



**An essay about the work of  
Nehemia Azaz**

by

**Julia Weiner**

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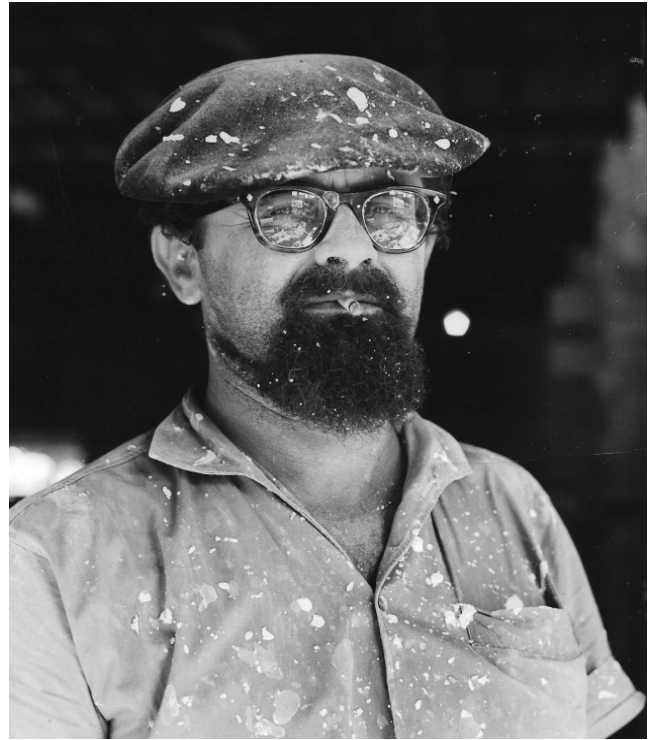
# Nehemia Azaz - The “Forgotten” Artist

by  
Julia Weiner\*

## Introduction

At the height of his career, Nehemia Azaz (1923-2008) was considered as one of the most important of Israeli sculptors working on public projects. Having begun his career as Founder and Director of the renowned Harsa ceramic factory in Be’er Sheva, Israel, he then received high profile commissions for major Israeli buildings including the Sheraton and Hilton Hotels in Tel Aviv as well as, perhaps most notably, the Israeli lounge in the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C. He was also well-known for his innovative stained glass windows, for which he used new methods to ensure greater luminosity, and these were commissioned for synagogues and private homes in the UK, the US and Israel. In 1973, Yona Fischer, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Israel Museum wrote about him ‘To my opinion (sic) he has achieved mastership in monumental work, much more than any of his Israeli colleagues.’<sup>1</sup> However, by the time of his death in 2008, his work had been, to some extent, forgotten.

There are several possible reasons for this. Above all, Azaz was an artist who made architectural commissions both for public and private buildings, among them synagogues, hotels, offices and schools, working closely with architects in Israel, the United States and the UK who knew he could be depended on to produce innovative sculptures that were responses to, and often tied in thematically with, the public spaces for which they were designed.<sup>2</sup> This was



a particular passion, as he declared in an interview in 1965.

‘I had the notion that small scale sculpture was no longer valid in the new post-war social circumstances, certainly not in an egalitarian society like Israel... I had strong convictions that art should become public art or find a form which the average person could relate to modern life.’<sup>3</sup>

Works of art designed for specific buildings are often at risk when these change ownership, are modernised or indeed demolished, so the work can be lost, particularly as it is often too big to install easily elsewhere. Unfortunately, this has happened to several of Azaz’s largest and most important sculptural commissions and thus his work has been removed from the public eye. His major works were not of a suitable size for domestic or museum spaces and indeed, he made it clear that he was not keen for his art to disappear into museum stores saying ‘I do not like art being shut away in ivory towers separated from everyday life.’<sup>4</sup> Apart from ceramics acquired early in his career, his work remains unrepresented in museum collections.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference provided to Azaz by Yona Fischer found amongst this papers dated 12th December 1973

<sup>2</sup> In Israel, he received a number of commissions for buildings designed by architects Dora Gad, Nachum Shani, Rafael Blumenfeld and Lazar Heskia. In the USA, both the firms of Eggers and Higgins and Loeb, Schlossman and Bennett gave him repeated commissions and in the UK, he worked on a

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number of projects for Eugene Rosenberg of Yorke, Rosenberg and Mardall.

<sup>3</sup> Charles S. Spencer “Azaz Sculpture as Architecture” in *Studio International*, November 1965, p.198

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p.198-9

In addition, the fact that in 1963, he chose to leave Israel to accept a commission to design stained glass windows for Carmel College, a Jewish boarding school in Oxfordshire, UK removed him from the mainstream of Israeli art. Public opinion in Israel could be unforgiving to those who chose to live abroad. His name is absent from most books on Israeli art and it is only now that his important contribution to the Harsa ceramics factory and to the Maskit fashion company (though not yet to public art in Israel) has begun to be properly appreciated. However, he never really became part of the British art scene either, which may have suited him. He said in a filmed interview

‘I never had an urge to become famous or successful, becoming a personality – I always wanted my work to be judged by people looking at it, not by what I was trying to say.’<sup>5</sup>

Azaz began his career in ceramics, also designing jewellery and glass. From 1960, he concentrated on his own sculpture, producing mostly large-scale architectural commissions as well as stained glass. He worked in an extraordinary range of materials, including concrete, bronze, aluminium, stone and wood, and produced both figurative and abstract work. One critic commented on this variety writing:

‘Nechemia Azaz is prodigiously gifted, being archaeologist and stonemason, ceramic engineer and potter, stained glass designer, mosaicist and jeweller, as well as sculptor ... he must at times be embarrassed by the choice of media and material in which he can freely work.’<sup>6</sup>

Whilst the fact that he worked in so many different media was once considered an advantage, it has also been problematic, making it difficult to describe a typical ‘Azaz’ medium or style so that his work is not as easily recognisable as it can be with some of his contemporaries. Even the art critic, Charles Spencer, one of Azaz's greatest supporters, identified this issue in 1986, writing:

‘the modern public, including the art world, seem unable to cope with the concept and reality of multi-talents. They prefer a

recognisable, coherent personality working in a limited range of materials.’<sup>7</sup>

Finally, mention must be made of the fact that he worked under a range of different names. His first name does not have any fixed way of spelling in English, and thus it can be found as Nechemia, Nechemiah, Nehemiah as well as in his preferred form of Nehemia. He was also given a European name Henri at birth, which he continued to use when working for some Anglophone companies. He often referred to himself as N.H. Azaz, using this name initially on the internet in 2004. In this age in which we are increasingly reliant on computer search engines, until the relaunch of a website about him and the creation of his Wikipedia page by his family, it was difficult to find information about him. Indeed, there is evidence among his papers that even before the internet age, more than once owners of his work trying to contact him found it difficult to trace and reach him.<sup>8</sup>

For the past two years, I have been working closely with the Azaz family and colleagues in Israel to research his life and career, to find which works are still extant and which have been lost and to ensure that there is an up-to-date website and well-organised archive and photographic record of all his works. It is hoped that in future, there will be an exhibition and fuller publication. In the meantime, this essay is intended as an introduction to his career. Whilst adopting a chronological approach, I will identify some themes that, despite the variety of media that he used, can be traced in many of his works. He was inspired by both the built environment, and the desert landscape of Israel. Though he was not an observant Jew, Azaz often went back to Biblical sources when researching commissions and the Hebrew alphabet was a particular stimulus.

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<sup>5</sup> Orit Azaz, Interview Nehemia Azaz, filmed 18<sup>th</sup> January 2008

<sup>6</sup> *Arts Review* 30th October (1965)

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Spencer *Society and Self - The Public and Private Sculpture of Azaz* May 1986

<sup>8</sup> Rosary College refer to difficulties in tracking down Azaz when they wanted to remove his sculpture. On 10th May 2010, the college wrote saying that they ‘do remember Googling Henri Azaz but did not find contact information on the internet’.

## Childhood and Military Service

Nehemia Azaz was born in Berlin in 1923. His Russian-born father, an expert in water irrigation and a committed Zionist, had settled in Palestine in 1906.

His mother, who had come to Palestine in 1920 from Germany, made the decision to return to give birth due to her concerns about medical facilities in her new home. Azaz was taken back to Palestine when just a few months old and he grew up in Zichron Ya'akov south of Haifa. In an interview in 1990, Azaz recalled his interest in carving from an early age.

'I began to sculpt at age 10, to chisel stone, because at that time in our yard were Arab labourers, stonecutters who dealt with repairs to the house. For some reason, I was drawn to mallet and scalpel.'<sup>9</sup>

Despite being severely punished by his father for the damage he caused, Azaz continued to carve in stone and wood through his teenage years. However, although his home was full of pictures by several local artists whom his father supported, Azaz was not at all interested in art stating 'I had no artistic interest, I didn't look at reproductions and I wasn't interested in books on art.'<sup>10</sup>

Azaz joined the British Navy in 1941 and throughout his service, he continued to carve but viewed it as just a hobby saying 'I always sat and carved, even in the army and even on all the missions I was on. But for me this was something to do, just as someone else would drink or smoke.'<sup>11</sup>

When he was temporarily invalided out, he attended archaeology lectures at the Hebrew University and visited the Rockefeller Museum. This was to have a great influence on his work as Charles Spencer has noted, leading to 'an

abiding passion, which later profoundly affected his artistic work'.<sup>12</sup>

He then joined the British Army as a member of the Jewish Brigade and saw service in Europe, and whilst in Italy took the opportunity to enrol at the University of Bologna where he studied stone carving. He was then assigned to serve in the Netherlands where he met a group of professional potters who were the first to encourage him to consider himself as an artist. He also met the artist Cephass Stauthamer (1899-1983) with whom he would later study.

He returned to Israel to fight in the War of Independence where he served with Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin. He was involved in the intelligence services and often visited the military base at Be'er Sheva. He resumed his practice of carving small figurines and heads and also made rings and pendants. As ivory was very expensive, he experimented with carving camel and cow bones instead, and made expeditions into the Negev to find them. In an interview in 1953, he revealed more about his working process.

'After he gets the dead camel bones, Azaz lets them dry for a few months, so the fat embedded in them dissipates, and they reach the required strength. For the carving he uses three types of special knives and even an electric drill.'<sup>13</sup>

There was a ready market for these works and he found it hard to keep up with demand. He

subsequently gave a number of them to his wife Yaffa who met him whilst she was serving in the army in Be'er Sheva and she treasures these small bone and ivory sculptures of women's heads and torsos to this day.

By now, he realised that he did not want to spend the rest of his life in the military. At this



Camel bone carvings  
Photo: Alex Sharp Photography



<sup>9</sup> Translation of Interview with Aviva Limon 5<sup>th</sup> June 1990

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Charles Spencer *Society and Self - The Public and Private Sculpture of Azaz* May 1986

<sup>13</sup> Raphael Bashan "The Vision of Dry Bones" *Maariv*, 24<sup>th</sup> February, 1953

point, he met a group of geologists working in the Negev and was present when they found samples of fireproof clay in the ground, which suggested a new direction to him.

'I searched for another mechanism for fulfilling my destiny within the framework of Zionism. And the only thing I could think of was in the realm of industry in Be'er Sheva...Within me awakened the notion that when I was discharged from the IDF (Israel Defence Force), I would travel abroad to specialise in industrial ceramics, to establish a factory. I prepared to establish a factory privately in Be'er Sheva, because of the raw materials that can be found there. An industrial ceramics factory.'<sup>14</sup>

### Studying in Europe

In 1953, Azaz left the army and returned to the Netherlands to acquire the necessary training to allow him to set up a ceramics factory in the Negev. He already had contacts through the friends he had made there on his first visit and was particularly interested in ceramic chemistry.

Official registration documents show Azaz registered as a sculptor, living at Oudezijds Voorburgwal 57, Amsterdam and studying with Cephass Stauthamer, who was the main occupant of the house, a former tobacco factory, which provided a number of studio spaces for artists in its attics. Stauthamer and his wife Josje Smit (also known as Diana Smith) both worked primarily in ceramics, Stauthamer producing large scale sculptures in clay. He also painted on glass and worked as a mosaicist, so gave Azaz an early example of how it was possible to work in a variety of media.

Martijn van Ooststroom, an art historian based in the Netherlands, believes that Azaz also studied ceramics with Just van Deventer and also possibly, Theo Dobbelman, the specialists in ceramic chemistry at that time. There is also some evidence to suggest that Azaz enrolled on a course at a technical college in either The Hague or 's-Hertogenbosch.

During this period, Azaz met Henry Rothschild. Rothschild had come to England in 1933 from his native Frankfurt to study at Cambridge. After the war, he became a leading collector and

dealer in contemporary ceramics, launching the careers of several important potters through exhibitions at his shop Primavera. In 1953, Rothschild helped Azaz to get a job as manager of a small pottery in London, where he also had studio space. Yaffa joined him in London and they married soon after. The wedding was a small affair with just two witnesses but they were the celebrated Modernist architect Eugene Rosenberg and his wife Penelope who were close friends. Eugene would become an important supporter of Azaz's work.

In May 1955, Azaz exhibited his ceramics for the first time, alongside paintings and drawings by L.S. Lowry and Josef Herman. Lowry and Herman were both well-known for their images of working people, Lowry depicting the industrial cityscapes of the North-West where he spent his whole life whilst Herman, a refugee from Nazism born in Warsaw, had found a new home in the Welsh village of Ystradgynlais where he painted the miners and their families. The two had exhibited together before in 1943 at the London Gallery Alex Reid & Lefevre. We do not yet know how Wakefield Gallery curator Helen Kapp came across Azaz's work but it may have been as a result of the connections of Henry Rothschild, who loaned a piece by Azaz from his own collection to the exhibition. Another piece was loaned by art dealer Gustav Delbanco, whose gallery regularly showed work by Josef Herman. Delbanco collected ceramics so may also have suggested Azaz's pottery be exhibited alongside Herman's work.

Archive photographs of the pieces exhibited reveal some works, which resemble ancient Minoan jugs with handles and flared mouths, while others are far more abstract and resemble rock formations. Their originality was positively reviewed in the Jewish Chronicle:

'To English eyes, the pottery of Mr Azaz is startling in its novelty. It has intense vitality and often conveys a strong sense of rhythmic movement. Mr Azaz is a sculptor and his works are not made on the wheel but are coiled. This may be why we feel in viewing them the impact of the artist's own vivid personality. Many of them appeal primarily as exciting pieces of sculpture.'

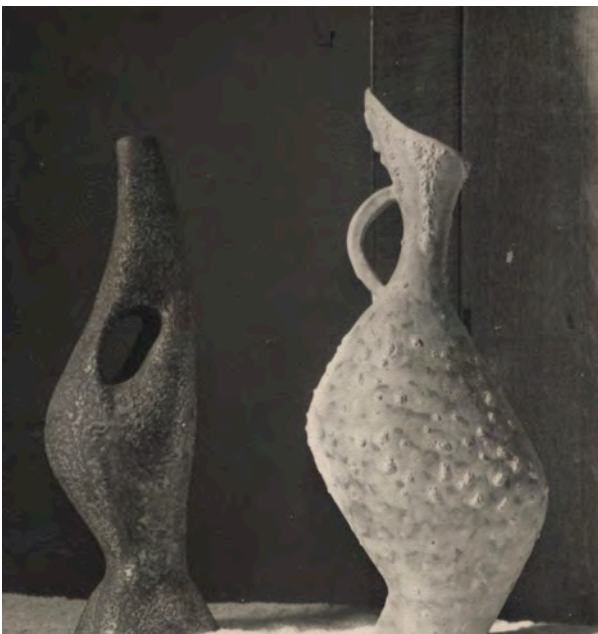
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<sup>14</sup> Translation of Interview with Aviva Limon 5<sup>th</sup> June 1990

They are fascinating not only in shape but in colour and texture. Mr Azaz has been experimenting in ceramic chemistry and has both evolved unusually fine and hard stoneware and invented some beautiful glazes.<sup>15</sup>



*Pottery from the exhibition at Wakefield Gallery in 1955  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*



Interestingly, Helen Kapp decided to stress the fact that they could still be used as domestic ware by placing flowers in them during the exhibition.

