

Jeremy Langford is considered to be one of the world's foremost glass artists. With a career that has spanned three continents and four decades, he's created stunning projects at some of the Jewish People's holiest sites. But that's only served to humble him. "The most important people in history were here," he says. "And now me?"

# glass ACT

BY *Libi Astaire*  
PHOTOS *Ouria Tadmor*









# It's a busy Thursday morning at the Waldorf Astoria Jerusalem.

While one large bar mitzvah group checks in, another family party boards a tour bus for the next stop on their itinerary. Amid the prattle of English, French, and Hebrew, punctuated by the jangle of cell phones ringing, is a babble of a different kind: the soothing murmur of water splashing in a pool.

I'm not the only one who gravitates to the corner of the lobby in an attempt to discover the source of this mesmerizing sound — an “attempt” because, as is often the case in Jerusalem, what you see at first glance is not the whole truth of the matter. At the level of the hotel's main lobby, what you see is a dazzling display of translucent, delicately colored glass doves suspended in midair. Look down one level, where the hotel's Business Center is located, and even more of these graceful but silent doves are floating past a rendering of Jerusalem etched in glass, the walls of the glass city melting into the hotel's Jerusalem-stone colored walls. It is only when you look even further down, to the bottom floor where the Grand Ballroom is located, that you finally see the pool — and the reflecting globe perched atop it, which mirrors back not only the glass city and the floating doves but the face of someone whose appearance in this work of art may come as a surprise: you.

The name of this monumental glasswork installation is *Sha'alu Sh'lom Yerushalayim* — Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem, and it incorporates many of the features that have come to distinguish the work of Jeremy Langford, one of the world's foremost glass artists: the expert craftsmanship, the multiple layers of meaning, the strong sense of vitality and even exuberance.

And as I will soon find out, the art is an accurate reflection of the artist. Jeremy Langford may have 40 years of experience under his belt, but he is still as excited today by the thought of a new project as the day when he first met his medium.

**The Glassblower's Apprentice** “Somehow glass found me. It wasn't something that I was actively seeking out,” says Jeremy, who was born in London, England, to a family of artists. He had had no formal education in glass or making art, but when he was 16, he started dabbling in glassmaking. “It was just instinctive. I started by breaking up pieces of glass, gluing them together, putting them in a kiln, and seeing what came out. And very interesting things did come out.”

While Jeremy was exploring the possibilities of glass, his family moved to Israel — a less than happy experience for the teenager. Coming from a totally secular background, he knew he was a Levi, and that the family's original name was Lelyveld, but he had no interest in





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Judaism and felt no connection to Israel. He therefore returned to the UK when he was 18. There he met an elderly glass artist who agreed to take him on as an apprentice.

"I spent over a year with him, and I learned all the classical techniques of English glassmaking: stained glass, acid work, carving, and engraving. It was like getting a formal classical education in the glass arts.

"It's similar to someone who has a formal education in classical music; afterward they can do whatever they want. So I had a solid foundation, but I was becoming frustrated by the limits of what was possible to be done with glass. I started seeking ways to express myself and develop new techniques."

While Jeremy was maturing artistically, his spiritual side began to wake up as well. A need to understand and experience what was beyond the physical led him to study the more esoteric side of Judaism. "That brought me back to more mainstream Judaism," he says, "and made me feel very close to Israel. It gave me more patience with the 'cost' side of things and made me able to accept everything going on here as a package deal. I've been in love with the country and the people ever since."

Jeremy eventually married and raised a family in Israel, but his work often took him abroad. Some of his early commissions were in London, at sites such as the Hilton Hotel, Mayfair, and the Greek Embassy. They led to many more commissions, both in the United States and Israel, for hotels and other public buildings, private homes, and synagogues. While his commissions multiplied, so did the techniques that he used to create his art. Today he has at his fingertips more than 30 different techniques — such as stacked, sculpted, stained, molded, sand-carved, and painted glass — which he can incorporate into pieces that might

be small enough to sit on a table or soar several stories high.

Or which could be used in what he says would be the dream commission of his career.

**Dreaming Big** Even though Jeremy Langford's work was in demand in New York, Miami, Los Angeles, Tel Aviv, and other major cities, there was one city that seemed to be eluding him: Jerusalem.

