

## **“BEHOLD THE MAN”**

### **JESUS IN ISRAELI ART - Part 2**

**Question:** Why was Israel the place of inspiration for Israeli artists to begin to paint and write about the traditional Christian Jesus in a different way from all that had been before? Did these ‘free’ Jews in their own land now find a new sense of self identity at last? Was it because they no longer had to apologize for being ‘a Jew’?

**Answer:** A Jewish tradition of ‘the prodigal son’ was a theme as familiar as ‘the binding of Isaac’. The world had made prodigals of Jews, by rejecting them and making them guilty for the murder of Jesus. Religious had made their own prodigals, those sons who had left the religious mainstream. But as anti-Semitism swelled, the prodigals became the entire Jewish population of Nazi Europe in WW2. Let us not forget those Jews living in the Arab lands who also suffered the loss of everything. Once they were forced to flee to the Promised Land with only the clothes on their backs... everything changed!

Now Jews were able to stand up and fight for their lives. They lifted their heads and breathed in new life in spite of the never ending ongoing terror and wars. These Israelis had nothing to lose now. *They had stood up on their feet an exceedingly great army* as prophesied by Ezekiel chapter 37. Now, Israeli artists shook off the stigma of being prodigals, and began to work and create new ways of expression to bring Israel’s prodigal son Jesus back to his own. The artists, so to speak, took Jesus down from the cross and made their world his, by wrapping him in a prayer shawl or tallit, just like they do for their loved ones who die. They identified with him in many new ways. The Israeli poet Uri Zvi said, *“There’s a difference between Jesus the sacrificial figure from the churches and his Hebrew name*

***Yeshua which can mean Salvation ‘who is ours!’***

“Today, there is hardly any important Hebrew language writer who has not allowed Jesus to step into his worldview. *“Jesus is like the lining of a coat. When the coat flaps in the wind, a bit of the lining is revealed each time.”* says Amitai Mendelsohn whose Doctoral thesis was exactly this theme, *Behold the Man Jesus*.

Moshe Gershuni,(1936-2017) is an Israeli artist who died this January. He felt particularly close to the biblical theme of the blood sacrifice. Also coming from an orthodox background, he dared to create the unthinkable. For example, this plate of blood as seen to the right. (Excuse the reflection in my photo.) His two large canvas paintings also displayed were bordered in Hebrew lettering. When translated his audacious question stuns all who read it: “Who will forgive our sins?” I personally found his work powerful and very very thought provoking. Blood was a central theme in biblical times in the Tabernacle and Temple worship period. Of course it figures centrally in the death of Jesus. Gershuni dared to pick up on this theme, one which is just never addressed in Jewish circles.





Gershuni (left) combined a biblical text, the yellow and white stars and a shoebox flattened out in the form of a cross. He is personal, selective and physical, yet simple, which can be profound. The top Hebrew letters represent SHEM or The NAME... The two dark blue marks, like apostrophes are yods; written in Hebrew scripture in the place of the *Name Above All Names*. Jay teaches, that when Israel encounters their Messiah. in Zechariah 12:10b, and 13:6 say, **“They will mourn (Hebrew to regard with honor and respect) for him, as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. What are these wounds between your hands (wrists)? Then he will answer, I was wounded in the house of my friends.”** I believe the Israelis will recognize the nail prints in Jesus’ wrists... the Divine NAME imprinted into his body. I think the artist caught that. He includes the entire body of Jews with the white stars of David, and the Holocaust victims with the yellow star. **“And what will this mean to the whole world? What will their acceptance be, but life from the dead?... do not boast against the branches, do not be haughty but fear (respect)...”** Romans 11:15b, 18a, 20b.

Jay tells the story of being invited to show his film *Gates of Brass* in a synagogue in Reno Nevada 30 years ago. After the showing, the Rabbi said, come to my office. He closed the door and stood holding it shut. *“My Father was an Hassidic Rabbi in New York when I was a kid. One Shabbat he was given a pamphlet on the street corner and threw it into the gutter and spit upon it. Immediately I knew it was something I had to investigate and hid the one offered to me. Of course it was all about Isaiah 53 and the Suffering Servant. I have loved him most of my life!”* “He gave me a knowing grin followed by a big bear hug!” Jay said.



Israeli born Adi Nes staged this scene taken from Da Vinci’s *Last Supper*. Here the soldiers are relaxed, only the central figure seems preoccupied as he looks away into the unknown. Facing the risk of dying in battle, these young men are at the most dangerous moment in their lives. The message speaks of commitment and sacrifice. Nes makes the analogy between Christ’s apostles, and the soldiers as emissaries of a power stronger than themselves. Victims of a geopolitical constellation over which they have no control. They may be betrayed... this might indeed be their ‘last supper’.

*Jesus was the first Palestinian!* That phrase was coined by none other than Arafat himself when a Muslim Bethlehem first hosted Christmas Eve services for Christian pilgrims. By then, 80% of the local Christians had fled for their lives. The staged photo (right) was shot with Palestinians. The man on the ground lies in the crucified position. The message is clear. Israel is crucifying the Palestinians. Yearly, visitors join Christian and Muslim Palestinians in Bethlehem for a conference called *Jesus at the Checkpoint*. *The agenda always the same. Both Christians and Muslims* spout Fatah rhetoric against the evils of Israel!

*This amazing exhibition inspired us with new ways to understand Jesus in his homeland. Send us your comments. Here is what the bible says: **The portion of Jacob is not like them. (the heathen) He is the Maker of all things; and Israel is the tribe - ROD of His inheritance. The LORD of hosts is His Name.*** Jeremiah 10:20, 51: 19

***There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch will grow out of his roots.*** Isaiah 11:1

***The LORD will take possession of Judah as His inheritance in the Holy Land, and will again choose Jerusalem.*** Zechariah 2:12



***...And He Himself will rule them (the nations) with a rod of iron...*** Revelation 19: 15b

I shared this story with our bible group. Years ago Jay and I attended a book signing of Professor David Flusser of blessed memory. He was an amazing scholar who created an entire department at the Hebrew University to study the life of Jesus. I inquired as he signed his book, **Jesus** "*Professor Flusser, why Jesus? You could have studied the lives of any of the greats in the Jewish world. Why Jesus?*" He paused, reflected a moment then kindly responded, "Because we have his words and one day we will understand His words!" *Thank you for your prayers for the peoples of Israel! Please don't get weary.*

This year we celebrate Israel's 70th birthday as a modern nation, and 50 years of Jerusalem's unification. If you plan to visit Israel, let us know and we will do our best to meet with you in Jerusalem.

*A blessed Passover to all from the Rawlings family.*

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