Already by this point, Azaz's ceramics had been purchased for municipal collections in Amsterdam. In 1958, a piece in a similar style entered the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Sadly, just a few months after the exhibition, Nehemia and Yaffa's stay in London was interrupted by tragedy. Yaffa's mother had come to visit them and was travelling back to Tel Aviv on El Al flight 402 on the 27th July 1955 when it strayed into Bulgarian air space and was shot down, killing all on board. Yaffa returned to Israel immediately for a state funeral for the victims and shortly afterwards fell ill, so Nehemia found himself back in Israel sooner than he had planned.

## Harsa

Whilst Azaz still felt he needed more preparation before opening his own pottery, once back in Israel he met a friend of his father's at a function. Aharon Remez was a well-known politician and civil servant but also director of Harsa, a company that already owned a ceramics factory in Haifa and was about to open a sanitary ware factory in Be'er Sheva. Azaz was given an opportunity that was hard to turn down.

'Remez told me that if I wanted to come back to Israel he'd give me the opportunity to set up an artistic ceramics department in the factory, so as to efficiently use up the empty spaces on the trolleys going into the kilns.'<sup>16</sup>

Azaz soon recruited Pnina Amir to help him in the enterprise. In the 1990 interview, he explains how it was run along the same lines he had employed in London where he designed vessels that were then made from moulds but which a group of trainees then decorated in their own styles. Thus 'only the production process would be industrial' whereas the decoration was hand applied and each design limited in numbers.<sup>17</sup> Azaz experimented with different clays using both the same clay that was used for sanitary-ware but also trying out clay from the Negev. The work was well received when exhibited in Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv, encouraging both Azaz and the company to put the designs into production. Azaz had seen how Ruth Dayan, wife of Moshe, had created work opportunities for new immigrants with her fashion company Maskit, in which he was involved as a jewellery designer, and wishing to do something similar,

<sup>15</sup> "Democracy and Art" *Jewish Chronicle* 13th May 1955 p.12

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Translation of Interview with Aviva Limon 5<sup>th</sup> June 1990

he contacted the Ministry of Labour. A training scheme was set up whereby young immigrants, mostly of North African origin, were trained to make and decorate the ceramics. Meanwhile, Yaffa joined the team and marketed the products from the company base in Tel Aviv. Azaz remembers 'within a year she had created an almost constant market for our products, everything we managed to manufacture.'<sup>18</sup>

Chana Rabin, who joined the team working in Be'er Sheva in 1956, recalls that most had no experience of working in ceramics but were trained by Azaz and worked making models and casting.

Rabin, who was recently interviewed about her time with Harsa, continues to call Azaz 'my master' as she feels she learnt everything she knows from him.<sup>19</sup> 'He was an excellent teacher; very patient and very clear with his explanations. He put much emphasis on the form and had the ability to teach that to his apprentices. Decorations had to fit the form and not to break it.' She comments that he allowed his workers to come up with their own ideas, and 'gave the decorators a free hand yet noted when he didn't think the design was right (and always explained why).'<sup>20</sup>

The Harsa factory proved a great commercial success, which Chana attributes to Nehemia's creativity and hard work and Yaffa's marketing skills. He certainly seems to have been prolific in creating new designs, commenting 'There were days when I would create four, five new designs a day. There was no problem with that.'<sup>21</sup> Keen not to flood the market with multiple copies of the same design, new designs were launched every three months, and those that were not selling well were quickly withdrawn. The

designs show varied influences. As with the pieces shown in the Wakefield exhibition, many of the works were influenced by the landscapes and colours of the Negev whilst others are based on ancient pots. The influence of European modernism can also be seen and in particular, the work of Lucie Rie seems to have been influential. Rie, a Viennese-born Jewish potter who had fled her home for London in 1938 was in the 1950s producing domestic ware which was sold in Heal's and in Henry Rothschild's shop Primavera. The Harsa domestic ware includes examples decorated with fine sgraffito lines and coffee sets with handles

protruding horizontally outwards, both signature features of Rie's work.

While managing the factory, and designing products for Harsa, Azaz also worked on his own sculptural pottery ideas, creating a number of his own motifs and designs. These pieces were not usually functional, but evoked the Modernist sculpture of Henry Moore and his contemporaries, many of the pieces resembling mythical beasts or anthropomorphic figures. In one work, three shapes call to mind a family but their long necks are surmounted not with heads but crescent moons. The new moon is a potent symbol in Judaism and there are special prayers said on the occasion of a new moon. A similar shape is created on the letters in the Torah by the scribe so it is a strongly Jewish motif that can also be found in the work of other Israeli artists such as Mordecai Ardon. Similar crescent moon shapes can be found in a range of glassware that Azaz designed for Shafir, which are also obviously influenced by ancient pieces of pottery found in the region.

The importance of the factory can perhaps be gauged by the fact that many of those who began their careers at Harsa later became established names in the field of ceramics. Only two of those employed were Israeli-born and the rest came from all over the world. They included Dan Arbeid (1928-2010) a young Jewish tailor



Page from Harsa pottery catalogue  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Avi Noam Hadar, published on Youtube on 3rd February 2016.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHRb4iTe4wM>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Translation of Interview with Aviva Limon 5<sup>th</sup> June 1990

from London's East End who had been working on a kibbutz. After spending a year working with Azaz he returned to London and joined the Central School of Art, becoming a much-loved teacher whose works can be found in museum collections throughout the UK. A second employee from England, Frances Sokolov (1935-2016) returned to Britain where she first worked as a ceramicist, and later found fame as Vi Subversa, the lead singer of the punk band Poison Girls. The Israelis include Yehuda Koren, who like Pnina Amir went on to teach at the Bezalel Art School for many years and became an authority on ceramic technology.

The Koor company would bring delegations from all over the world to visit the factory in the middle of the desert and the employees were expected to be on hand to answer questions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, problems nevertheless arose as Harsa found it difficult to meet demand as they were only allowed to fire pieces in the gaps between sanitary ware. Therefore in 1958, Azaz went to Germany to buy a new kiln for the company, taking the time also to visit Expo '58 in Brussels where some Harsa products were shown. Once the kiln was installed, production increased and by this point staff numbers had risen to about 25.

Azaz was obviously considered the leading figure in artistic ceramics in Israel in this period. In 1959, it was he who received a letter from the International Ceramics Museum in Faenza informing him that the museum wished to have a section devoted to the ceramicists of Israel in their annual exhibition that year and asking him to communicate this to other ceramicists and also, presumably, to make the selection. Azaz in fact handed over the responsibility of making the selection to Dr F. Schiff, the Director of the Haifa Museum of Art, but six of his own works were chosen for the exhibition, two of which were then acquired for the museum's permanent collection.

However, despite Azaz's international reputation, there continued to be friction between Harsa and Koor and attempts to build up a steady export market failed. He was also becoming frustrated with the medium saying 'the pottery experiment did not entirely satisfy me because the vessels we made for functional purposes were collected as works of art, displayed in the living room rather than used in

the context of living.'<sup>22</sup> Having always intended to stay at Harsa for a maximum of 5 years<sup>23</sup>, in 1960, Azaz decided it was time to leave the company, recommending that Pnina Amir take over from him.

## Maskit

Even before he started working with Harsa, Azaz was involved with the Maskit initiative of Ruth Dayan. Ruth was the first wife of the late Israeli Defence Force General and politician Moshe Dayan whom Azaz had known from his time in the Jewish Brigade. Dayan founded Maskit with the intention of creating jobs for new immigrants by making fashion items and Azaz became involved as jewellery designer.

Azaz would make drawings of designs and then worked closely with highly skilled Yemenite silversmiths who worked for Maskit, in particular Moshe Ben David and his cousin Chaim. Almost sixty years after they began to work together, Moshe still feels indebted to Azaz saying 'Nehemia for me is a great thing. I was very much influenced by him in my work. No question about it.'<sup>24</sup> Azaz's jewellery tends to be large and heavy and Moshe remembers how this was at first criticised. 'When he started with large things, neck jewellery, pendants, all large... all the artists started criticizing him (saying) who can wear these jewels, big things? A year later all the artists began making big jewellery.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Charles Spencer "Azaz Sculpture as Architecture" *Studio International*, November 1965, pp.199-200

<sup>23</sup> Azaz told Charles Spencer in 1965 'I gave myself five years to prove it could be done commercially and artistically.' Ibid p.199 A recent article about Harsa suggests that Azaz signed a five year contract with Remez which required Azaz to found the department and head it until it was fully and independently functional. Amnon Israeli "Harsa's Art Department 1956-1966" *1260 Magazine* 2013

<sup>24</sup> Interview by Sharon Neufeld with Moshe Ben David, Nes Ziona, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2016

<sup>25</sup> Ibid



*Azaz designed jewellery for Maskit  
Photo: Alex Sharp Photography (colour)  
Nehemia Azaz Archive (mono)*

Much of his jewellery was made using cast or beaten silver with mounted semi-precious stones, coral, amber, ivory or even small pieces of Roman glass that Azaz sourced himself, ensuring the stones were cut the way he wanted them. Moshe spoke about the originality of his work in this field saying 'his designs are special. There is no resemblance between his design and those of others.' He also explained how they worked together. 'He'd give us his design, and when he handed us the paper we'd tell him, "Listen, sometimes it's easy to work on paper, but to carry it out..." He'd say "I understand that." He was a man who would create newness, he'd explain everything, every single point about his design. Every point. Even where a ball should be.'<sup>26</sup>

One of his most inventive necklaces he called the Question Mark. It does not go fully round the neck but encircles it like a collar without needing to be clasped and then has a long chain hanging down, weighted by a semi-precious stone. He also designed hair combs, which, like the sculptural ceramics described above, once again show the influence of the Torah scribe. The protuberances that stick out of the top are inspired by the *tagin* or decorations drawn onto specific Hebrew letters by the scribe.

Even after he had finished working for Maskit, Azaz continued to craft jewellery throughout his career as presents for family and friends, often using carved miniature sculptures he had made that would then be mounted in silver.

## First Architectural Commissions 1957-1960

Whilst still working at Harsa, Azaz had received the first of what would be many commissions for art to enhance public buildings. In Be'er Sheva, he built a wall for Hotel Zohar's restaurant, made from fired bricks taken from a local factory.

This piece shows Azaz's continued interest in fired clay but also is the first piece in which he explores his interest in the built environment. Whilst all the bricks are made from red clay, perhaps to connect the work to the desert landscape outside, they are anything but uniform in size and shape. He used standard bricks, air bricks, sloping roof bricks, bricks with large holes in them and arch shapes to create a wall that suggests many different architectural elements and appears to depict a busy cityscape. Created in high relief with plenty of cavities to create light and shade, the ideas explored here would be repeated in later, better-known commissions for the Sheraton Hotel in Tel Aviv and the Sherman House Hotel in Chicago. However, whilst both these have been lost, the early Hotel Zohar wall remains in its original location.



*Firebrick wall installation at Hotel Zohar, Be'er Sheva  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

Another early commission was received from Yedioth Ahronoth, the national evening newspaper published in Tel Aviv.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid



*Tiled mural at Yedioth Ahronot (Tel Aviv Evening News)  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

Azaz created a mural of glazed tiles, which was placed above the main entrance to the publishing house. There is little material about this piece which sadly has either been covered up or removed but photographs show how the design was perfectly suited to the building. It depicted the newspaper rolling off the press to be seized and read by its wide readership. The people are depicted as stick figures but their different occupations are clear from their hats that range from white-collar workers in bowler hats to kibbutzniks in their typical three-cornered hats. The newspaper's name is repeated across the top of the newspaper coming off the press, but the newsprint appears more like an abstract painting. Abstract Expressionism was very much the dominant form of art at the time in Israel.

### **Landscape – Sheraton Hotel 1960**

In 1960, Azaz was commissioned to produce a major piece of architectural sculpture for the Sheraton Hotel in Tel Aviv and this really made his name in Israel. The hotel was already a major story. It was the first hotel to be built outside North America by the Sheraton corporation. The

architects responsible for the interior design were Raphael (Rafi) Blumenfeld and Lazar Heskia who would continue to offer major commissions to Azaz for decades to come.

Azaz's contribution to the hotel was a carved concrete wall, which was 33 feet long, 16 feet high and 4½ feet wide. Its main purpose was to conceal four enormous pillars that dominated the lounge floor and 'spoil the overall impression and view'.<sup>27</sup> Azaz had never worked in concrete before but as his wife remembers 'he put the concrete blocks in place, cemented them together and then covered them in lime wash'.<sup>28</sup> The concrete therefore appeared to be solid rock. He carved into the concrete in situ, using here different levels of relief with some parts carved all the way through to allow light to penetrate through to the foyer and the lounge on either side of the wall. The Jerusalem Post described how 'the component parts are ingeniously woven together into a semi-abstract pattern to which further interest is added by the differences in the depth of the relief, some portions jutting out while others are little more than incised'.<sup>29</sup>

The design was, like his work for the Hotel Zohar in Be'er Sheva, once more inspired by the built environment. Here, however, it is very clear to see the influence of the different styles of architecture to be found in Israel from the earliest times onwards. One commentator revealed how, in carving straight into the concrete, the work resembled 'an imaginary excavation of the six civilisations that preceded the founding of ancient Palestine'.<sup>30</sup> Included in the designs were ziggurat pyramids, domes, stairways and niches, Gothic windows and doorways. There is also a Tree of Life motif that alludes to the Biblical story of Creation. A cup of wine could be interpreted as either the wine drunk on the Jewish Sabbath but also, to Christian visitors, as a chalice, though one American visitor wittily commented that 'he had

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Wilkinson, 'Israel Art is Sheraton Key Note', *Jerusalem Post* p.5, 14<sup>th</sup> March 1961

<sup>28</sup> Julia Weiner, Interview with Yaffa Azaz, 8<sup>th</sup> January 2016

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Henry End *Interiors of Hotels and Motor Hotels*, 1963

found traces of American civilisation too: the clear outline of a Martini glass.’<sup>31</sup>



*Lifescape at Tel Aviv Sheraton Hotel*  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

The style is in some ways redolent of work of other artists. Both the Hotel Zohar and Sheraton walls show some affinity with the sculptures constructed by Louise Nevelson out of odd pieces of wood and other detritus. They also show some similarities to Adolph Gottlieb’s pictograph paintings of the early 1950s where Gottlieb, an American-Jewish artist aligned to the Abstract Expressionist movement, would take universal symbols that he felt transcended time, place, and language to appeal to what he termed as the ‘collective unconscious’. These included simplified human features but also plant forms and vessels which he placed into a geometric grid system. He even made a Torah curtain for the Millburn Synagogue in New Jersey to this design in 1951. Whilst Yaffa Azaz says that she does not believe her husband knew of these works, it is likely that they were known in Israel. In 1961, Mordecai Ardon painted a work in a similar style entitled ‘Love Rug’ and by 1965 a major work by Nevelson was in the collection of the Israel Museum.

Indeed, in 1962, Azaz produced another wall carved out of concrete for the Architects and Engineers Association Building, Tel-Aviv which again seems to resemble a Gottlieb pictograph. Entitled *Structures*, it once more allowed Azaz to explore architectural motifs. However, whilst

there is definitely a similarity between the work of Azaz and Gottlieb, Azaz was able to take something from this style of painting and make it completely his own, using architectural details and symbols from Jewish history in his work. Sadly, whilst *Structures* is still in situ, its impact has been diminished by electricity wires and other street fittings added later to the building.

