



### **Prof. Bezalel Narkiss (1926-2008), Israel Prize winner (1999)**

From the Israel Prize book, 1999:

Bezalel Narkiss entered the academic world three times, and only on the third time did he find his rightful place in it. He began in Mathematics, continued in the Humanities, and while writing his doctorate on Medieval History, turned to Art History.

He explains: "My father wanted to be an artist when he immigrated to Palestine in 1920, but he was strongly influenced by Prof. Boris Schatz to work with him in the Bezalel School of Art and eventually to establish the National Museum that was attached to it. The name 'Bezalel' was chosen by Boris Schatz, who called his son by that name and made everyone who worked with him also name their sons Bezalel. Our home was full of art books and we daily discussed artworks."

Bezalel Narkiss' father, Mordecai, was the founder of the Bezalel National Museum in Jerusalem, and its director until the day he died. Boris Schatz had discovered him and had given him this mission. Indeed, Mordecai Narkiss assembled the enormous collection of the museum that would eventually become the basis for the Israel Museum, and developed its characteristics. Bezalel Narkiss: "Father wanted me to work with him, but I was worried about stepping into the large shoes of the greatest of those in Israel who dealt with Jewish Art and with art in general."

Mordecai Narkiss did not manage to establish students who followed in his path. Although he indeed planned programs of study, there were as yet no academic departments where art was researched. Thus, in 1957, when his father died, Bezalel Narkiss was writing a doctorate in History and taught this subject in schools in Haifa and Jerusalem. The museum's administration asked him to work on his father's unfinished manuscripts and to prepare them for publication. So it was that Bezalel Narkiss entered the world of Jewish Art. He became fascinated with the subject, and thus in the end became his father's most eminent student. The Bezalel Museum wanted Bezalel Narkiss to become its director, but since he had had no basic or formal training in art and especially in Jewish Art, the museum's administration sent him to study in London, one of the leading centers of Art History. He studied there for 5 years, from 1958 to 1963, being awarded his BA in Art History in one year. He wrote his doctorate on the spectacular illustrations in the "Golden Haggadah", a Pesach Haggadah that was written and illuminated in Barcelona in the 14th century. Its illustrations depict events from the Creation of Man to the Song of the Sea.

Narkiss followed the path his father had paved. "Father" – Narkiss recalls – "was working before he died on illuminated manuscripts and wished to write a book on the development of illustrated Haggadahs through the ages. But until I reached London, I was unable to understand in depth the index cards and the photographs that I found on his desk."

In the Warburg Institute of the University of London the professors and researchers directed Bezalel Narkiss to the Hebrew Manuscripts located in the British Museum (today the British Library). He discovered that researchers knew very little about Jewish Art. He began to catalogue all the Hebrew manuscripts that he saw in England. "We thought it was a matter of some tens of such manuscripts, but I found 500 illuminated manuscripts. They were from the 10th to the 15th centuries, and came from Germany, France, Italy, North Africa, Yemen and Eretz-Yisrael."

In 1963, Dr. Bezalel Narkiss returned from London to Jerusalem, to the Hebrew University in order to establish the Department of Art History with his colleague, Prof. Moshe Barasch. The first course in Jewish

Art was given in 1966, and “I immediately understood that this subject was a real hit with the students.” The Department of Art History was established, but the tools to develop the study of Jewish Art were still missing. There was no catalog, no archive of art objects, no collections of pictures or photographs, and very few basic studies of the subject. Narkiss knew that without these tools it would be impossible to develop this field of study, to do research and to educate a generation of experts and researchers. It was clear to him that he had to develop the study of Jewish Art as a scientific discipline. In Princeton University, Narkiss “discovered” the Index of Christian Art. This became the model on the basis of which Narkiss founded the “Jerusalem Index of Jewish Art”, but he immediately improved upon it, attaching detailed descriptions, suitable for everyone to the photographs of works and objects of art. From the very beginning the Index was computerized, and today Princeton University uses the program he developed.

Bezalel Narkiss’ desired to establish an index of all the items of Jewish Art, including photographs, pictures, diagrams and technical drawings with explanations and background material. The Index passed through several stages of development before this dream was realized in the framework of the “Center for Jewish Art” in the Hebrew University.

The first stage was in editing the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Narkiss was offered the job of being the art and picture editor. Parallel to his work at the University, and with the help of a large staff, Narkiss succeeded in collecting 80,000 pictures. For the first time a comprehensive stockpile of Jewish Art was created, dealing with all its branches: illuminated manuscripts, plans and pictures of synagogues, paintings of Jewish subjects by Jewish artists, tombstones, ritual objects, etc. The Encyclopedia’s administration promised Narkiss that it would finance a detailed index to this collection, but failed to do so for lack of funds. The second stage of establishing the Index took part in the Museum of the Jewish People (Beit Hatfutsot) in Tel Aviv. As a member of the staff engaged in planning the new museum, Narkiss was offered as a “dowry” the establishment of the Index. Narkiss and 20 of his students assembled another 40,000 pictures, but the museum also ran out of the promised funds.

“It then became clear to me,” explains Prof. Narkiss, “that I would have to do it myself in the University in the framework of the “Center for Jewish Art” that we would specifically establish for that purpose.” In the state of things in Israel, it was not enough to gather academic talents to implement research development plans; one had also to “schnorr” the funds. Bezalel Narkiss found himself embarked on journeys abroad to raise money. He recalls: “I succeeded in recruiting Maurice Spertus from Chicago, a dedicated collector of Judaica and a very special man. Thanks to him in 1974 we published the first volume of the Center for Jewish Art’s annual *Journal of Jewish Art*. The Index was first published in 1976 with the help of the Israel Academy of Science and France’s Centre national de la recherche scientifique.

