



PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

ANGELA LEVINE MEETS
KEN GOLDMAN

A torah crown with live doves inside, a fur mezuzah, a memorial candle that plugs into your computer – it is no wonder that the *JR* editor was so intrigued by these objects, illustrated in the recently published *500 Judaica*, that she commissioned an investigation into the whereabouts and persona of Ken Goldman, their artist-designer.

This writer complied. A two-hour bus ride from Tel Aviv to Afula and a further journey into the foothills of the Gilboa mountain brought her to Schluchot, a modern Orthodox kibbutz where 200 families earn a living from agriculture, breeding fish and growing the country’s finest carrots.

Goldman, bespectacled, in jeans, and with a kippah on his head, turned out to be a 51 years-young man with a schoolboy’s enthusiasm for life. Born in Memphis, he was educated in New York and holds a BA in Fine Arts and an MA in Industrial Design from the Pratt Institute where he says he acquired a lifelong respect for materials of every kind.

In 1985, he and his wife Sandy (now kibbutz secretary) emigrated to Israel with four other couples from the Bnei Akiva youth movement, settling in Schluchot. At first Goldman worked in the fishponds, but recently he and Dvora Liss (a kibbutz colleague and curator of Judaica at the nearby Ein Herod Museum) initiated, and now run, a summer camp for teenagers, as well as hosting groups of special needs youngsters from abroad.

Goldman says that he has two lives in the world of design: the products he creates for markets abroad, “guaranteed to bring a smile to your face,” and the artefacts he dreams up that are inspired by Jewish ritual and traditions; familiarity with these being essential to appreciate his work.

Goldman’s father, now retired, was a community Rabbi and Goldman grew up with religious observance all around him. So it seemed natural some 15 years ago to turn his design skills in a ‘Jewish’ direction. He admits that some of his artefacts may seem irreverent, but stresses that they project a sense of being part of a family club, a closeness that allows him to take liberties with the function and forms of traditional Judaica.

A large airy room in the kibbutz doubles as Goldman’s workshop and as a space used by summer campers for arts and crafts. This is where he creates the prototypes for designs that require a mastery of a range of creative skills. His objects are mostly non-functional. Some are just witty and cute; like the prayer shawl with a neckband embroidered with coloured candies that has never been worn. But many of his designs have a deeper meaning; as for example, his delicate *Angel Wings* candle holders. Goldman explains that according to a Talmudic story the shadows cast by these wings fill the Jewish home with the spirit of the Sabbath.

His *Kaddish Stones* project dates from a time when his daughter’s class was going on a school trip to Poland where the focus would be a visit to the death camps. Gathering 79 pebbles from a field near his home, Goldman engraved each with one of the words



that make up the prayer of mourning. His idea was that every student would place a single pebble in different corners of the camps, to be found later by other Jewish visitors. These people, he believes, would then be inspired to recite a complete Kaddish “which would sound out again and again, honoring the Jews who perished in the Holocaust.”

His silver nickel and imitation grass *Torah Crown* was designed for a particular purpose: as a festive ornament for the kibbutz synagogue. Exhibited in a glass case at its entrance, it accorded with the custom of decorating synagogues with greenery during the week of Shavuot. And what is the significance of a tefillin case in the shape of a horn? Goldman’s design refers to Michelangelo’s misinterpretation of the Biblical description of ‘rays of light’ surrounding the head of Moses that compounded the belief that Jews had horns. Also, through this work, Goldman wanted to illustrate

MEZUZAHS RE-IMAGINED

The subject of this year's Judaica 21 competition (see page 4) is the mezuzah. To help provide inspiration for potential contestants we present here some of the creations of the last decade. All the images are from the new book *Judaica 500: Innovative Contemporary Ritual Art* (see overleaf).

society's intolerance of people with customs and dress different from their own. Often, he says, when he lays tefillin in public places, people shy away from him as if he were indeed the devil.

Goldman's best-sellers have been the plush velvet kabbalah dolls marketed in 2007 by the New York toy company FAO Schwarz at a time when Madonna was making mysticism fashionable. The dolls are based on the image of three angels on a 9th century amulet that Goldman located in *Raziel and the Angel*, a medieval text of magic. These angel-images are also the source for a set of button-amulets that Goldman is currently seeking to market.

How do his colleagues in this religious kibbutz view his artwork? "We are a farming community, and the chaverim are focused on their daily workload, and mostly uninterested or uncritical of what I am doing." Does it worry him that he toes a fine line between the acceptable and the offensive? "Not at all," he says, "I love the excitement of pushing borders and living on the edge".

See more of Ken's Goldman's work on: www.kengoldmanart.com

Cover: Torah Crown, nickel silver and imitation grass, 2010

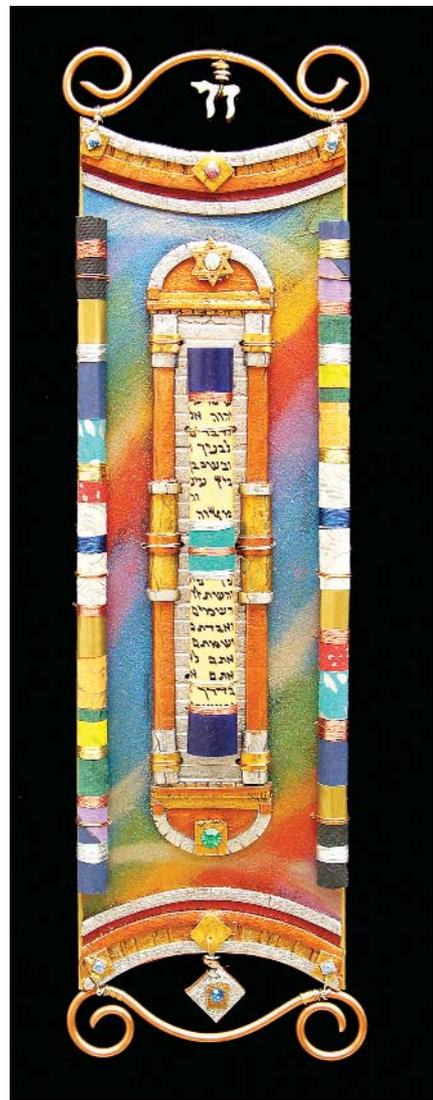
Opposite: Ken Goldman with kabbala dolls, plush velvet, 2007

Centre: Kaddish stones, found stones, hand-inscribed, inked, 2005

Above: Angel Wings, lazer-cut stainless steel, 2008

Below: *Homage to the Candy Man*, candy, cotton thread, sewn, 2009





Previous page: Ken Goldman, mezuzah, fur, silver, sewn, pierced, sawn, 2004

Above left: Emily Rosenfield, mezuzot, pewter; carved, cast, 2005

Above right: Cukier, *Mezuzah III*, clay, hand-made papers, fibres, recycled objects, paint, metal; woven, sculpted

Left: Julia L Hecht, mezuzah case, glass and precious metal beads, Austrian crystal, pearls, gold-tone wire, plastic tube, cap: off-loom bead weaving, wire-wrapped. Photo: Henri Grau

Below: Adi Fainer, *Dove V-1 Mezuzot*, gold- and silver-plated metal; lost wax cast, hand-finished, 2008

FROM: JUDAICA 500: INNOVATIVE CONTEMPORARY RITUAL ART

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