Azaz was not the only artist working on the design of the Sheraton. Other leading Israeli artists working there included Naphtali Bezem and Danny Karavan but it

was his wall that really attracted critical praise after the opening of the Hotel. The Jerusalem Post wrote ‘The most arresting art work is the sculptured wall which partially divides the ground floor lounge and draws the attention of the visitor as soon as he enters the hotel’.<sup>32</sup> Henry End described the work as the ‘outstanding feature of the hotel’s interior’.<sup>33</sup> The work was also praised in the international press.<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately, when the hotel was demolished in 1991, the wall was demolished too. Yaffa Azaz recalls that the first that she and her husband knew of this was when they met the artist Yigal Tumarkin at Ben Gurion airport as they arrived in Israel for a visit. He informed them that the piece had already been destroyed. Attempts to receive compensation for the loss of the work were in vain. Luckily, a preparatory maquette made in aluminium is conserved in the collection of the family though this in no way replicates the impression the piece must have made in situ.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Wilkinson, ‘Israel Art is Sheraton Key Note’, *Jerusalem Post* p.5, 14<sup>th</sup> March 1961

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Henry End *Interiors of Hotels and Motor Hotels* 1963

<sup>34</sup> A large photo of the wall appeared in the *Aachener Volkszeitung*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1963 p.7. It was also discussed in Charles Spencer’s article about the artist in *The Studio*, volume CLXII September 1961 pp.114-5

## Stained glass commissions in Israel 1959-62

Whilst large sculptural pieces like *Lifescape* in Tel Aviv or *The Form Makers* in Chicago have been demolished, in part due to their size and the difficulty of relocating them, much of Azaz's stained glass work remains in situ and can still be admired in various locations in England and Chicago. However, the whereabouts of his earliest pieces of stained glass made for private homes are unknown and his first major commission, for the S.S. Moledet, was lost when the ship sank in 1988. The only piece of stained glass currently known to be in-situ in Israel can be found at the Kfar Silver Agricultural College in Ashkelon.

Three pieces of stained glass were made for private homes and are only known through the photographs.



*Examples of privately commissioned glass windows*  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

They are all examples of coloured glass set in concrete. Azaz was always an innovator with stained glass and never used the traditional lead comes. In these early works he instead used the *dale de verre* technique first developed by Jean Gaudin in Paris in the 1930s where slabs of glass are held together using concrete or epoxy. The glass used tends to be thicker than the panes in traditional stained glass, thus producing deeper colour effects. The effect is also closer to that used across the Middle East in Islamic buildings including mosques where pieces of coloured glass are set within plaster framework. Azaz had of course, already worked with glass when he incorporated small pieces of ancient glass into his jewellery and also designed a range of glassware for the Shafir Company.

As these early works are only known from photos, it is difficult to know exactly how they

were made but the glass looks fairly thick and also is chipped or faceted in places to increase the refraction and reflection effects. The first of these known private commissions was made in the 1959 and the other two in 1960, the latter two commissioned by the renowned Israel interior designers Dora Gad<sup>35</sup> and Lazar Heskia, with



*Azaz designs at Shafir*  
Photo: Alex Sharp Photography



whom he would continue to collaborate. The pieces, commissioned for the homes of an American writer and an architect, were long and thin, and all of them appear to span from ceiling to floor. Perhaps the most interesting is the piece made for the American Writer's home which was commissioned by Heskia, where Azaz arranged rectangles of varying shades of white, blue and orange (complementary colours which thus create a particularly vivid effect together) and set them with thick bands of concrete between them. The glass is set in relief, so that some chunks protrude into the room, no doubt creating differing light effects depending on the time of day. The pattern of irregularly placed rectangles was one that Azaz was to repeat many times in different sizes and for completely different uses – there is a similar motif on a ring and late in life, when designing a very original children's playground, the climbing frame has an almost identical design.

In 1961, Dora Gad, obviously pleased with piece he had produced for her client, commissioned him to make a series of stained glass panels for the dining room of the S.S. Moledet. This ship was one of a number for which Gad acted as interior designer. The S.S. Moledet (meaning Homeland) operated both as a ferry operating between Haifa and various European ports but also as a one class cruise liner.

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<sup>35</sup> Dora Gad (1912-2003) was the first woman to practice as an interior designer in Palestine. She worked first with her husband Yehezkel and then, after his death in 1958, she established a partnership with Arie Noy, a longtime employee in her office. Gad-Noy existed until 1976. Gad was also involved with Maskit.



*Large stained glass panels on Zim Lines S.S. Moledet  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

The four pieces of stained glass produced were not windows but were artificially lit from behind to bring light into the room. There were four panels, each seven and a half metres long and made up of a series of rectangles placed alongside each other to create a succession of different L shaped configurations. Azaz used both chunks and thin sheet glass to once more create variety of texture, this time set in black epoxy that was reinforced with fibreglass to ensure they were lightweight and could resist the vibrations of the motors. The windows appear to have been mostly abstract but the theme was in fact the fruits of the Bible, the first of many times that Azaz would turn to the Bible for inspiration.

In 1962, Azaz worked on his first set of synagogue stained glass windows, creating two windows for the synagogue of Kfar Silver Agricultural College in Ashkelon, Israel.

Whereas for his previous windows, where he had coloured the concrete or epoxy holding the glass in place black to resemble the traditional lead comes, here he coloured the concrete grey which gives a very different and much lighter effect. Azaz used two different styles of stained glass. Central to each design is a dome-like shape. This might be a skull-cap, appropriate for a house of prayer, or the domed hat beloved of kibbutzniks, which instead refers to the agricultural work of the college.



*Stained glass at Kfar Silver Agricultural College  
Photo: Michal Ariel*

It could also be the shape of one of the tablets of stone onto which the Ten Commandments were engraved. This would make sense as it seems that the original idea was to use the first words from each of the commandments as part of the design. However, the final scheme instead incorporates two other Biblical quotations that are much more in keeping with an agricultural college. The first is a quotation from Proverbs 28 'He who tills the land shall have plenty of food' whilst the second phrase is the famous first line of Psalm 23 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want'. Inside each dome, these Hebrew words can be read amongst a spider's web of other, thinner, lines whilst the spaces are filled with different shades of blue and purple thin glass. Outside the dome shapes, large chunks of transparent glass are set within the concrete. By using different sorts of glass, Azaz achieved a range of effects. The thin glass lets in a fair amount of light whereas the thick glass chunks give the wall texture. The whole design is anchored within a grid system which no doubt ensured the stability of the wall.

In this design, we see Azaz for the first time using the stylised Hebrew Alphabet that would become a major feature of much of his work. He always uses a similar font, very linear but also always placed at abrupt angles, quite different from the decorated letters found in the Torah which influence other aspects of his work.

## First commissions in America

### The Loop Synagogue and Kol Ami Museum, Chicago 1962-4

Azaz now had successfully completed several major commissions in Israel and decided to find more work further afield. He made a number of trips to the United States and was offered an important commission by the Loop Synagogue in Chicago. The synagogue had been founded in a central location in 1929 but the original building had been destroyed in a fire and a new building, designed by architects Loebel, Schlossman and Bennett was completed in 1957. Commissioning works of art was obviously important to the synagogue as the sanctuary is famous for its Creation-themed stained glass windows by renowned American-Jewish artist Abraham Rattner, which take up the entire east wall and are visible from the street.

Azaz was commissioned to make a sculpture to hang over the door into the building, which would announce the presence of the synagogue within the business community of central Chicago. Its position was also important in that it marked the location of the Aron Kodesh or Synagogue Ark inside. In a handwritten description of his meeting with the architects, Azaz quoted Mr Bennett, the lead architect on the scheme, who told him 'All along I felt that the building should represent and reflect the contribution the Jewish faith and ethics have made to the civilised world... I therefor (sic) would like to see the spirit of the ethical principles of your religion manifested in the sculpture.'<sup>36</sup> When pressed to elaborate, the architect suggested that Azaz could consider 'a theme that will in some way incorporate or symbolize the priestly benediction since the

same benediction in essence has similar connotations in other religions as well.'<sup>37</sup>

In the handwritten document, parts of which were then published in the synagogue bulletin in 1964, Azaz explained in detail how he came up with the design.



*Hands of Peace at the Loop Synagogue, Chicago*  
Photo: Allison Lichtenberg

'I went to the Loop Synagogue, looked at the building, sat for many hours in a back row in the main sanctuary, taking in the serenity of the whole and the beauty of the Rattner stained glass, trying to crystallize what I felt. It dawned on me like an electric shock, the place simply exudes PEACE. I then realised there was no need for me to incorporate or symbolize the priestly blessing. I was going to suggest to the architects the actual text of the three-fold blessing and incorporate the myth of the "flaming letters" which tells that when the Temple in Jerusalem was put to the torch, the sacred scrolls

of the Bible were burned, but the letters of the scrolls did not vanish in smoke but are eternally alive in the form of floating flaming letters in the heavens.'<sup>38</sup>

This concept of 'flaming letters' was to be key in many of Azaz's works that used Biblical texts. Whilst he had already used short quotations from the Bible in his work at the synagogue in Kfar Silver in Chicago, he went to greater lengths to reproduce the long text of the Priestly Benediction from Numbers 6 verses 23-27. It appears in both Hebrew and English in the sculpture and dominates the piece. For the first time, Azaz worked in bronze, creating a large rectangular slab, three metres high and 1.8 metres wide weighing two tons. Across this block, the Hebrew and English words appear to float. The words that stand out most are those with which the quotation ends, Shalom in

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<sup>36</sup> Hand written text by Azaz entitled *The materialization of an idea* by Henri N.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. This section of the hand-written text appears in an article published The Bulletin of the Chicago Loop Synagogue Vol 1 no 3 January 1964

Hebrew and Peace in English which are positioned in the bottom right and left hand corners of the sculpture and which have led the sculpture being known as 'The Hands of Peace'. Also protruding from the piece are two hands, held in the position of blessing, which reach out to those entering into the building but also ensure, because they are made in outline that the words can still be read through them.

The piece installed was actually the second version. In the first version, the hands were much more abstract, made from a mix of welded sheet metal and mesh that resembled to some extent the flames to which Azaz referred. However, these made the text difficult to read and the synagogue obviously wanted something slightly more realistic and thus the new design was created. The sculpture was dedicated in late 1964 when the synagogue president Max Nierman announced that 'the choice of subject, the priestly blessing of the Bible symbolizes our hope that this synagog (sic) may serve as a source of blessing to our entire community.'<sup>39</sup> This piece remains in situ and is included on a number of public art trails of the city.

Azaz was also commissioned to make the Torah Ark and the Ner Tamid (Eternal Light) for the sanctuary.

Both show a continued fascination with Hebrew lettering. The Ark is inscribed with the Biblical quotation that describes the Torah as a Tree of Life. Once the Ark was opened, the Torah remained hidden from sight behind a 'curtain' constructed from geometric shapes cut out of metal strung together on chains. This needed to be pulled aside to reveal the Scrolls of the Law. The beautiful silver Eternal Light was made in the shape of a cone fashioned out of spiral filigree, in which the Hebrew letters spell out the words Ner Tamid, forming a decorative pattern. Azaz had of course already worked closely with the Yemenite jewellers Moshe and Chaim Ben David and Yemenite jewellers are particularly well-known for their use of filigree.



*Loop Synagogue Torah Ark and Eternal Light  
Photo: Jason John Paul Haskins, Locus Iste (left)  
Nehemia Azaz Archive (right)*

These commissions may well have led to Azaz receiving commissions for a number of other pieces of Judaica for the recently opened Kol Ami Museum, located in another Chicago Synagogue, North Suburban Synagogue Beth El.



*Wrought iron gates and Eternal Light  
at North Suburban Synagogue Beth El.  
Photo: Marla Hand*

In 1962, he created a pair of wrought iron doors for the museum, and later another Eternal Light, which incorporated the first words of each of the Ten Commandments, and a Menorah (seven branched candelabra) with cut outs of letters from the Biblical text that describes the Menorah that stood in the Temple in Jerusalem. For both the doors and the Eternal Light, the letters appear to float, suggesting once more that the concept of 'floating letters', which Azaz had written about with regard to the Hands of Peace sculpture, was very important to him.

The text from the doors is taken from a piyyut or liturgical prayer that incorporates an alphabetic acrostic whereby each line starts with a letter of

<sup>39</sup> Dave Meade "'Hands of Peace" will be lifted over the Loop', The Chicago Daily News p 60, 11<sup>th</sup> December 1963

the Hebrew alphabet. Azaz gave only the first word of each line of the prayer but repeats the first letter two or three times so that each letter creates a particularly strong impression.

Azaz would maintain a close relationship with the city of Chicago and create two further major works for the city later in his career.

## Carmel College

It was while Azaz was working on the Hands of Peace that he made a decision to leave Israel to go and work in England. In 1956, he had met Rabbi Kopul Rosen, the Founder of Carmel College, a Jewish Independent Boarding School located near Wallingford in Oxfordshire. Yaffa remembers it was their friend Eugene Rosenberg who had first introduced Rosen to Azaz. They discussed the possibility of Azaz working on stained glass windows for a proposed synagogue that was to be built for the school. Sadly, Dr Rosen died of leukaemia in early 1962 at the age of just 48 and it was his dying wish, sent in a hand-written letter, that Azaz produce windows for the synagogue, which was by then in construction. Azaz and his family therefore left Israel in 1963 and moved to Carmel College where he was appointed artist in residence. The plan was for the students of the school, at that point all boys (girls first entered the school in 1968) to help with the construction of the windows.

Whilst the central building at Carmel was a manor house, many of the buildings were much newer. In an article for the Observer Magazine about the school, which he calls 'the Jewish Eton' writer Chaim Bermant describes the school thus. 'Overall, the school looks like a recent endowment of the Glaziers Company. There is glass everywhere... The synagogue, with its soaring walls, looks like an elaborate greenhouse.'<sup>40</sup> Built between 1963 and 1964 to designs by a local architect Thomas Hancock, the synagogue is now Grade II listed. It was constructed out of concrete blocks and supported on four large Baltic redwood pillars, the roof slopes upwards from the entrance to the ark wall where the height reaches 14 metres. Whilst the side walls of the building were constructed in clear glass, Azaz was to work on

stained glass for both the entrance and the Ark wall. In her book about synagogues in Britain and Ireland, Sharman Kadish describes the effect as follows. "By day, the effect was to dissolve the distinction between the interior space and the external rural landscape. By night the building stood out like a lightbox against the blackness of the sky.'<sup>41</sup>

Robert Cannon was one of two students (the other was Bill Wilson) who were involved in the making of the glass for over two years, and he has given a detailed description of both how the boys became involved and Azaz's working method.

'I was at Carmel College and I was 15. We were told that this man was coming who was to work with the boys on stained glass windows. A large number of boys who thought they'd get out of Games volunteered to do this. About 30-40 kids turned up, but within a week they'd all disappeared. Most of them came through the art classes, which I'd never done but it was all very intriguing and I went along.

Nehemia was a tough man. He looked like Belshazzar on a bad day with his great beard and he was big. Certainly, for young boys at school, he was a frightening looking and awesome figure. He was very encouraging in a gruff kind of way. It wasn't teacherly. It wasn't pastoral – either you could do it or you couldn't. I did make a number of pieces myself and he encouraged me and said I could use some of the glass. He was an exciting person to work with because you were working with an artist. He wasn't a teacher. He was quite unremitting. I learnt about the notion of an artist or one aspect of an artist from regarding the way he was and worked and the sort of pronouncements he made.

He completely changed my life. It was my first exposure to anyone with a personality like that who was a creative artist like that. I wouldn't say he was Bohemian but he certainly wasn't run of the mill middle class. He was certainly very dedicated to helping people who had the wherewithal to be creative to do so. But there was no mollycoddling about it. He was authentic. He had tremendous integrity.