"Up until about 15 or 20 years ago, I hadn't done much work in Jerusalem," he says. "Then one day I was being interviewed about my work and the interviewer asked me what I would consider to be the pinnacle of my career. I like to dream big — and so I said, 'One day the Beit Hamikdash is going to be built. It might be a little chutzpadig on my part, but I'd like to be the artist, a latter-day Bezalel.'"

A few months later, Jerusalem started "calling" Jeremy. First he was commissioned to create the glasswork for the permanent exhibition at the Tower of David's Museum of the History of Jerusalem. Later, top architect Moshe Safdie commissioned Jeremy to create an *aron kodesh* for the Aish HaTorah building in Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter of the Old City. A few years after that, he was asked to create all the glasswork for the Generations Center, which is located next to the Kosel.

"While I was working on that, I suddenly thought, 'Wow, Jeremy, connect the dots. From the entrance to the Old City, to the Aish HaTorah building, which is about 200 yards from the Kotel, and now to be working right next to the Kotel — you can't get much closer to the Beit Hamikdash than that!' It was amazing. It was like I had received a message: 'Sorry, you can't work on the Beit Hamikdash yet, but we've given you a project that is as close as you can get for now.'"

The Generations Center, a project of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, may be one of Jeremy's most famous projects. It presents the history of the Jewish People from Avraham Avinu until today in a powerful exhibition that features Jeremy's series of abstract glass pillars, accompanied by sound, light, and holograms. Even with his self-confidence, Jeremy admits that the awe-inspiring location intimidated him.

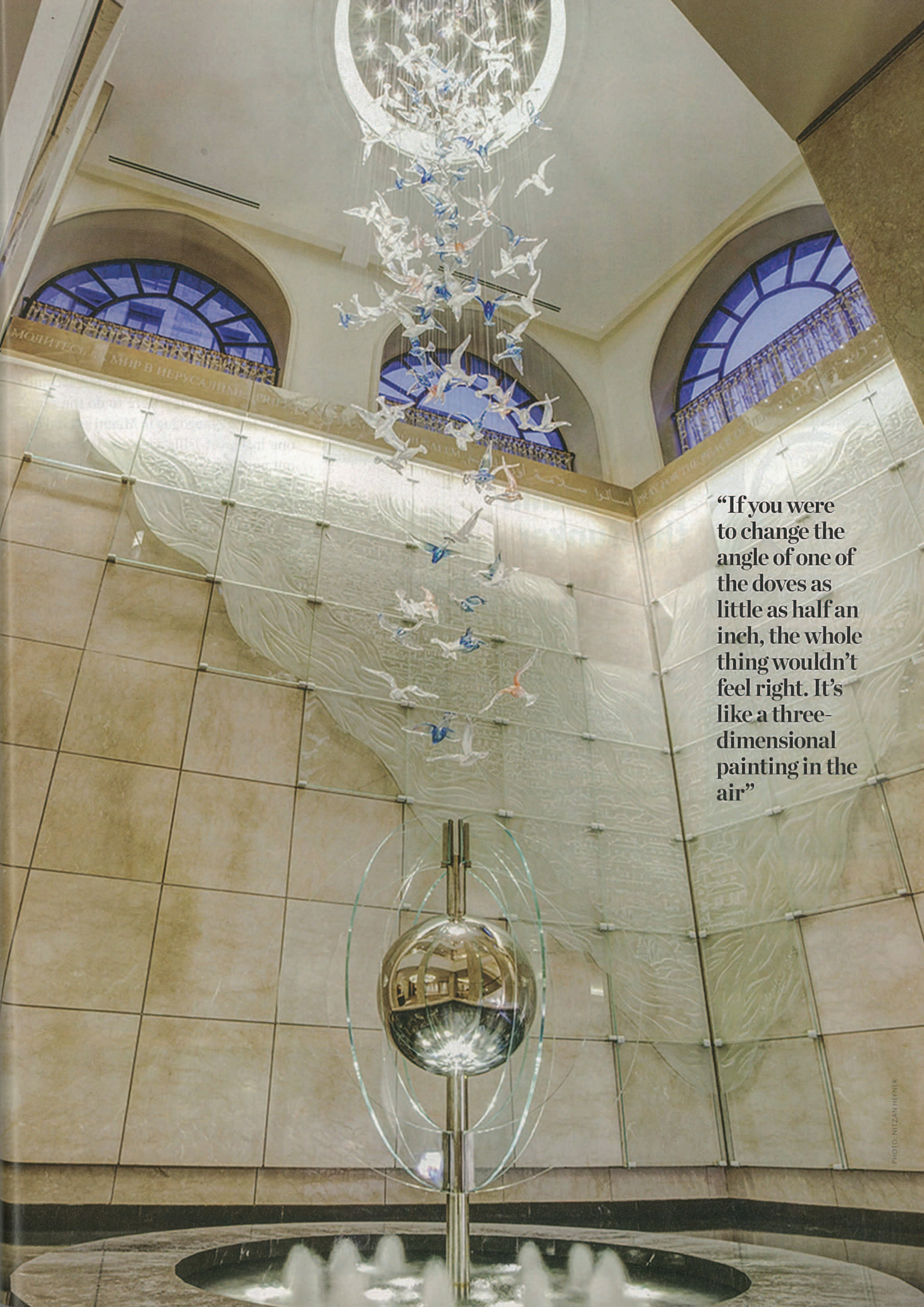
"To say that I got cold feet is an understatement," he replies. "The person who helped me to pull myself together was my late wife. She told me, 'Just get up and do it.'"

