

# Award for Outstanding Achievement The Generations Center

## *storytelling and the chain of generations*



by Martin Sklar

Shaike Weinberg, the late director of the U.S. Memorial Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. and before that of Beth Ha-Tefutsoth, the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv, Israel, came to the museum world with a theatrical background in London. He was a storyteller. Objects and artifacts, staples and icons of the museum world, were his adjectives and exclamation points.

Now listen to Eliav Nahlieli, who led the design and planning team in creating “The Chain of Generations Center” experience at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Israel. “I see myself as a storyteller,” Eliav told a forum of the Israel Antiquities Authority. “The emphasis in my projects is placed on the story behind or in front of the artifact or object. I tend to move backwards, to the tribe gathering around the campfire, and experience the tales of the tribal elder.”

It was such a tale that began the Generations project. When Mordechai Eliav (Sullie) of The Western Wall Heritage Foundation approached Eliav Nahlieli at his Programa I Design Studio, he brought along a short story, “A Paratrooper’s Story” by Dr. Moshe Amirav, one of the paratroopers who took part in the 1967 battle to liberate Jerusalem. Eliav recalls the reading as “a spiritual moment. I knew immediately how the project should look.”

Today, The Chain of Generations project, produced and presented by The Western Wall Heritage Foundation, is a walk-through

positioned for visitors to see as a prologue to visiting The Western Wall in Jerusalem. (The Western Wall is the last surviving remnant of the ancient Temple of Jerusalem, venerated by the Jewish people and others as a site of pilgrimage and prayer.) The design team created an emotional and inspiring experience - sculpted in light, smoke, glass, music and narrative. Most extraordinary is a unique storytelling device: the use of sheets of glass bonded together - fused into single entities - each encoded with narrative conveying seven “chapters” of the story. Beams of light seem to express spirituality, creating a dialogue among the glass sculptures.

The designers’ main message seems to radiate from the words of the presentation: “Every one of us is a link in the chain of generations, following the path of time from the dawn of history, from the time of Abraham and into the future. Despite our differences, we all have

a common background - a common history and heritage, both symbolized by the concept of Jerusalem.”

The experience is built on two levels. The first encompasses seven scenes: 1) Our forefathers and the twelve tribes, 2) A people and its homeland, 3) The destruction, 4) Yearning for Zion, 5) The Holocaust, 6) The resurrection 7) The Memorial wall for IDF soldiers who fell in the battle for Jerusalem. The second level brings visitors to the Hall of Light, theatrically using light beams choreographed to inspire visitors to meditate.

The designers’ objective was to show the audience seated within the circular Hall of Light, that all people are links in the chain of generations, with Jerusalem itself as a concept and a symbol of the link. This is where the story comes full circle, when the visitors hear Moshe Amirav’s story with the intent to “hear



A key leader in the Disney magic for a half century, Martin Sklar was Vice Chairman and Principal Creative Executive of Walt Disney Imagineering (WDI) for over a quarter century. On December 5, 2001 (Walt's 100th birthday) Sklar was officially selected as a Disney Legend. Martin Sklar is also a recipient of the Thea Award for Lifetime Achievement and a member of the IAAPA Hall of Fame. His “Mickey’s 10 Commandments” is widely acclaimed as the industry’s best guide to the creation of themed entertainment. His present title at WDI is Imagineering Ambassador.

## New Archeological Finds

While excavating the site in order to lay concrete foundations to support the largest of the glass creations (the 18-ton “Yearning for Zion”), archeologists discovered a complete, fully-preserved mikveh (ritual bath) from the Hasmonean (Second Temple) period directly below! It was immediately decided that the sculpture should be suspended on steel girders in order to preserve the mikveh. While preparing this, a second, extremely rare find was unearthed – a wall from the period of King Solomon’s Temple!

Standing in this incredible room, one views a 21st century sculpture. Above one’s head is a ceiling from the Crusader period and walls from Mamluk times. Below the sculpture sits the 2,000-year-old mikvah (protected under glass) while next to that is situated one of the only preserved walls from the Solomon era.

“When they called to tell me about this discovery,” designer Nahlieli says, “it was the eve of Hanukkah – another true miracle. But in Israel, our roots and history start from the ground. We knew we had to find a way to show it – even with 18 tons of glass to support!”

their own heartbeat – to experience the same spiritual moment I felt when I first heard it,” Eliav Nahlieli says.

And then, immediately, visitors exit outside, to come, often emotionally, face to face with the Western Wall.

The creative team assembled by The Western Wall Heritage Foundation for this project was truly extraordinary (see listing at back of program book). All felt what Nahlieli termed the “amazing” design challenge of creating a project at one of the most important religious and cultural sites in the world. Two of the biggest challenges went to the artist of the glass sculptures, Jeremy Langford, and the lighting designer Avi Yona “Bambi” Bueno.

Jeremy Langford emphasizes that the sculpted glass is “a metaphor for the Jewish nation: strong, but elastic; transparent, but with clear boundaries; glass glows and transmits light. It becomes a harmony of ancient architecture and modern art.” The sculptures are built from layered and sculpted glass, and required almost 150 tons of glass to create. All of the sculptures are carved with Hebrew lettering, names of individuals from each historic period. “One sheet of glass may be weak, but by layering the sheets and fusing them together, they become strong,” says Eliav Nahlieli. Thus, they symbolize the Jewish experience, and the development of Israel.

Bambi, a versatile lighting designer who has worked in rock, opera, ballet and theater, credits “the approach of simplicity

and purity of heart of all our creative team” for making the experience so unique and successful. As Bambi described it, team members shared “the pride of being a part of the old nation that started it all.” In the darkened rooms, the rays shine forth from Bambi’s combination of still and moving light fixtures, interacting with the glass forms to create dramatic textures, shadows and shapes, using a contemporary visual language to speak of ancient traditions.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the rabbi of the Western Wall and holy places, says about Moshe Amirov’s story: “The story of Rabbi Yisrael Halevi, that completes the experience of visiting the Generations Center, epitomizes the secret of Jewish continuity – the nation that knew how to believe in rebuilding alongside destruction, and to build hope despite pain.”

Several benefactors were especially significant in supporting The Western Wall Heritage Foundation. The Hall of Light was created with the generous help of Ira and Ingeborg Rennert. The Hall of Names was established through the generosity of Mort Zuckerman in honor of his daughter Abigail.

All sought, and achieved, a cherished storyteller’s goal: The visitors are more than spectators – they become active participants who delve deeply into the history of the Jewish nation.



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