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<sup>40</sup> Chaim Bermant "The Jewish Eton" *The Observer* 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1973

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<sup>41</sup> Sharman Kadish, *The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland*. (London: Yale University Press 2011) p.248

We worked initially in these large Nissen huts which he was given as a studio. In these, there were crates of three or four different kinds of glass.<sup>42</sup> The glass came in different forms. First there were large slabs of glass about 11/2 x 1 feet in size, mostly made from expensive materials, some with gold in. There was a deep cobalt blue, wonderful ruby rich red, an acidic yellow. We worked with these by hitting them with a hammer so they broke into chunks. There were either little, tiny fragments or big pieces the size of a large piece of flint. They were jagged and you cut yourself to smithereens handling them. There were then sheets of glass 3 x 2 feet wide in acidic yellow, green, red, orange, and dark blue. They were all cut into shapes. Then, and somewhat the most interesting, there were the boxes from the glass factories of odds and ends. There were big wooden crates, 2 feet deep and what you had to do was to put your hands in and see what came out. There was flat glass, textured glass with a ripple in it, enamelled glasses, all colours and different textures.

The other basic material was UHU glue used in large foot long tubes. There were two problems with it. The first was it was actually narcotic and we noticed you started getting headaches. The other thing was that it wasn't as secure as it should have been and Nehemia later had to remake the windows.

The way in which we worked was that Nehemia would lay out the pieces of glass that formed the base of the windows on trestle tables. They were 7 feet high and 2.6 feet wide. They had a wooden frame and Nehemia had drawn the design on in a black marker and he would know which kind of glass was going to go where. The texturing came about in one of three ways. Either you would have an area made out of chunks from broken blocks stuck directly onto the glass or you would have deliberately cut elements, for example to look like a fish or a figurative element and they were cut out. Usually you would have a base piece and up to 4 layers so

you could have depth of colour. Then, very often, the space in between was filled with glass taken out of the miscellaneous boxes. You'd work on the section he instructed with the kind of glass he said.



*Carmel College pupils with Yaffa Azaz on synagogue windows.  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

It was really a Renaissance apprentice model. We began with very menial tasks and after a while, when we had got used to standing around in silence, no chat, very serious, whilst the master was working, we'd sometimes be able to lay out the glass cutting tools. There was a diamond glass cutter, a wheel glass cutter, a ruler so you would prepare these.

After some while, we were allowed to cut the glass to a pattern and then after a long time, he would sometimes let you loose. There were of course drawings but you could make some choices or suggestions. Nehemia would come and look over it and mainly it was approved. We would work during free periods on Sunday afternoons and quite often, Bill and I went in the evenings and stayed late.

Yaffa was in the studio all the time and she was cutting and sticking following his designs and orders as we were. She was immensely respectful of his creativity. The atmosphere was never unpleasant but there was a job of work to be done, chatting was not the order of the day. We were learning the discipline of it, to concentrate to do it properly. And you felt that. There was a very strong sense that we were privileged apprentices.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Yaffa remembers that they visited Venice to purchase some of this glass. Julia Weiner, Interview with Yaffa Azaz 8<sup>th</sup> January 2016

<sup>43</sup> Julia Weiner, Interview with Robert Cannon 11<sup>th</sup> February 2016

Cannon also explained why he felt Azaz had come up with this unusual method of making stained glass. 'Stained glass made in the traditional way could not have been an educational project for the school.'<sup>44</sup> Cannon also feels that as this method of stained glass produces something akin to a bas-relief, they reflected the fact that Azaz was primarily a sculptor. Azaz explained further reasons for working in this new way in an article about his Marble Arch windows. 'Mr Azaz explained that the principle of his technique is a prism. Reflecting light instead of allowing its passage. He uses multiple layers of coloured glass cemented between two sheets of clear glass. Light is absorbed either from the sun outside or artificial light inside. The result is that the colouring can be seen even from the same side as the light source. Conventional stained glass can be seen properly only from the side opposite to the light source.'<sup>45</sup>

Unlike his previous stained glass commissions, which were either abstract or only featured lettering, the Carmel windows have figurative elements. Cannon explains. 'If you look at the maquettes of most of his abstract work, they are completely different to the windows which were done in a way to be readable and recognisable by the boys.' The subjects were all Biblical. The tall, narrow windows in the synagogue represented the Creation story from Genesis whilst the windows in the entrance were inspired by quotations from the Books of the Minor Prophets. Both sets of windows feature Hebrew text which floats alongside the imagery, described by Jewish Chronicle art critic Peter

Stone as having the 'cuneiform angularity of old Hebrew lettering'.<sup>46</sup>

The windows were very well received. In the volume of *Buildings of England* devoted to Oxfordshire, Nikolaus Pevsner described them as 'brilliant and innovative'.<sup>47</sup> Many writers refer to the fact that as a result of the way they are made, the light is refracted at multiple angles and the effect they have changes throughout the day. For example, one writer finds 'The glass, brought over from France, reflects light from all angles, and the vivid orange, yellow, blue and green abstract shapes change their character and depth as it becomes lighter or darker outside. No artist or architect could fail to be thrilled by them.'<sup>48</sup>

Cannon remembers that the Head Master, David Stamler, himself a keen collector of art, was the member of staff most interested in the project. He revealed his enthusiasm for the work in an interview with the *Oxford Mail* in which he said 'Synagogal art has usually weakly, copied ecclesiastical styles; for once in England an answer is given to the question 'Is there a Jewish art?' The fact that boys have participated in the making of these pieces has had a dramatic effect upon them.'<sup>49</sup>

Azaz created several other artworks for Carmel College. For the synagogue, he created an unusual ark curtain similar to the one he had worked provided for the Loop Synagogue. Once more he used the idea of floating letters inspired by the idea that the letters from the scrolls burnt



*Synagogue windows at Carmel College*  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archives

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> "Donor Trouble" *Jewish Chronicle*, August 13 1971

<sup>46</sup> Untitled article by Peter Stone found in Azaz files dated December 1965 p.627

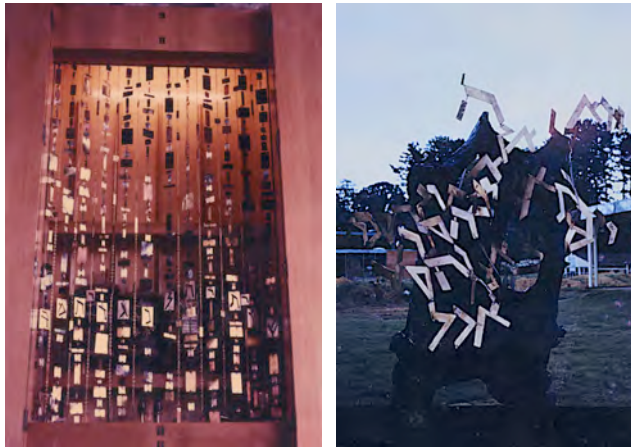
<sup>47</sup> Jennifer Sherwood & Nikolaus Pevsner, *Buildings of England - Oxfordshire - Pevsner Architectural Guides*. (London: Penguin 1974) p.712

<sup>48</sup> 'Out of the Air' *The Listener* p.198 6<sup>th</sup> August 1964

<sup>49</sup> "Inspiration of a uniquely artistic new synagogue" *Reading Mercury* 1<sup>st</sup> August 1964

after the destruction of the Temple floated into Heaven. Using the text 'I place thee, Lord in front of me always', Azaz produced cut out slim letters from small rectangles of bronze sheet which he hung on chains with other shapes made from bronze, silver, copper and brass. Thus, when the curtain is drawn, it sounds like the 'clash of cymbals' described in Psalm 150.

Letters also feature prominently in a sculpture of the Burning Bush that was placed outside the synagogue.

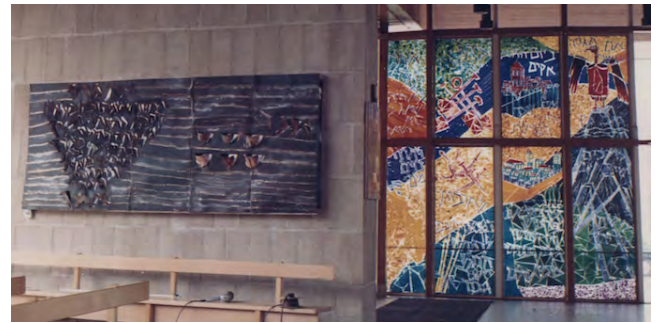


*Ark curtain & Burning bush sculpture at Carmel College  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

The heart of this sculpture was a tree trunk that had been blasted by lightning. Once more, a Hebrew inscription appears to float above the wood, the letters cut out from thin sheets of bronze and soldered together onto rods that protrude from the wood. The text is taken from the description of the Burning Bush in the Book of Exodus. Cannon remembers watching Azaz work on this and comments 'The Burning Bush took a long time, it was very carefully done. There was nevertheless a sense with the work of an untidiness, as Nehemia made the workmanship visible, the solder is visible. He used to liken this to the way the medieval glass makers stuck a line of lead right through the faces so you got a sense that it had actually been made by an artisan rather than an artist.'<sup>50</sup> Azaz would return to the theme in 1974 when he made a piece with the same name for the Plaza Hotel in Jerusalem. For this, flames made from sheets of brass and wire undulated up from the floor whilst floating embers of thin, highly polished gilded metal were suspended from the ceiling on

wires though they are no longer recognisable Hebrew letters at all.

Azaz used bronze once more for a Holocaust Memorial he made for the school, which has sadly been lost and is now only known from photographs.



*Bronze holocaust memorial panel - Carmel College synagogue  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

This was made from a bronze sheet from which various shapes were cut out. The intention was that it should be backlit. On the right was one sole Hebrew word, Yizkor, which translates as 'Remember' but is also the name of the special memorial prayer for the departed. There are then 6 cups, which probably symbolise the oil lamps or candles lit in memory of those who have died, each cup representing a million people who perished in the Holocaust. Finally on the right are the words of the Kaddish prayer for those who mourn, the letters creating the silhouette of another huge memorial oil lamp. Interestingly, Azaz made some changes from his first maquette for the memorial. In this, the cups are simple flames and there are 10 rather than 6 and the words of the Kaddish form a flame instead of a cup, perhaps to remember the way that the bodies of many of those who perished were cremated in ovens after their deaths as well as to symbolise the memorial flame.

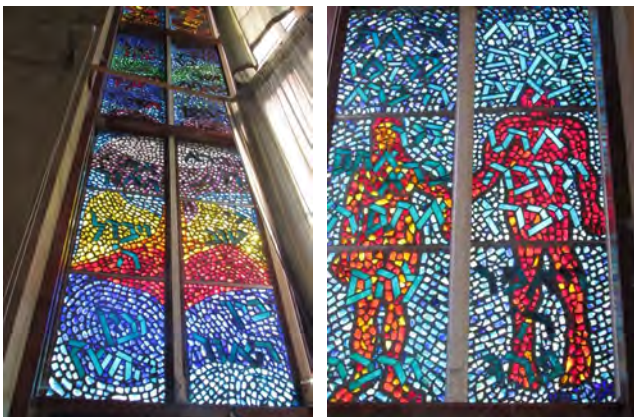
Azaz also constructed a memorial made out of concrete to his friend Dr Kopul Rosen in the grounds of the school that can still be seen there today.

<sup>50</sup> Julia Weiner, Interview with Robert Cannon 11<sup>th</sup> February 2016



*Memorial to Dr Kopul Rosen, founder of Carmel College  
Photo: Julia Weiner*

After the Great Storm of October 1987, the two large panels of glass on each side of the ark were damaged and when contacted by the then Head Master Philip Skelker, Azaz, who still lived close to the school, agreed to help. 'I suggested to dismantle them, salvage as much as possible of the coloured glass and volunteered to recreate (sic) the windows in a different technic (sic) which would not demand maintenance over many years. The making of the new windows has taken six years of my life, a labour of love for which I have not been paid.'<sup>51</sup>



*New stained glass windows at Carmel College synagogue  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

The new windows used a style more similar to the one he had employed at Kfar Silver Agricultural College. He used thick chunks of glass set in concrete, the subject of which remained the Creation but with new designs in simplified forms. Particularly striking are the large silhouettes of Adam and Eve realised in red glass against a blue background. Azaz no doubt chose red glass to remind students that Adam was created from the earth. The word for earth in Hebrew (Adamah) has the same root as the word for red (Adom) and of course, the first

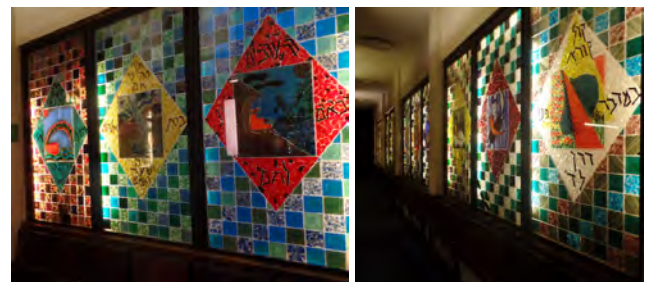
<sup>51</sup> Letter from Azaz to Carmel College, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1997

man's name (Adam). The new windows were put in place in 1994.

In 1997, Carmel College closed down suddenly during the school summer holidays and the buildings have not been inhabited since.<sup>52</sup> Azaz's windows remain in situ, the earlier ones showing some signs of damage where sections of the glass have slipped over 50 years. When writing to the school of his sadness at hearing of the closure, Azaz concluded his letter 'Carmel College is very dear to me and the windows as well as the 'Burning Bush' sculpture are an important part of my life'.<sup>53</sup> The Burning Bush sculpture was moved to Immanuel College in Bushey where Headmaster Philip Skelker went on to work after the closure of Carmel, where it still stands.

### **Other stained glass projects 1965-1978**

The success of the stained glass project at Carmel College led to Azaz receiving further commissions to work in stained glass in a similar way. In 1965, he was approached by Marble Arch synagogue, which had opened in the West End of London in 1961, about producing a series of stained glass windows. The synagogue originally proposed that he produce 117 stained glass windows over a period of 4 years. In the event, 36 were completed over 17 years representing different Jewish festivals or stories from the Bible. Each window was sponsored by a different member of the congregation and many are dedicated to the memory of deceased family members. The project took so long as the synagogue had to raise funds before work on a window could begin.



*Stained glass windows commissioned for Marble Arch synagogue  
Photo: Julia Weiner*

<sup>52</sup> A number of films have used the buildings at Carmel including *The Iron Lady* (2011) where a scene was filmed in the synagogue.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

An article in the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1971 reported that Mr J.L. Jacques, the synagogue treasurer was “enthusiastic about the windows that have been done, for Mr Azaz has invented a technique which does away with the usual lead framed sections. ‘Looking at them,’ said Mr Jacques ‘gives the impression of seeing a picture more than a construction’”.<sup>54</sup>

A set of preparatory drawings for the windows has recently been discovered amongst Azaz’s papers. These include annotations that reveal discussions between artist and rabbi about final details of the designs. For example, on the image showing the Passover Table, there is the following annotation: ‘Rabbi’s comment accepted and there will be no sign of similarity to a cross on the bottle’. On the image of Noah’s Ark, the Rabbi asked for a dove to be included. For the image of Jacob’s Dream, Azaz was asked to remove Jacob’s bare legs from the image and only show the upper part of his body, probably due to requirements for modesty in the synagogue. The windows are still in situ.