Yet even with that encouragement, he says that the going wasn't easy. "I was thinking to myself, 'Over the years, the city was conquered and rebuilt, conquered and rebuilt. Many of the biggest names in history were here: Dovid Hamelech, Shlomo Hamelech, the kings of Israel, the prophets, the Tanaaim — they were all here. So, now me? How am I going to respect the site and the history of the site, while having my own expression?'"

He dispelled the anxiety using a unique and creative solution: He asked for the keys to the Kosel Tunnels and went to live there for a few days. "It was like communing with the past and those energies that are here in the present, until I had what I call an epiphany — a realization of how I could do it. Then I was fine. My fears were gone."

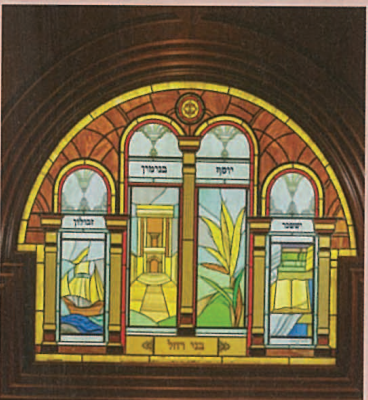
**Eclectic, by Design** Trying to connect the dots between a monumental project such as the Generations Center near the Kosel and a delicate Tiffany-style skylight done for a private home; and between a traditional stained glass window for a synagogue and a massive, ultra-modern glass reception desk for a company; it's hard to come up with a common denominator. So, what is the "Jeremy Langford style"?





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PHOTOS: ILYA MALINIKOV

## Light within the Bunker

One of Jeremy Langford's more recent projects was a series of stained glass windows for Kever Rochel. As usual, he planned to take his inspiration from the site. But this time there was an unexpected obstacle.

"I hadn't been to Kever Rochel in some years, and I was shocked to find myself in an atomic bomb shelter, thanks to the 'peace process,'" he recalls. "It therefore was very important to me to express the deep spirituality of the site, and the history of the site, and add some life back into those stones that are presently hidden behind the walls of this fortified bunker."

Working with architect Aharon Ostreicher, who designed the new *beis medrash*, Jeremy was given the task of creating stained glass paintings for both inside the synagogue and for the corridor that leads to the space.

For the stained glass windows of the 12 Tribes that are inside the synagogue, Jeremy went for a design that was very colorful, explaining that he wanted the *beis medrash* to have a feeling of life. Since no natural sunlight would be streaming inside — the bunker-like outer walls that surround the site block out any such light — he worked with a trusted lighting consultant to achieve the feeling that there is light being transmitted through the glass.

I was intrigued by his choice of color for the series of stained glass panels that lead to the *beis medrash*. The 12 windows depict the history of Kever Rochel through the ages, and the panels look almost like old sepia-toned photographs.