The Index of Jewish Art is a computerized index with more than 200,000 items. This is world’s greatest virtual museum of Jewish Art, which includes “from the smallest coin to the largest synagogue”, as Prof. Narkiss puts it, including ritual objects, illuminated manuscripts, mosaics and modern painting and sculpture.

Every work of art represented in the Index is described in full detail. Narkiss says that the Index is the crowning glory of his academic-cultural work and it is also the main work of the Center for Jewish Art at the University. The Index continues to be updated even after Prof. Narkiss retired, and he continues to direct it. Teams of documenters from the Center for Jewish Art visit various places in the world. They work in ancient graveyards, conduct research in old archives, enter synagogues that have been shut down and visit the houses of local Jews. By now, these documentation teams have visited 34 countries, including Serbia, Croatia, as well as countries in the Caucasus, the Russian Commonwealth of Independent States, North Africa and India. The results of their surveys were published in a new book, *Ingathering of the Nations*. One team visited the National Museum and a large monastery in Kiev and to its surprise discovered a secret collection of 400 Torah scrolls and ark cloths. It transpired that these were the remnants of a widespread campaign of the confiscation of Jewish ritual objects in Galicia in the 1920s ordered by Lenin. The silver and gold pieces were not preserved, as they had been melted down.

Bezalel Narkiss created a field of study and research almost “out of nothing”. He showed that Jewish Art can be found around the world. He established it in programs of study and research at universities and research centers throughout the world. He also taught hundreds of students who became museum curators, researchers and lecturers. Narkiss wrote 7 books in general Art History and in Jewish Art. Some of

them deal with Jewish illuminated manuscripts, including a facsimile edition of the “Golden Haggadah”, as well as Armenian, Greek and Latin manuscripts.

From the researches of Bezalel Narkiss and his students one can learn also of Jewish life in the far past and on the conditions under which they lived. Among other things, they discovered that the artist who illuminated the Schocken Haggadah was seemingly a non-Jew. They discovered in one of the most famous Haggadahs clear echoes of anti-semitism. In the 13th and 14th centuries, rich Jews and lovers of art ordered Haggadahs, Mahzors and other books from non-Jewish artists. The person who commissioned the “Birds’ Head Haggadah” from a Christian artist ordered him not to paint human faces for the figures in the book. The artist solved this dilemma by giving the figures birds’ heads, but he designed them with beaks like long, enlarged noses, small pig-like ears and on their heads the pointed hats that Jews had to wear in Germany.

The judges’ decision (Prof. Avraham Ronen, Prof. Ziva Amishai-Maisels, Prof. Avram Kampf):

The Committee for the Israel Prize in the field of Art History of 1999 unanimously decided to award the prize to Professor emeritus Bezalel Narkiss, Nicolas Landau Professor of Art History at the Hebrew University on his life’s work researching Jewish Art.

Professor Narkiss has been studying and researching Jewish Art since 1957, when he began setting in order the research left by his father Mordecai Narkiss who was the director of the Bezalel National Museum. After studying for his doctorate at the Warburg Institute of the University of London in 1963 he was appointed a lecture in Medieval Art at the Hebrew University, and there began his long and fruitful career as a researcher of Medieval Art in general and Jewish Medieval Art in particular.

In researching Medieval Jewish Art, Prof. Narkiss concentrated on illuminated manuscripts: both sacred books – Bibles, Haggadahs, etc. – and secular and scientific books. An important project of Prof. Narkiss was the researching, grouping, cataloguing and methodological publication of some of the illuminated manuscript collections that were found in the large libraries in Europe and in private collections. Thus he published the collections of Jewish manuscripts in England and the Bibles in Leningrad: *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts in the British Isles: Spanish and Portuguese Manuscripts* (Jerusalem and London, 1982); *Illuminations of Hebrew Bibles of Leningrad* (1990).

Another important project of Prof. Narkiss is the computerized Index of Jewish Art, that was founded in 1967 and whose first volume came out in 1970. The Index contains ca. 200,000 items, with exact documentation of the complex Jewish artistic creation from the ancient period, through illuminated manuscripts, ritual objects, synagogue and public architecture, and modern art.

In 1974, Prof. Narkiss founded the annual *Journal of Jewish Art*, the only academic periodical dedicated to this subject. Another journal, *Rimonim* (in Hebrew), which was aimed at a wider audience was founded in 1983. In 1979, Prof. Narkiss established the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University that promotes and organizes research projects and international congresses. Prof. Narkiss also founded two Societies for Jewish Art: the first is active in Israel, and the second, the International Society for Jewish Art is active worldwide.

In his many years as a teacher at the Hebrew University, Prof. Narkiss combined teaching Medieval Art with the fields of researching and teaching of Jewish history, culture and art.

Prof. Narkiss has produced many students who continue his research and teaching, direct the Center for Jewish Art and the publication of the periodicals he founded. Among the many books he published, edited and to which he contributed we name but a few: *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts* (1969); *The Golden Haggadah* (1970); *The Kennicott Bible* (1985); *The Worms Mahzor* (1985).

As his life’s work, Prof. Narkiss has managed to establish research into Jewish Art as a discipline on an equal level with the art history of other civilized peoples.