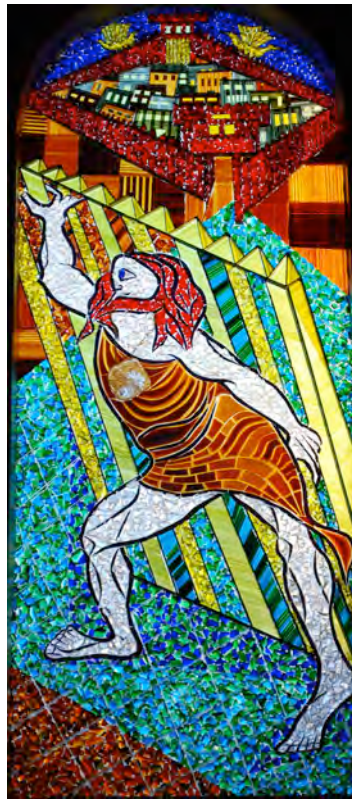
A further commission came a year later from Robert Maxwell, who in 1959 had begun renting Headington Hill House from Oxford City Council, first as offices for his Pergamon Press but then as a home for him and his family. In the house they found that the original Victorian stained-glass window on the stairs, showing Samson holding the gates of Gaza, had been damaged during the war, and, having visited Carmel College to see the synagogue, asked Azaz to make a new window to replace it. When the commission was complete, Azaz organised transport to take it to Headington Hill House and Maxwell had the original window removed and a crane ready to install the new window. Yaffa Azaz, who had worked assiduously on the window following her husband’s instructions, remembers what happened next.

‘The artwork was lying on four trestle tables and for some reason, Nehemia felt uneasy about the them and decided, whilst the glass was still lying on the them, to hammer some nails into the tables. He must have hit the glass because suddenly there was an almighty crash and the whole thing came crashing down. I can tell you, I will never forget that moment and how awful it was.’<sup>55</sup>

The window was temporarily replaced with a new kinetic art design made of Perspex whilst Azaz and his wife made a new window that took a further three to four months.

Eventually, the new window was installed and remains in the house, which now forms part of Oxford Brookes University. The window is in very good condition and the lighting is also superb, showing the amazing effect that Azaz’s glass can have when well-preserved and correctly lit. Again, the glass is used in so many different ways including piles of chunks of glass, glass layered in pyramids and others placed in strips. Particularly noticeable is the pendant Samson wears around his neck on a metal chain that has been incorporated into the design. This comprises a large chunk of clear glass on which the silhouette of a figure has been engraved. Interpretations of this piece have been divergent, sometimes strange, perhaps because the piece was commissioned by such a prominent and later controversial public figure. For example, one commentator has noted that this ‘is

supposed to depict the head of Penelope and to indicate that behind every successful man there is a strong female presence. (This seems rather odd, in view of the damage Delilah did to Samson, and the fact that Penelope is a figure from Greek myth, not the Old Testament.)’<sup>56</sup> It does, indeed seem odd, especially as the figure



*Samson at the Gates of Gaza*  
Headington Hill House  
Photo: Andrew Loutit

<sup>54</sup> “Donor Trouble” *Jewish Chronicle*, August 13 1971

<sup>55</sup> Julia Weiner, Interview with Yaffa Azaz 8<sup>th</sup> January 2016

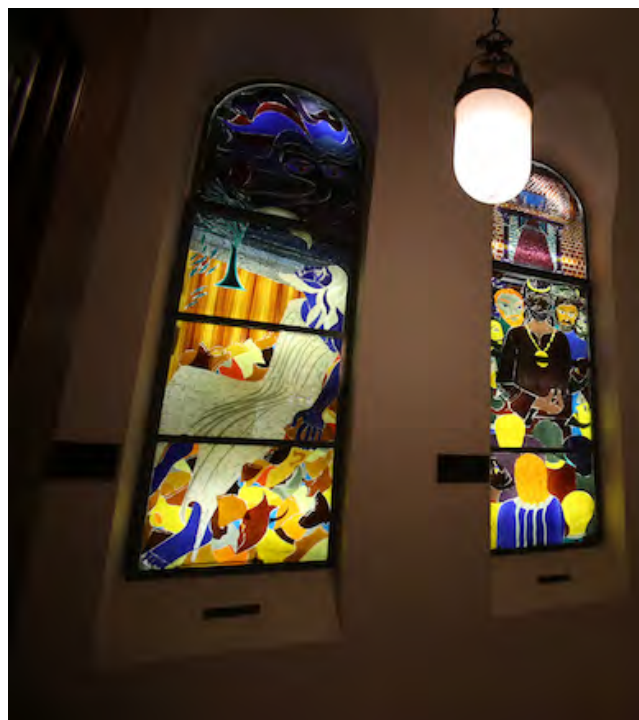
<sup>56</sup> Stephanie Jenkins “Headington Hill Hall” Headington History: Listed Buildings/Structures. [http://www.headington.org.uk/history/listed\\_buildings/headhilhall.htm](http://www.headington.org.uk/history/listed_buildings/headhilhall.htm) (retrieved 6th August 2017)

that appears on the pendant seems more Assyrian than Greek.

There is also a widely held view that Samson is meant to resemble Robert Maxwell himself though the likeness is not at all obvious.<sup>57</sup> It would be strange if this were so as the window shows an episode just after Samson has spent the night with a prostitute and just before his downfall at the hands of Delilah. Whilst the scene does illustrate Samson's legendary strength as he carried off the gates of the city of Gaza, which might have proved appealing to Maxwell, Azaz depicts Samson with long red locks of hair, very different from Maxwell's own black hair!

Similar in style to the Samson window is a series produced for the Temple Sholom Synagogue in Chicago. Probably the success of the 'Hands of Peace' at the Loop Synagogue brought him to the attention of other Jewish communities in the city. The synagogue is the oldest on the North side of Chicago and dates from 1929 and was built by the same firm of architects who built the Loop Synagogue. In 1949, windows were installed showing the 12 prophets, probably dating from the 19th century and by an unknown artist.

Azaz was asked to produce five new windows to complement these with three of the five books that form part of the 'Writings' or Ketuvim of the Hebrew Bible, Psalms, Proverbs and Job and two windows dedicated to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.



*'Job' and 'Proverbs' windows at Temple Sholom Synagogue*  
Photo: Eric Revels, ERC Co

Whilst the way that the glass is layered is not nearly as complex as in the Samson window, the windows are all, like Samson, very tall and narrow with the windows dedicated to the Books of Job and the Psalms dominated by a single large figure. Job sits contemplating the sky and one can make out a pair of eyes staring out of the Heavens, a rare depiction of God in a synagogue. Also worth noting is that among the shards of pottery surrounding Job on the ground; one vessel looks very similar to the glassware Azaz designed during his Harsa years.

The Psalms window shows King David composing the psalms, his harp at his side, whilst the Proverbs window shows a crowd in front of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Ezra window is set in the interior of the Temple, showing the return of the sacred vessels to the building by the prophet after the Babylonian exile, though what is depicted looks very much like the interior of a contemporary synagogue. Finally, when tackling his namesake, Azaz chose to show the prophet involved in an architectural project, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. I find it interesting that two of the three figures shown

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<sup>57</sup> See above as well as the following: Francis Wheen, "Bob's Big House" in *The Independent Magazine* 8<sup>th</sup> February 1992 'On the evening of 7 June 1985, a...lavish party was held...It was a celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary of ...Robert and Elizabeth Maxwell...As they arrived, guests were led into the huge central hall, whose dominant feature was a stained-glass window, executed by an Israeli artist, depicting Robert Maxwell as Samson at the gates of Gaza.' As Wheen gets the title of the window wrong, we cannot be sure that Maxwell wanted to be represented as Samson.

in detail have dark beards similar to the artist's own.<sup>58</sup>

Azaz's final stained glass window was produced for Liverpool Reform Synagogue. The window was commissioned by Ilse Joseph, a Berlin-born violinist who fled to England in 1940. Tragically, her four children had remained in occupied Europe and were deported and murdered at Auschwitz. The window, which was dedicated in 1978, shows four ears of corn, to represent each of the lost children, growing up against a sunlit background with the words Love and Peace above. For this work, Azaz reverted to using flat panes of glass held in place with resin.

## Belfast Synagogue

The success of Azaz's art in a contemporary synagogue setting at Carmel College was soon replicated in Belfast where Azaz's close friend, the architect Eugene Rosenberg, had been commissioned to design a new synagogue for the Belfast Jewish community. The building, which opened in 1964, when the congregation numbered some 1500 people, is round in shape but from above the roof is in the shape of the Star of David. This used to be visible from the interior as well but since the congregation has greatly reduced in size over the past 50 years, the interior space has been subdivided and the ceiling beams that make the star shape can no longer be seen in their entirety. The building received listed building status in 2015.

Rosenberg was well known for working closely with artists when designing buildings. He felt strongly that art was part of the enjoyment of everyday life and that architects and artists should work closely together.<sup>59</sup> He made clear what he wanted for the synagogue in an interview he gave when he stated 'our intention ... was to be simple and honest without the slightest presence of covering up things or

imposing symbolism and decoration, which are blind things and visually worthless.'<sup>60</sup>

Azaz designed a large part of the interior including the large sliding ark doors, which once again feature Hebrew lettering in the distinctive Azaz style, this time bearing the first line of the prayer known as the Shema. The letters are made from bronze and silver and are particularly striking as they are mounted on a backing of red silk.

The Ner Tamid or Everlasting Lamp combined blue glass with bronze. Above the ark, Azaz carved the text of the Ten Commandments into the wall in two tablet forms and then inlaid the carving with gold leaf.



*Bronze doors and candelabra at Belfast Synagogue  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

To the left of the ark, there is a large bronze sculpture of a Menorah, the seven-branched candelabra that is a key symbol of Judaism. Its striking asymmetry casts shadows onto the wall of Portland stone where it is affixed. Azaz's Hebrew lettering has also been used for the inscription near the ark.

His work was much admired by the congregation, with one reviewer of the building commenting 'There is strength and determination in all his work and although he does not by any means confine himself to religious art, a truly Jewish spirit pervades his work.'<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Following Azaz's work at Temple Sholom, the synagogue commissioned the renowned Chicagoan Jewish artist Leon Golub to design a series of windows for them, the only stained glass work he ever produced. They also commissioned one window from leading Dutch artist Karel Appel.

<sup>59</sup> Following his retirement, Rosenberg published a book to inspire alliances between artists and architects. Eugene Rosenberg & Richard Cork, *Architect's Choice: Art in Architecture in Great Britain Since 1945* (London:Thames and Hudson 1992)

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<sup>60</sup> Judith Rosenfield "Architectural Distinction of New Synagogue" *Ulster Commentary* February 1965 p.13

<sup>61</sup> "Nehemiah Azaz, Sculptor" *Belfast Jewish Record* 11<sup>th</sup> February 1965

## Commissions for Mony and CIBA

The years after Azaz moved to Britain were the busiest of his career. As well as working on the various UK projects described above, he also had a number of important commissions from companies in the United States that were realised from 1964 to 1966. The first of these was for the Mutual of New York Life Insurance company (MONY), who had built two new 19 storey towers in Syracuse, New York as new office space. For this, Azaz designed a wall piece made in fibreglass reinforced with polyester resin with a bronze aggregate surface.



*Multiple fibreglass and resin panels at MONY*  
*Photo: David Hirsch 454 West 23rd Street, Chelsea 3-2171*

Unfortunately, little is known about this work, which has been lost though the towers, now known as the AXA Towers, are still standing. However, a number of maquettes for the work exist. Interestingly, for these Azaz preferred to work in wood for the first time rather than in plaster or metal. This was probably the first time he had worked in wood, a material he used for a number of major commissions in the 1970s and 1980s. The MONY wall piece differs from other pieces he was working on at the time in that it is completely abstract. The interest in the piece lay in the contrast between the parts of the sculpture that stood out which were smooth and highly polished and those that were recessed which were instead heavily grooved, creating an interesting play of light on the sculpture.

The MONY commission was followed a year later by a major commission for three new sculptures for CIBA Pharmaceutical Company for their headquarters in Summit, New Jersey. This flat roofed building had a large square and terraces where the sculptures were placed. The first of these was called *Order and Disorder* and was cast in concrete, though Azaz came up with

an ingenious way of creating a light mould that could be transported to the United States for casting. He worked in polystyrene, cutting through it with a hot knife to create the complex series of shapes and voids that once more appear to be inspired by the built environment and has some similarity to his previous work for the Sheraton Hotel in Tel Aviv. This was then used to make a fibreglass mould which was transported to the United States where the final sculpture was cast in concrete.

The sculpture was long but relatively small in height and this and its creamy colour perfectly complemented the Modernist, concrete building behind it. However, in a filmed interview with his daughter Orit, Azaz revealed that the title and subject matter had a deeper resonance than perhaps realised by the pharmaceutical company. He describes it as an 'ironical implication of how the chemical establishment works. It appears to be ordered – almost all medication developments start from an idea and then they start elaborating and deciding which materials and which components are needed. It is trial and error. That is why it turns out to be so expensive. Having been inside of a laboratory and seeing how they were working, and the amount of human effort that goes into trying out different materials to achieve something nebulous, they don't really know what is going to be the final result; it is an elaborate idea which I have tried to insinuate.'

'I was able to go around and see the business. This was during a period in the 1960s when pharmaceutical companies were attacked by the media, because.... only small percentage of medicine was actually effective. That was the irony – I was trying to create an idea of a critique, a visual critique, of what has been written about. They were not aware of that... I explained it to them in other ways. The architects with whom I had contact with many years later put it to me as a straight question. I actually told him what the irony was and he laughed and said "If I were trying to express the same thing, I would have done it in a similar way."' <sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Orit Azaz, Interview with Nehemia Azaz, filmed 18th January 2008



From top to bottom: *Order and Disorder*, *Man on a Moonbeam* and *Receiving and Giving Machine* at CIBA GEIGY  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

On a terrace above *Order and Disorder*, a bronze sculpture called *Man on a Moon Beam* was placed. Made of chased copper standing 10 feet high, the sculpture comprises a sphere mounted on a pedestal with a pole sticking out from it holding what we can presume to be the man. The sphere revolves in the wind. Created at a time when the United States was very much involved in the space race, the sculpture symbolises man's aspirations.<sup>63</sup>

Azaz's final work for the complex was a fountain, his first major attempt at working with water. Entitled *Receiving and Giving Machine* and cast once more in white concrete, this comprised two structures facing each other across a pool of water and shot jets of water out at each other. The concrete was hollow and pumps were placed in each side. Whilst this work was eventually removed due to safety issues<sup>64</sup>, the two other works have been well looked after by the company and when Novartis, as CIBA eventually became, moved offices to East Hanover, New Jersey, they arranged for the sculptures to be resited.

### Solo Exhibition

Maquettes in bronze for other works in a similar style to the CIBA commissions can still be found in Azaz's studio, many dating from the same years. In the video interview, he explains how some of these were unfulfilled commissions.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Azaz confirmed that he rarely made smaller personal works saying 'I've made very few personal sculptures for sale, because ...my approach to sculpture is monumental, it's based on principles that are almost classical, that sculpture is part either of temples or of palaces or of the environment.'<sup>66</sup>

Many of these maquettes have architectural names such as *Cantilever*, *Bridges* and there are several for unmade wall pieces. Often appearing precarious and unbalanced, Charles Spencer

<sup>63</sup> Donald J. Storch, Press release describing the new sculptures

<sup>64</sup> This was either because of a perceived danger to small children or because the water froze one winter and someone slipped and injured themselves.

<sup>65</sup> In the 2008 video, Azaz reveals that *Cantilever* was made for a new company in the United States. Rather than make drawings, Azaz would make maquettes and then send photographs of these to possible clients.

<sup>66</sup> Translation of Interview with Aviva Limon 5<sup>th</sup> June 1990

described these sculptures as 'hard, jagged, sometimes brutal Gothic shapes'.<sup>67</sup>



*Cantilever, Bridges bronze maquettes*  
Photo: Ian Brown

A number of these were included in Azaz's solo exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery, London in 1965 and then again at an exhibition at the Galerie Artek in Helsinki in 1967. In both exhibitions, Azaz also included a small number of sculptures carved in stone. In almost all cases, Azaz chose two stones of contrasting colours, usually black slate and white marble but sometimes substituting alabaster or granite, and explored different ways of interlocking the different coloured forms.