"I didn't want the historical windows to be too colorful," he explains. "When I'm doing work at a holy site, I want to make my own expression but do it in a way that will blend in with the site and respect the site and respect the feelings that people have for the site. So, in this particular space, I wanted a quiet expression. By using a very traditional technique that I had learned back in England — it combines etching, painting, kiln-fired painting, and stained glass work — I achieved an old-world feeling that I thought was right for this particular site. Because after all, Kever Rochel is very much connected to that feeling we all have for Mamma Rochel."

"I don't have one particular style," he says. "I express myself in many different ways. There's going to be a book published shortly about my work, and the book is going to be called *Eclectica*."

He points out that because so much of his work is commissioned for a specific site, he will necessarily take into account the site's style. "If I were to do the same thing for a synagogue in Miami as I did for one in Forest Hills, Queens, I'd be taken out and shot — and vice versa," he quips. "But there is a common denominator. There is always an inner and outer aspect to what I am doing. There is what you see and there is always something underlying it. I have a quote in my studio: 'Art is a dialogue with an unseen force. Embrace it.' So, with my art I am always seeking to express something that is beyond the physical."

He adds that the glass installation at the Waldorf Astoria Jerusalem, which was commissioned by the Reichmann family, is another example of this balancing act. While the hotel's interior designer said Jeremy could do whatever he wanted with the space, his brief from Mrs. Ester Reichmann was more specific.

"She said to me that they wanted the design to be Jewish in expression, because this is Yerushalayim, but at the same time it's an international hotel and so the design had to have universal appeal. That's quite a challenge. In the end we took the verse '*Sha'alu sh'lom Yerushalayim* — pray for the peace of Jerusalem,' because when there is peace in Yerushalayim, there will be peace in the world."

From that starting point, the ideas began to flow. Some are more overt; for instance, the verse from Tehillim is carved into the glass at the top of the stylized scene of Jerusalem, in both Hebrew and English, for all to see, while the glass doves are a well-known symbol of peace. Less explicit



