you want to understand the Bible even more, come to the Bible Lands Museum." 🎉



Amanda Weiss



The late Dr. Elie Borowski

A detailed history of the museum, a biography of Elie Borowski, the events calendar and further information on the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem can be found at www.blmj.org.