These works contrast markedly with the bronzes, all solidity, clear contours and smooth surfaces in contrast to the fragility and sharp edges of his bronzes. They were much admired in the exhibitions with Charles Spencer comparing them to the bronzes writing 'A more recent group of carvings in alabaster, marble and slate are less stylized and more satisfying enquiries into the relationship of form and space on a monumental scale.'<sup>68</sup>



*Diverting Elipses, Head, Embrace (counter-clockwise)*  
Photo: Ian Brown

### St Barbara's Church, Röhlinghausen

One commission that did see fruition and again shows an interest in architecture was for St Barbara's Church, Röhlinghausen, a Catholic church in the Ruhr area of Germany and the only Christian place of worship for which Azaz designed. Azaz had met the architect Stephan Legge and his wife Ursula Legge-Suwelack many years earlier whilst returning to Israel from Europe on the SS Moledet<sup>69</sup> and they had kept in touch. They contacted him in the mid-1960s about this new project where a church that had been destroyed in the war was being rebuilt in a new, contemporary style.

<sup>67</sup> Charles S. Spencer, "Azaz Sculpture as Architecture", *Studio International*, November 1965

<sup>68</sup> Charles S. Spencer, "Israel Sculptors in England", *Ariel* Number 18, 1967

<sup>69</sup> Julia Weiner, Interview with Yaffa Azaz 8<sup>th</sup> January 2016



*Aluminium partition at St Barbara's Church, Röhlinghausen  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

Azaz designed a series of cast aluminium plaques for the chapel. These are all mounted on poles and can either provide a backdrop for the altar, or if more space is needed and people are seated behind the altar, each plaque can be swivelled around 90° to allow those behind to view the service. The sculpture in its entirety is 27 feet long and 10 feet high. Azaz described the designs at one point as 'historical ground plans of churches'<sup>70</sup> and some of the section do seem to show bird's eye views of buildings whilst others seem instead to show elevations of the buildings or even the textures of different building materials. The aluminium pieces are each cut into complex shapes which fit together like a jigsaw but leaving a small space through which the back of the church is still just about visible. The work is still in situ and in very good condition.

Azaz also designed one and a half metre high wrought iron candelabras, 50 smaller candelabras for offerings, a granite main altar and granite benches, a secondary altar and a baptismal font for the church but these were not commissioned.

Whilst the commissions for CIBA and St Barbara's Church illustrate Azaz's interest in the built environment first explored in *Lifescape* at the Sheraton Hotel, another commission from the Sherman House Hotel in Chicago allowed him to explore this interest even more fully.

## **The Form Makers 1836-1968 – Sherman House Hotel 1967-8**

A chance meeting led to one of Azaz's most important commissions as recounted in an article about the piece that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune Magazine*. The work 'would never have materialized at all if it hadn't been for a solicitous mother in New York City who implored Azaz to drop in on her son during a visit to Chicago. The son, Gerald S Kaufman, president of the hotel, just happened to be on the lookout for a novel way to begin redecorating the lobby.'<sup>71</sup>

This work, which became known as *The Form Makers 1836-1968*, was the one of the largest works Azaz created in his career. 54 feet long, 16 feet high and 3 feet wide, it was made of cast concrete and weighed 75 tons. It was a large-scale piece for which Azaz was paid \$75,000, \$45,000 of which was the costs of making and installation, over \$500,000 today.



*The Form Makers, cast concrete wall at Sherman House Hotel  
Photo: Gil Amiaga, Architectural Photographer  
52 East 23rd St, New York, 10010*

Once more, Azaz began by working in polystyrene, which he cut through with a hot knife and from these fibreglass moulds were made. This was all done in his studio near Carmel College in Oxfordshire. Although he divided the 54 feet sculpture into 22 pieces when working on it, there was not enough room in this studio to store all the sections so he had to put up a tent outside in which to work. The moulds were flown to Chicago where they were then cast.

<sup>70</sup> Julia Weiner, Interview with Yaffa Azaz 8<sup>th</sup> January 2016

<sup>71</sup> Carole Edwards, 'Who left a 75-ton sculpture in the Sherman House Lobby?' *Chicago Tribune Magazine* pp.64-65, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1969

A long article in the Chicago Tribune Magazine furnishes us with a great deal of useful information about this commission including the inspiration behind it.

Azaz chose to recount milestones in the city's architecture because he feels good architecture is at a premium everywhere. ('Most architects are not even good engineers, let alone artists') and because he feels Chicago has pioneered in this field. He points to innovations by Louis Sullivan and Mies van der Rohe that were not used elsewhere for two or three decades, and he admires the imagination shown during the rebuilding after the great Chicago fire.'

Working from photos, Azaz selected a window from one building, the floor from another, and in some cases the entire building. He planned to include wrenches and nuts and bolts as symbols of the railroad's importance to Chicago's growth.'<sup>72</sup>

Azaz also revealed that 'since I am a sculptor and not an architect, I am more interested in form than dimension so that you will not find the buildings portrayed in correct proportion to each other.'<sup>73</sup>

The wall was double sided with the side that you saw as you entered representing the most recent architecture of the city, whilst the other side focussed on 19th century architecture. More than 40 buildings were referenced. Azaz spent many months in Chicago overseeing the joining and smoothing and of the 22 concrete sections. The final work was tinted black for a more dramatic effect.

Azaz once more incorporated pieces of glass into the finished work, creating voids in the sculpture that he filled with coloured glass that were visible from both sides and were lit from within. This meant that wiring and a control booth had to be incorporated into the sculpture.

The Form Makers proved popular in Chicago and a special leaflet was produced with details of each of the buildings featured. There was some correspondence in the press about buildings that had been omitted.



*Relocation of the Form Makers to the grounds of Rosary College  
Photo: Dominican University Archives and Special Collections*

In 1975, the wall was transferred to Rosary College in nearby River Forest. It was purchased by Azaz's friend Ezra Sensibar who also paid the costs of transport, installation and landscaping the gardens around the sculpture in memory of his late wife Shayne. Sensibar hoped that as the College had a strong art department, his donation of this major sculpture would be the first step in the creation of a student sculpture garden on campus. The sculpture was repainted a sandstone colour to match nearby buildings, and the glass sections and internal wiring removed. Photographs show students enjoying having their photograph taken near 'The Wall' as it became known.

The sculpture remained at Rosary College (which became Dominican University) until 2007 when the land was required for further building. The sculpture was offered back to the donor who had no place for it but little effort was made to contact Azaz himself.<sup>74</sup> The sculpture was therefore demolished. A large number of photos and references are to be found in Dominican University archives.

### **'Brotherhood of Man' Pace University, 1969 and other Op Art works**

Azaz followed The Form Makers with another, even larger work which revealed a new interest in op art and kinetic art. The term op art was first used in 1964, though there are many examples of the art from earlier, to describe

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Author unknown, 'Chicago Tribute' *Chicago Times*, p.3 1<sup>st</sup> December 1968

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<sup>74</sup> The University, when asked about this by the family, cited the fact that they were unable to trace a Henri Azaz. See footnote 8 for further details.

works of art that use optical illusions. One of the leading exponents of Op Art is the Israeli-born, Paris-based artist Yaakov Agam whom Azaz knew. Azaz first experimented with op art in 1966, when required to come up with a quick fix solution for Robert Maxwell's window<sup>75</sup> and then when producing works for the University of Warwick.

Warwick was one of a number of new campus universities founded in the 1960s, with its new campus built between 1966 and 1967. The architect was Azaz's close friend Eugene Rosenberg for whom he had produced work at the Belfast Synagogue and here Rosenberg once more showed his passionate belief in working with artists when designing buildings. As collection curator Sarah Shalgosky wrote to Azaz 'the ethos of surrounding students, staff and visitors with contemporary art was developed in the 1960s by the University's founding architect Eugene Rosenberg. He felt very strongly that art should be integrated into daily life and experience rather than sequestered in a gallery.'<sup>76</sup>

The first piece that Azaz produced for the University, which is still in the collection but no longer on show, was entitled *Dynamic*, and was made from painted wood, Perspex and foil, and purchased for the collection in 1966. The sculpture is three metres wide and 79 centimetres high. Azaz created optical effects by painting coloured patterns on three sides of the wooden slats, so the viewer sees different images depending on where they stand. It is interesting to note that one of the university's founding members was Dr Cyril Barrett, a philosopher who was also a leading expert on op art and published one of the first authoritative books on the subject in 1970.<sup>77</sup> This could have awakened Azaz's interest in this art form.

Azaz created a similar piece in 1969 for another university. The commission was from Pace University in New York who required a large sculpture to go over the main entrance of their new flagship building at 1 Pace Plaza in Manhattan.



*Brotherhood of Man at Pace University*  
Photo: Monet Lucki

Pace Plaza is a very busy area of a busy city, with a location just by City Hall and across from the Brooklyn Bridge. Azaz wanted to create a piece that captured something of the dynamism of the location but also the energy of the students passing in and out of the main entrance. He decided to make a sculpture that changed as you moved below it.

The final work was spread across over 20 metres, almost 10 metres above the ground. It is made up of 25 different triangular prisms ranging in height from three to seven metres, each one 66 centimetres wide. Each prism was made in copper, mounted on rigid steel frames and then anchored through the masonry of the wall with bronze bolts. The copper surface was patinated and sprayed with protective lacquer. Once in place, two sides could be seen, each quite different. Azaz explained how it worked in an interview with the Oxford Mail.



*Detail for Brotherhood of Man*  
Photo: Monet Lucki

<sup>75</sup> See p.21, Samson at the Gates of Gaza glass window

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Sarah Shalgosky to Azaz, November 2003

<sup>77</sup> Cyril Barrett, *Op Art* (Littlehampton Book Services Ltd 1970)

“It is a kinetic sculpture, operating not through its own movement – it will be stationary – but through the movement of the person viewing it.” Mr Azaz explains. Its general appearance he aptly describes as “like a loose arrangement of organ pipes”...

‘Two of the surfaces of each prism bear human figures, represented in varying degrees of abstract stylisation from the plainly recognisable to the barely discernible. On one surface, they are deeply incut, on the other raised.

The raised surfaces will all face one direction, the incut in the other. “As you walk past the impression will be that the figures move out from the wall while you stay still.” Mr Azaz explains.<sup>78</sup>

One problem with this piece was that it was difficult to visualise the final effect before it was installed. Azaz told the newspaper that he had not made any preliminary studies. “I designed each element as I went along, with the hope that the whole will fall into harmony.” But this apparently casual approach is not as risky as it sounds. It is the way he likes best and experience has proved that it works.’<sup>79</sup> A few years later, he was asked for more information about the sculpture and admitted that he had made a maquette in wax for the piece but that he rarely relied too greatly on sketches or models.

‘As a matter of principle, I execute all my own work in full scale and never have had any of my work transposed into its final size from scale models. As a general practice, the maquettes which I propose are treated by myself just as a rough sketch and a general guideline. The final result in full scale quite frequently differs in many details though the general impression remains very much the same.’<sup>80</sup>

The sculpture, which is also known as *Crowd in Motion* or *The People* occupied Azaz for a year, unsurprising considering its size, complexity and the fact that it includes some 200 stylised figures. This was the longest he had spent on any single commission. The sculpture remains in its original location in very good condition.

<sup>78</sup> Ken Gillman, ‘Soon the prisms will fall into place’ *Oxford Mail* p 3, 6<sup>th</sup> March 1970

<sup>79</sup> Ibid

<sup>80</sup> Letter dated 8<sup>th</sup> April 1974 in reply to request from Mr John Bainbridge for more information about the sculpture.

In 1972, Azaz was commissioned by Lazar Heskia to produce two very different works for the Plaza Hotel in Tel Aviv. Whilst one was a figurative work carved in wood, the other was a three-metre high, nine-metre long screen made of painted aluminium. Again, depending on where you stood you had different views of the bright circles and sweeps of painted colour that created dynamic effects as you walked along. Sadly, this work has also been lost and is now only known from photographs.



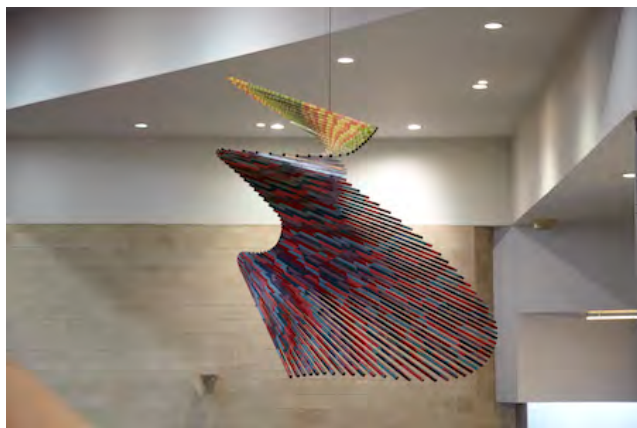
*Dividing screen at Tel Aviv Plaza Hotel*  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

Perhaps his most important work in this field was the second piece Azaz created for the University of Warwick. Entitled *Op Mobile No 10*, it is still in situ hanging in the entrance to the Arts Centre designed by Renton Howard Wood Levine, which opened in the 1970s.

*Op Mobile No 10* was actually a replacement for an smaller, earlier work entitled *Op Mobile no 9* which he had made for the same location but for which he had instead used Perspex and piano wire. This proved to be too fragile. In the past he had used prisms to allow viewers to see two different views but for *Op Mobile No 10*, he used instead aluminium tubing which he painted in bright colours. The piano wire was replaced by metal cable.

*Op Mobile No 10* hangs from the ceiling and of course will sway if there is any air movement. However, it is also attached to a motor on the ceiling, which causes it to revolve six times every minute. One side of the sculpture is painted in reds, pinks, purples and blues whilst the other is coloured in shades of orange, yellow and green, the original colour scheme of the Arts Centre. As the sculpture revolves, viewers see first one side

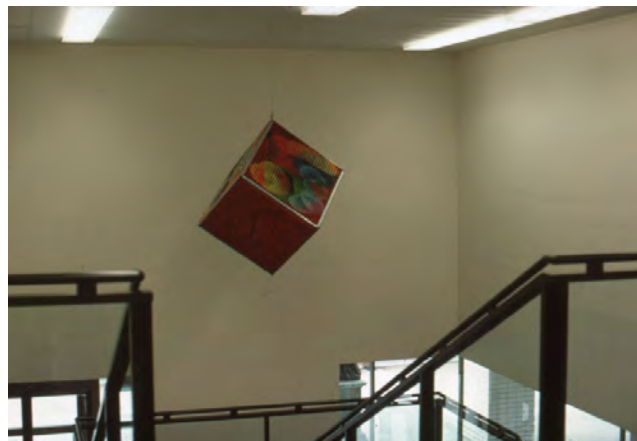
and then the other. The shape of the sculpture suggests the wings of a huge, hovering bird circling above the viewers' heads.



*Op Mobile No 10 at Warwick Arts Centre*  
Photo: Warwick Arts Centre

The collection at the University of Warwick was, as the catalogue to it notes 'a collection that even in its infancy was unique in being contemporary with the buildings it inhabited. Reaction to it, however, ran from puzzlement to indifference but fell short of open hostility.'<sup>81</sup> One finds it hard to imagine that Op Mobile No 10 could be viewed with anything other than delight for its bright colours and innovative movement.

Eugene Rosenberg once more called upon Azaz to create a work for another of his public buildings, St Thomas' Hospital, on which he worked from 1966 to 1975. Op Art 1976 was originally hung on a staircase and also had a rotating motor, but is now in storage. It is a 1 metre cube made once more of painted metal tubes. Each side shows a different abstract design, some in monochrome, others highly coloured. Several other such cubes were made for private collectors<sup>82</sup> alongside kinetic panels made in a similar style to the work in the Plaza Hotel. When Israeli artist Zadok Ben David was working for Azaz as a studio assistant, he remembers painting the tubes for several of these commissions.<sup>83</sup>



*Op Art 1976 cube at St Thomas' Hospital, London*  
Photo: Allan C. Taylor

### Commissions for Buildings in Israel 1965-72

Azaz continued to receive several high profile commissions from Israeli organisations after he set up studio in Oxfordshire. Unfortunately, few of these have survived and if they have, they have been relocated. However, they show a continued interest in the landscape and history of Israel that had been obvious in *Lifescape*, his monumental carving for the Sheraton Hotel in Tel Aviv. But where *Lifescape* and indeed the works produced in the same period for CIBA were heavy pieces made out of concrete or bronze, works made for Bank Agudat and for the Hilton Hotel in Tel Aviv are much lighter and more delicate, using thin metal wire and glass instead.