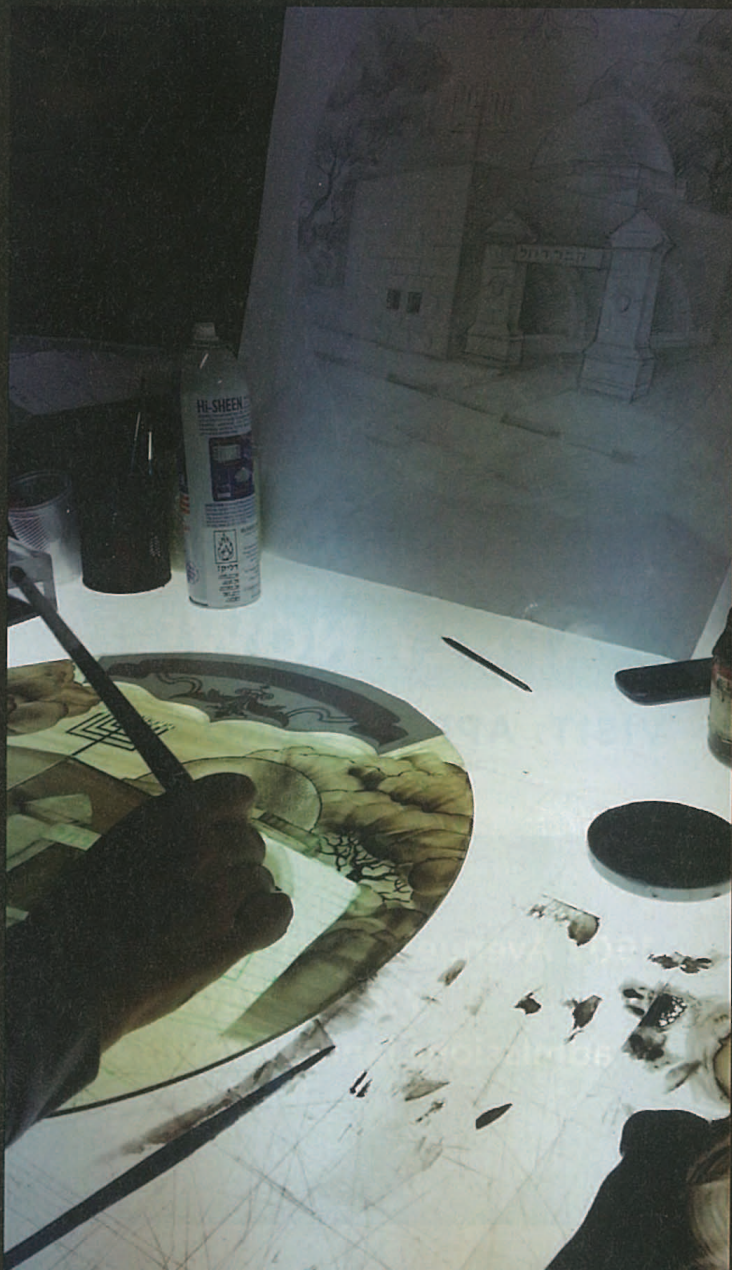
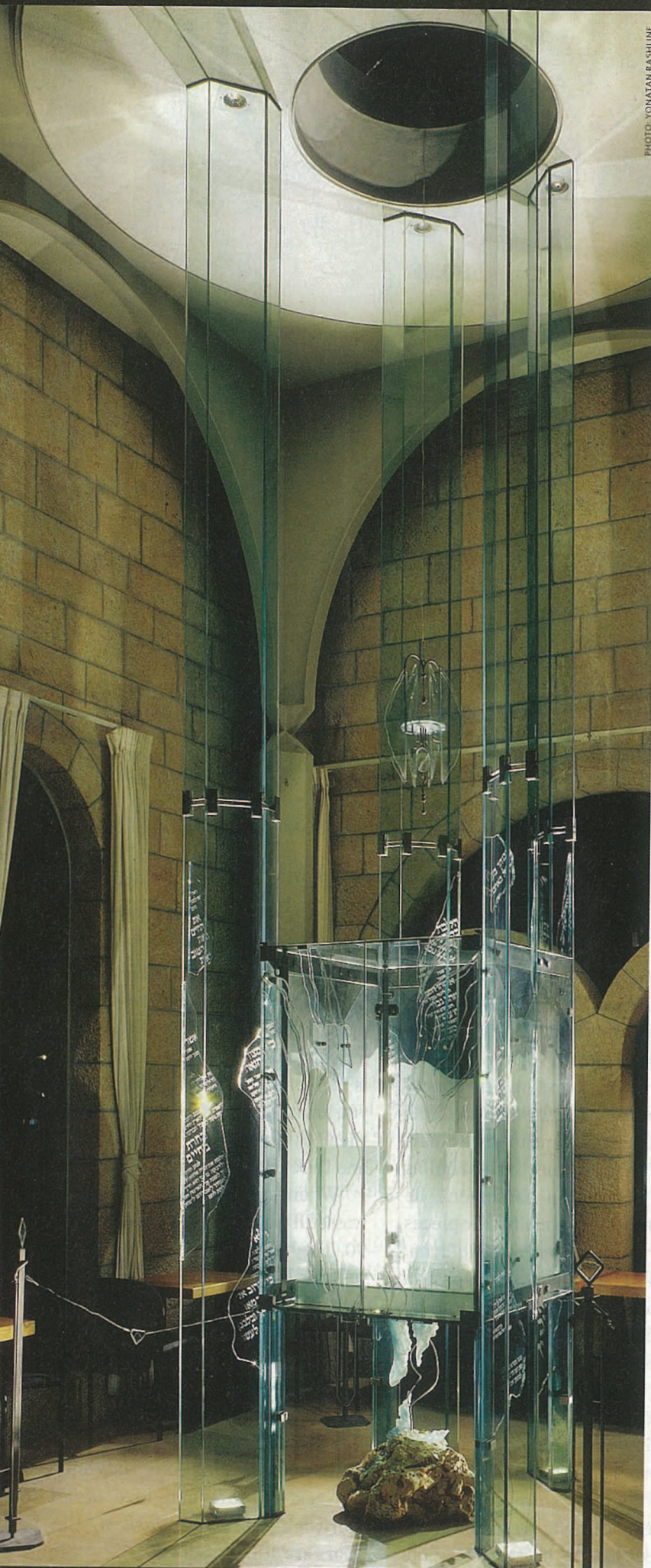


PHOTO: JEREMY LANGFORD STUDIO



**REFLECTED VISION** Most materials just reflect light, but glass transmits it as well, making it a highly symbolic medium. "This means a transparency that creates another level of expression"





is the reflective globe, which has six pieces of clear glass around it.