For Bank Agudat, Azaz made a screen that separated the public counter from the tellers in the bank. Installed in April 1965, this work has now been lost and we only know of its appearance from some rather poor photographs.



*Dividing screen at Bank Agudat, Tel Aviv*  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

It looks, however, as if in this piece, Azaz explored a number of motifs found in previous works. The screen had a stainless steel frame from which a spider's web of thin wires supported pieces of silhouettes cut out of sheet metal. A photograph of the work in Azaz's

<sup>81</sup> Cyril Barrett *The Permanent Collection – A Personal View*

<sup>82</sup> Op-Mobil I, II and III were exhibited at the Galerie Artek in Helsinki in 1967

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Zadok Ben David, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2016

collection has a note in his handwriting that explains that the motifs chosen are 'stylized symbols on Israeli coins'<sup>84</sup> which would be entirely appropriate for a work of art commissioned by a bank. Most of the motifs are recognisable from Israeli coins of the period. The one Agura coin had ears of wheat, which appeared on the screen (Azaz would go on to use almost identical designs in the Liverpool Reform Synagogue stained glass window). Nearby were pomegranates, found on the back of the five Agurot coin and a ceremonial amphora which had appeared on earlier coins. Again, the shape brings to mind Azaz's own ceramics. The most significant design was the Menorah, which once more is very similar to Azaz's ceramic and jewellery designs, with each branch topped by a crescent moon. This Menorah, however, is very different to the one found on the back of coins, which is a copy of the Menorah from the fallen Temple depicted on the Arch of Titus in Rome. Azaz's Menorah resembled more the harp that appears on the back of 25 Agurot coin. Large pieces of blue and green glass brought flashes of colour to the screen. This work, with its mix of metal and coloured glass and its antique inspiration seems like a large-scale version of some of his jewellery.

A year later, Azaz was one of a number of artists who received a commission from Dora Gad, for whom he had already produced a number of works in stained glass. Gad was by now the best-known interior designer in Israel and was at the same time working on the Israel Museum and the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) in Jerusalem. The Hilton Hotel in Tel Aviv was the first Hilton to be built in Israel and was important because the Hotel Group defied an Arab boycott to build there.

Gad discussed her plans for the hotel saying 'I am trying to impart to the *Hilton* an Israeli character but without Israeli clichés. I believe that real artists create original works by means of an Israeli prism through which our *light, colour* and rhythm of life are reflected. The *Hilton*

will not have a dominant Mediterranean atmosphere. The Negev will be the theme.'<sup>85</sup>

Azaz was no doubt delighted to create a work inspired by his beloved Negev Desert. For his sculpture, which was to be placed above a water feature in the Coral Bar, one of three bars in the hotel, Azaz was inspired by the coral reefs found in the Red Sea. Entitled *Coral Formations*, the sculpture was made from brass, bronze and copper creating abstract forms suggesting coral, sea urchins and other marine life. Once more, this piece was disassembled during hotel renovations and has been lost.



*Coral Formations at Hilton Hotel, Tel Aviv*  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

In the same way that Azaz used motifs from Israeli coins for an artwork destined for a bank, for the Hennig House Diamond Center in Ramat-Gan, Israel, he chose designs that would remind visitors of the purpose of the building. Hennig House was a concrete building designed by Nissim Semov and described as a 'striking modernist structure'.<sup>86</sup> The commission probably came to Azaz because his old friend Rafi Blumenfeld was responsible for the interiors.

According to a brochure published about the building, 'a dominating feature of the structure is a relief in concrete on the building exterior symbolizing rough and polished diamonds, by the noted London-based Israeli sculptor

<sup>84</sup> Hand-written annotation on the back of photograph in the Azaz archive

<sup>85</sup> Bruriah Avidan in *La'Isha* 14<sup>th</sup> May 1963. Quoted in Ran Shechori *Dora Gad: The Israeli Presence in Interior Design. Architecture in Israel* (Hebrew and English). (Tel Aviv: Architecture of Israel, 1997) p.131

<sup>86</sup> 'Dedication of Henning House' brochure, no date

Nehemia Azaz.<sup>87</sup> The relief was in 1972 placed high up on one of the side walls and added a rare note of decoration on what is otherwise a very spare piece of concrete architecture marked by its stark geometry. The relief arranged the diamonds in a curve, offering a contrast to those lines that provided the only other ornament on the side walls of the building.



*Diamonds at Hennig House Diamond Center  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

Azaz was also commissioned to create a fountain for the entrance foyer. For this, he chose to work in Perspex, creating forms that looked like diamonds. The sculpture was made in Wallingford and then shipped to Israel where it was installed. The building was opened in 1974. The fate of the fountain is unknown and the Diamonds relief sculpture was demolished in 2013.

### **Israeli Lounge, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. 1971**

The Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. was built between 1966 and 1971. Designated by President Johnson as the sole official memorial in the nation's capital to the assassinated President Kennedy, who had taken a great interest in the project, the building houses a concert hall, opera house, theatres, a cinema and a library.

As the center was intended to bring the finest in music, opera, dance and theatre from across the world to the centre, many different countries contributed to the interior design of the building, as detailed in a booklet about the center. 'Heartwarming responses came from corporations, individuals and foreign governments who offered gifts of building supplies and furnishings as well as priceless objects of art, for which they commissioned their finest artists.'<sup>88</sup> The mirrors in the foyer were gifts from Belgium, chandeliers were donated by Sweden, Austria and Ireland, the curtain in the Opera House was a gift from Japan. Italy supplied the marble in the entrance plaza whilst France gave two tapestries designed by Matisse and woven by the renowned Gobelin factory. The United Kingdom donated a sculpture by Barbara Hepworth.

According to the brochure, 'Scattered through the Center are numerous handsome lounges used for receptions, press conferences, board meetings, cocktail parties and the like.'<sup>89</sup> A decision was made that one of these would become the Israel Lounge, decorated by Israeli artists. The project was the brainchild of Yitzhak Rabin, who served as Israeli ambassador to the United States from 1968 to 1973, and his wife Leah. As the Israeli government was not able to fund the decoration of the room themselves, a group of Jews from the Washington area raised the funds instead.

'Israel on an austerity budget' explains Norman Bernstein, local co-ordinator of the project 'could not fund it. The Center provided only the bare room to be decorated by Israel.' Having secured the room, Mrs Rabin approached Washington Jewry to ask for help. Bernstein points out that Israel insisted the money contributed must not be funds ordinarily slated for UJA or Israel bonds. There was to be no drain on these two important lifelines. The Washington patrons were informed of this when approached, and they donated freely above and beyond their commitments to the other organisations.

<sup>88</sup> *The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts* booklet no date

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>87</sup> Ibid



Carved wall in the Israeli Lounge and detail (below)  
at The John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts,  
Washington D.C.

Photos: Simon O Chesney



‘The patrons wanted the lounge to reflect their love of the Center, their love of this country and their love of Israel.’ Bernstein says. They also wanted to bring to Washington something truly representative of the State of Israel. Nothing else like it exists here.’<sup>90</sup>

The position of the room is important as it is on the box tier of the Concert Hall just by the President’s Box and is thus often used by the President when he attends concerts in the building.

Three artists were involved in the decoration of the room. Azaz was commissioned to create a large sculpture for one wall, whilst Shraga Weil painted the ceiling and Ezekial Kimch painted onto silk for the remainder of the walls. According to the Jewish Chronicle, ‘Azaz was asked to undertake the work by the Israeli Ambassador to the US, Mr Itzhak Rabin. ‘We were together in the Palmach’ Mr Azaz recalled. ‘I was very happy and honoured to undertake

<sup>90</sup> Mollee, Kruger, “Area Jewry and Mrs Rabin joined in creative coup”, *Jewish Week, American Examiner* 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1971 p.18

the commission.’<sup>91</sup> The interior designer in charge of the project was Rafi Blumenfeld, with whom Azaz had worked on the Sheraton Hotel project, and who already knew he was capable of producing work on a monumental scale.

As the Kennedy Center was dedicated to the performing arts, a decision was made to make music the central theme of the room. Blumenthal explained that he wanted to show ‘the inspiration of the historic past and above all, the importance of music in the lives of the Jewish people. “Music,” he says, “is closer to us than the other arts.”’<sup>92</sup>

Azaz decided to take the words of Psalm 150 as the starting point for his sculpture and the words form the centrepiece of the work.

‘Praise him with the trumpet sound

Praise him with the lute and harp

Praise him with the timbrel and dance

Praise him with the sounding cymbals

Praise him with the loud clashing cymbals.’

The quotation is surrounded by the images and names of all the instruments mentioned in the Bible. Azaz spent months reading the Bible and learning about the instruments before beginning work, but had to use some artistic licence for the design. The instruments he carved include ‘the nebel and ugab (both are kinds of harps), the sor (a bugle) and the halil (a fife).’<sup>93</sup>

Azaz explained ‘There is little record of what the instruments actually looked like... From the descriptions given in the Bible I made them the way I thought they existed.’ He agreed that ‘a musicologist might have a different impression of the instruments.’<sup>94</sup>

Spending hours researching and thinking about his work was something that Azaz often did. Yaffa Azaz remembers that there were often times that she chastised her husband for not actively working and he told her that thinking about his work was just as important. When

<sup>91</sup> “Bible Tunes” *Jewish Chronicle* 27<sup>th</sup> August 1971 p.15

<sup>92</sup> “JFK Center: One ‘Human Room’ “ *The Washington Post* 30<sup>th</sup> November 2017

<sup>93</sup> Ibid

<sup>94</sup> Mollee Kruger, , “Area Jewry and Mrs Rabin joined in creative coup”, *Jewish Week – American Examiner* December 2 1971 p 16

interviewed about his work by his daughter he commented

'I spend an awful lot of time imagining. I start from an idea and it takes me a long time to work out all the details and I never start work until I completely crystallise in my mind. That is why I don't make sketches. By the time I get to the point it is a release of both thought and emotions that have taken a long time.' <sup>95</sup>

Whilst his most recent works had been in metal or cast concrete, Azaz chose to work in wood for this commission, a material he had not used for a major commission before, though it would become one of his preferred materials from this point on. He explained his choice as follows: 'The sculpture...would have been too cold in metal. Wood is more related to the human element, organic, alive.'<sup>96</sup> He also found that the wood gave greater sculptural depth. The wood chosen was African walnut, which he found difficult to carve as it is very hard but his initial preference for a softer redwood proved impossible because it would not go with the Brazilian wood of the Kennedy Centre doors.

The final sculpture was 20 feet square in size but made up of 40 different panels. The Kennedy Center booklet describes the finished work as the largest wooden sculpture in the world. In his studio in Oxfordshire, Azaz worked with \$6,000 worth of wood, but used less than one third of what was carved in the final sculpture. The wood was then enlivened with the addition of copper wire for the strings of the instruments and gilding to make the letters stand out. There were plans for the sculpture to be exhibited at the Royal Festival Hall prior to shipping it to Washington D.C. but a strike by dockers meant it had to be shipped early.

The Israeli Lounge was a huge PR success for the State of Israel. Rafi Blumenfeld described it as the first 'permanent museum of Israeli art outside of a museum'.<sup>97</sup> An Israeli official commented 'I have never seen such whole-hearted enthusiasm anywhere for a cultural endeavor. It certainly shows, that in the midst of the deep concern for Israel's defence and

economy, my people are also concerned with Israel's impact as a creative force in today's world. Hundreds of thousands of Americans will experience Israel's vibrant art as a triumph of life.'<sup>98</sup>

A review in the Washington Daily News enthused that 'three Israeli artists have turned an oddly proportioned room in the Kennedy Center into a triumphant tribute to music and the national genius of their people. Their joint tour de force is the concert hall and it is hard to say whether the greatest brilliance is in the individual works or art or in the harmony with which they complement each other,'<sup>99</sup> whilst the American Examiner ran with the headline 'The art of Israel: beauty and wonder enthrall thousands at the new Kennedy Center in D.C.'<sup>100</sup>

The panel is still in situ in the Kennedy Center where the Israel Lounge continues to be used for functions. It has been restored, as there was some damage due to air conditioning, which caused the cracking and loosening of elements. It has been brushed with turpentine-thinned linseed oil at least once a year and waxed every two years.



*Bronze maquette of wall  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive*

<sup>95</sup> Orit Azaz, Interview Nehemia Azaz, filmed 18<sup>th</sup> January 2008

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> Anne Crutcher, "Israeli Triumph at the Kennedy Center" *The Washington Daily News* 29<sup>th</sup> November 1971

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

<sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>100</sup> Mollee Kruger, "Area Jewry and Mrs Rabin joined in creative coup", *Jewish Week – American Examiner* December 2nd 1971 p 16

## Sculptures in Wood 1972-1983

Working in wood on such a large scale obviously affected Azaz greatly as he went on to create several works in the same material. In 1972, he produced two different works for the Plaza Hotel in Tel Aviv for Lazar Heskia. One, an op art abstract screen has already been discussed. However, he also produced a figurative piece carved out of mahogany and then painted, which shows various generations of the same family. Despite being a figurative piece, this does share some similarities with his op art works in that as you walk past the sculpture your view changes. For example, at first glance, the body of the tallest figure in the sculpture may appear to be a void, but peer through that void and you find his body placed at 90° to his head. As in Cubist sculpture, two views of the same head can be found for other figures. The sculpture is enlivened by being painted in bright red, yellow and turquoise as well as white and black.

This sculpture which is either called *Generations (Dorot)* or *The Family* was re-sited to Municipal Library, Beit Ariela, Israel and, then in 2015, to Sheba Medical Centre, Tel Hashomer Hospital, Tel-Aviv.



*Dorot (The Family) at the Sheba Medical Centre, Tel Aviv*  
Photo: Ronen Dor

In the 1980s, Azaz created two further major works in wood. The first was for Imo Concorde Hotel, Owerri Nigeria where Lazar Heskia was once more the architect. Azaz researched Nigerian folk art and then travelled to Nigeria where he spent three months carving a wooded wall, beginning by using a chain saw in situ and then refining the works with chisels. He also created five freestanding wood sculptures. The location of these works is currently unknown.



*Nigerian and African Folk Magic Figures, Owerri*  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

The Nigerian sculptures were installed in 1982. A year later, he made another carved wooden wall entitled *Dunes Erosion Forms* for the Dining Hall at the Sheba Medical Centre in Tel-Hashomer, Israel. Once more, it was Leah Rabin, Chair of the Friends of the Medical Centre, who commissioned this large sculpture measuring seven metres long and three metres high. For this piece, he used his knowledge of Op Art to carve into Canadian pine, creating an optical effect that makes the wall look as if it is the undulating surface of the sand dunes of the Negev that he loved so much. The final work was tinted with different coloured sands. It has recently been restored and is much loved and remains in its original location. Its popularity amongst staff and visitors led to the re-siting of *Generations* to the hospital. A one metre square wooden maquette for this piece remains a prized possession of the family.



*Dunes Erosion Forms installed at Sheba Medical Centre, Tel Aviv*  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

Azaz also produced a number of works in wood that remain in the family collection. One, entitled *Erosion by Nature and Man* explores similar themes to *Dunes Erosion Forms*. Whilst part of the work is carved to replicate the effect of the wind on the sand, in other areas a more complex network of lines has been engraved into the wood and some areas have been enlivened with bronze additions. Azaz explained that in this work he was exploring 'how time and man change the landscape. Man creates open casting, open mining.' The more complex patterning and the rougher bronze areas are 'what is left after they have mined: Rubbish.'<sup>101</sup>

### **'Erosion by Water Forms' for Churchill College, Cambridge, 1992**

Azaz received one last commission for a piece of public sculpture from Churchill College Cambridge. In 1991, he was invited to enter a competition to design a new sculpture for the college which was to be placed in a pool near the Buttery. Azaz was asked to enter by David Thurlow of Architects Thurlow Carnell and Thornburrow, consultant architect to the college.