"That is very much connected to the whole aspect of seven — the six days, with the globe being the central connecting force," he says. "It's also connected to the aspect of the 6,000 years, after which Mashiach is going to come and bring the Geulah and world peace.

"Another thing is that anyone looking at the work from different angles will see their reflection in the water and in the globe. Someone once asked me if my intent was to allow a person to look down into their own sort of inner pool and find a deep peace within them. That's not exactly where most of us are at, but if we were able to achieve that feeling of inner peace, it would be far easier for us to connect with other Jews."

Reflection, in fact, is a major element in glass work, and thus another common denominator linking Langford's varied commissions. "Glass is a material almost unique in the arts. Most materials, like stone or bronze or metal, just reflect light. But glass both reflects and transmits light, so there is a transparency to it that gives yet another level of expression. It allows me to have reflected light and to have people reflected in the glass — and there's a lot of symbolism in that."

**Painting in the Air** The chairs in the lobby of the Waldorf Astoria's Business Center provide a front-row view of the doves floating against the etching of Jerusalem. With their delicate infusions of color, they look like they just flew out of the kiln.

The doves were created in the Czech Republic, Jeremy says, where he has a studio. It took hours to make each dove — and there are 120 of them — because each one was hand blown and individually molded. Then they were shipped to Jerusalem.

"Hanging them was another long process," he says, "because the whole thing has to work together. There is a flow to them. If you were





PHOTO: JEREMY LANGFORD STUDIO

**"I'm the conductor of the symphony." Today Jeremy Langford has a staff of trained hands, but every piece is still a part of him**

to change the angle of one of the doves as little as half an inch, the whole thing wouldn't feel right. It's like a three-dimensional painting in the air."

Jeremy's main studio is in Ramat Gan, where he has a permanent staff of six glass artisans working under him. He can call upon another 20 or so people that he has trained when he needs extra hands for a big project.

"Having a staff allows me to do very large-scale works that I couldn't do on my own," he explains. "But whether I'm making a small piece for someone's home or a work for a high-end hotel or a beautiful synagogue, every piece is a part of me. I describe myself as being like the conductor of a symphony orchestra, who has to intimately understand the music and how to express each tone and decide the tempo of the work. So any work that comes out with my name on it is me. I may

not actually take each piece out of the kiln, but I am an intimate part of everything that is happening in the studio."

While in the past about 95 percent of his work came from commissions, he is now at the stage of his career when he feels comfortable taking off time to work on his own art. One recent project is a Megillas Esther hand painted on parchment; he has also started making small-scale pieces in glass, such as a *zecher Yerushalayim*. When asked if he plans to tackle a Haggadah shel Pesach anytime soon, he smiles. "I've been thinking about that," he says. "Maybe one day."

One thing he is not thinking about is retiring. Indeed, when asked if he ever feels a little tired or jaded about having to design windows for yet another synagogue or create yet another "wow" centerpiece for an upscale hotel lobby, he smiles.

"I never feel jaded," he says. "A rabbi

once said to me, 'Do you know what an old person is? It's somebody who lives in the past.' If you live in the present, and you are fed spiritually and energetically from what is happening in your life right now — and you have plans to strive for in the future — then I think the ideas will continue to flow and the excitement will still be there.

"When the pianist Arthur Rubinstein was still playing the piano at the age of 90, they asked him, 'What's the secret to your longevity?' They were expecting him to say that he drank jars of yogurt, or something like that. Instead, he said just three wonderful words: 'I love life.'

"I think that was very profound. And despite my physical appearance, I still feel young and fresh. The years that I have been working have only increased my zest for life and love of art and spirituality. *B'ezras Hashem*, the best years are still ahead." ●