Churchill College was originally built between 1960 and 1968 by Sheppard Robson. As architectural historian Simon Henley comments 'In contrast to the historic Colleges, with their medieval Gothic and Neo-Classical buildings corralled behind high walls, this was in an

almost rural setting on the outskirts of the city, modern in design, and Brutalist in detail.'<sup>102</sup>



*Erosion by Water Forms*  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

Azaz's letter of entry described how his sculpture would be made of prestressed structural steel with vertical panels of textured bronze sheet attached. In contrast, the central panel would remain smooth. The water would be programmed to run continuously over the flat, smooth panel but only intermittently on the textured panels, 'creating wet and dry patterns'.<sup>103</sup>

Azaz was commissioned to make the piece, which was then successfully installed. Photographs of the work in situ show how well it blended in with the architecture, its verticality and colouring perfectly matching the teak window frames of the building. Unfortunately, the fountain required regular maintenance and as a result, in 1998, it was returned to the sculptor and is now part of the family's collection.

It is noticeable that none of his fountains survive in situ. His widow Yaffa feels this was because he underestimated in particular the importance of filtering water in fountains explaining 'unless

<sup>101</sup> Orit Azaz, Interview with Nehemia Azaz, filmed 18th January 2008

<sup>102</sup> Simon Henley, *London Calling: British Modernism's Watershed Moment - The Churchill College Competition* 30<sup>th</sup> June 2014 [www.archdaily.com](http://www.archdaily.com) Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> October 2017

<sup>103</sup> Undated letter from Azaz to Churchill College

you have a very sophisticated way of cleaning the water, blockages form'.<sup>104</sup>

### Figurative Sculptures 1980-1996

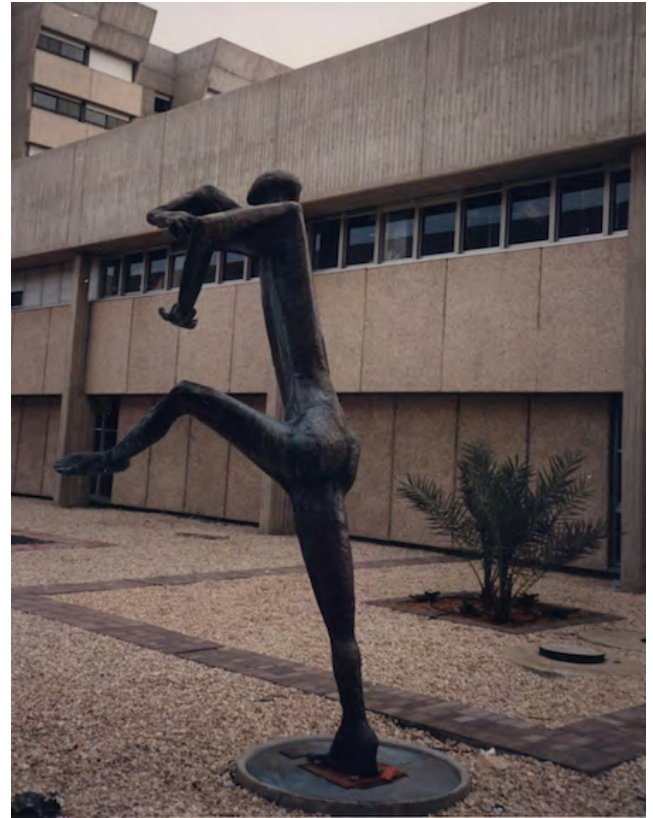
The commission for Churchill College was a rare abstract work from the last decade of Azaz's life. The majority of his oeuvre from 1980 onwards was figurative, mostly small pieces. Some explored the human condition in the late twentieth century whilst others were inspired by classical mythology. He focused on these at a time when the world economic slump had led to the postponement of contracted commissions but also because his ill health made it difficult for him to work on large scale public projects.<sup>105</sup>

In 1983, Azaz produced a second work for the Cardiology Institute at the Sheba Medical Centre. This was a large figurative sculpture made in copper that stood 9 feet high and depicted a man taking a step. Entitled *First Step After* it was intended to show the enormity of the experience of taking those first steps after major heart surgery for patients at the Institute.

The symbolism was reinforced by the fact that it once more involved the use of water. In this case, water flowed from the statue's right hand into its left palm at the pace of a heartbeat. The commission probably came once more from Leah Rabin and the Friends of the Medical Centre but was a subject particularly pertinent to Azaz who had suffered a massive heart attack shortly after his arrival in England in 1963 and was regularly in hospital for check-ups after that. Unfortunately, this sculpture has disappeared from its location.

Azaz made a number of other smaller works in bronze in a similar style, in which he explored what he described as 'my own inner feelings'.<sup>106</sup> He entitled the series *Metaphors* and exhibited them both in London and in Tel Aviv.<sup>107</sup> In an introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition, Charles Spencer made the link between Azaz's interest in the human figure in athletic poses and

his early prowess as an athlete who studied photographs of athletes in motion.



*First Step After*  
Photo: Nehemia Azaz Archive

The figures tend to be slim and elongated, sometimes even 'unnaturally stretched',<sup>108</sup> trapped in cages, perched up perilously on stilts looking down at the world or sinking into the ground but refusing to submit. Spencer describes the work as follows, possibly developing ideas discussed with Azaz himself.

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<sup>104</sup> Julia Weiner, Interview with Yaffa Azaz 11<sup>th</sup> January 2016

<sup>105</sup> Charles Spencer, *Society and Self – The Private and Public Sculpture of Azaz*, May 1986

<sup>106</sup> Moshe Ben Shaul, "Azaz is Still Alive", *Maariv*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1987

<sup>107</sup> At the International Contemporary Art Fair in London and the Mabat Art Gallery in Tel Aviv.

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<sup>108</sup> Charles Spencer, *Society and Self – The Private and Public Sculpture of Azaz*, May 1986



*View from Above and Caught in a Rim*  
Photos: Ian Brown

'Azaz has developed what might be called his 'body' language based on his athletic past, his scientific learnings and perhaps his recent experience of serious illness... A sense of enquiry and concern is ever present, a realisation that the paradox of human nature includes man's ability to continuously extend his physical and mental capabilities without necessarily enlarging his moral stature.'<sup>109</sup>

One of the most interesting of this series is *Self Reflection* in which a figure with a blank face brings up a hand to their face that is reflected in the polished bronze. This does suggest the importance of the artist's hand and what it was able to create in the mind of the artist.

The series of *Metaphors* also included a number of works carved in wood, named after figures from Classical mythology. Spencer describes these as

'symbolic representations of the timeless enquiry into the nature of man; the conflict between physical, animal qualities and spiritual, idealistic elements; aggression and tenderness, masculine and feminine, muscle and mind.'<sup>110</sup>



*Self Reflection*  
Photo: Ian Brown

*Metamorphosis* is a sculpture of a Minotaur fighting with a bird-like creature carved from chestnut wood, which Spencer interprets as the struggle between 'the earthbound and the free spirit'.<sup>111</sup>



*Metamorphosis*  
Photo: Ian Brown

<sup>109</sup> Ibid

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

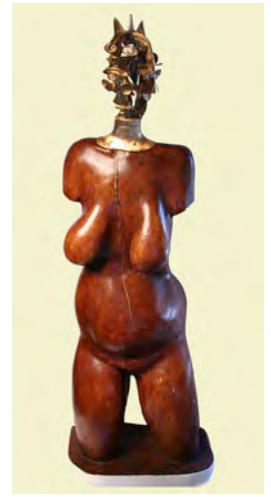
<sup>111</sup> Ibid



*Gaia's Progeny*



*Erosion by Nature and Man*  
Credits: Ian Brown



*Astarte*

In *Gaia's Progeny*, Azaz carved the primal Mother Earth goddess using a similar technique to that used in *Erosion by Nature and Man*, her torso undulating with ripples of sand. Her progeny, the Titans, whose heads burst from her body are painted in bright colours in contrast to the earth tones used for the majority of the piece. *Astarte* is a sculpture named after the fertility goddess worshipped by the Canaanites and reminds the viewer of the small carvings that Azaz made for his wife out of bone in the Negev desert. Whilst the curvaceous torso is carved from wood, the head is a more cubist rendering cast in bronze.

One of the final sculptures that Azaz made is more akin to *Generations* and shows five figures grouped together but avoiding communication. Entitled *Touch Me Not* it explored the idea of the personal space that people require, and asked how this can impact on a sense of community. Carved from one of a number of tree trunks that Yaffa remembers being delivered to the home and sitting in the yard, the entire sculpture, which is near life-size, was carefully painted. The skin tones used for the figures range from pale to dark and include both men and women, young and old.



*Touch Me Not*  
Photo: Ian Brown

Yaffa Azaz considers these late works the most personal of his oeuvre. In an interview she said

'He had some ideas about life and the way he saw it, he drew some conclusions and some of these he then expressed in sculpture. In my opinion these works are the nearest to him.'

## Conclusion

Nehemia Azaz passed away in October 2008 at his home. His last major commission was sixteen years before his death but he had continued to work on his smaller scale bronzes and wood carvings till the end. His wish was to be buried in the Negev where he had begun his artistic career and whose landscape had inspired a number of his works.

Whilst many of Azaz's public works have been moved or lost, there are plenty that remain that testify to the incredible variety of work he produced. How was he able to produce such a diverse body of work? His widow Yaffa feels that he was able to change direction so often and experiment with new materials because 'I think he was a very unusual personality. Nothing conventional about him in any way. He was very brave and daring about things he knew nothing about'.<sup>112</sup>

Another aspect of his work that she wished to emphasise was the amount of thought that he put into his artwork. Remembering that sometimes she would chide him when he appeared to be doing nothing, she now realises that he required periods of quiet reflection as an

<sup>112</sup> Julia Weiner, Interview with Yaffa Azaz 8<sup>th</sup> January 2016

essential part of his artistic process. 'He was a great thinker and a great reader'<sup>113</sup> she recalled.

Azaz himself expressed this in an interview with a Carmel College student filmed in 1994 when he said 'I spend a great deal of time not working, only thinking and dreaming, and some of the ideas that go through my mind, I find myself trying to synthesise in sculpture.'<sup>114</sup>

## About the author

*Julia Weiner is Senior Lecturer in Art History at Regent's University, London. She studied at St Edmund Hall, Oxford and the Courtauld Institute of Art and has worked for the Ben Uri Art Gallery, the Courtauld Gallery, the British Museum, the National Trust and the Victoria & Albert Museum. She is the art critic of both the Jewish Chronicle and the Jewish Quarterly and also writes regularly for Jewish Renaissance. She has a particular interest in how artists express their Jewish identity in art, has written widely on this subject and recently worked as Guest Curator for two exhibitions at the Jewish Museum, London.*

## Information about Nehemia Azaz

Additional information about the artist can be seen at the website <http://www.nehemiazaz.com>.

Or email [info@nehemiazaz.com](mailto:info@nehemiazaz.com) directly

*We would especially like to thank:*

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid

<sup>114</sup> Filmed 14<sup>th</sup> November 1994

## Image titles with descriptions and sizes where known

Page	Image Title	Year	Materials - dimensions
3	Camel bone carvings	1953	Carved camel bone
5	Pottery from the exhibition at Wakefield Gallery in 1955	1954-5	Pottery
6	Page from Harsa pottery catalogue	1956-60	Pottery
8	Azaz designed jewellery for Maskit	1959-60	Silver and semi-precious gems
8	Firebrick wall installation at Hotel Zohar, Be'er Sheva	1957-8	Firebrick
9	Tiled mural at Yedioth Ahronot (Tel Aviv Evening News)	1958-9	Glazed tile (4 m x 4 m)
10	Lifescape at Tel Aviv Sheraton Hotel	1960	Carved concrete (5 m x 10 m)
11	Examples of privately commissioned glass windows	1959-2	Glass and concrete
11	Azaz designs at Shafrir	1961-2	-
12	Large stained glass panels on Zim Lines S.S. Moledet	1961	Thin sheet and chunk coloured glass set in black epoxy (4 m x 7.5 m)
12	Stained glass in the synagogue of Kfar Silver Agricultural College	1962	Concrete and chunk glass wall (5.5 m x 7.3 m)
13	Hands of Peace at the Loop Synagogue, Chicago	1963	Beaten and formed bronze (3 m x 1.8 m)
14	Loop Synagogue Torah Ark and Eternal Light	1963	Bronze
14	Loop Synagogue Eternal Light	1963	-
14	Wrought iron gates at North Suburban Synagogue Beth El.	1962	Wrought iron
14	Eternal Light at North Suburban Synagogue Beth El.	1962	Brass foil and wire
17	Synagogue windows at Carmel College	1964-5	Multiple multi-coloured plate and chunk glass windows (2.13 m x 0.76 m)
18	Ark curtain & Burning bush sculpture at Carmel College	1965	Copper & brass sheet and chain / Lightning scorched tree with brass lettering
18	Bronze holocaust memorial panel - Carmel College synagogue	1966	Beaten and formed bronze
19	Memorial to Dr Kopul Rosen, founder of Carmel College	1966	Concrete & glass
19	New stained glass windows at Carmel College synagogue	1993	Multiple glass and epoxy resin windows (2.13 m x 0.76 m)
19	Stained glass windows commissioned for Marble Arch synagogue	1961-78	Multi-coloured plate and chunk glass (36 off)
20	Samson at the Gates of Gaza at Headington Hill House	1966	Multi-coloured plate and chunk glass
21	Two of the five windows at Temple Sholom Synagogue	1972	Multi-coloured plate and chunk glass (2.4 m x 0.75 m)
22	Bronze doors and candelabra at Belfast Synagogue	1965	Bronze and silver
23	Multiple fibreglass and resin panels at MONY	1964	Bronze surface, fiberglass resin (93 sq. m)
24	Order and Disorder at CIBA GEIGY	1965	Carved concrete
24	Man on a Moonbeam at CIBA GEIGY	1965	Chased copper
24	Receiving and Giving Machine at CIBA GEIGY	1965	Cast concrete
25	Cantilever	1960-65	Bronze (210 mm high x 470 mm wide x 50 mm deep)
25	Bridges	1960-65	Bronze (190 mm high x 290 mm wide x 80 mm deep)
25	Diverting Ellipses	1960-65	White marble, black slate, red sandstone (420 mm high x 300 mm wide x 200 mm deep)
25	Head	1960-65	White marble & black granite (400 mm high x 420 mm wide x 360 mm deep)

			mm deep)
25	Embrace	1960-65	White marble and slate (780 mm high x 160 mm wide x 240 mm deep)
26	Aluminium partition at St Barbara's Church, Röhlinghausen	1966	Cast aluminium (8 m x 2.8 m)
26-27	The Form Makers, cast concrete wall at Sherman House Hotel (and on the grounds of Rosary College)	1967-8	Cast concrete (3 m x 17.5 m)
28-29	Brotherhood of Man at Pace University (& detail)	1969	Beaten and formed copper (9 m x 18 m)
29	Dividing screen at Tel Aviv Plaza Hotel	1971-2	Painted aluminium (2.6 m x 8 m)
30	Op Mobile No 10 at Warwick Arts Centre	1975	Painted aluminium (1.8 x 1.5m)
30	Op Art 1976 cube at St Thomas' Hospital, London	1976	Ribbed aluminium (1 x 1 x 1 m)
31	Dividing screen at Bank Agudat, Tel Aviv	1965	Steel and stainless steel (0.9 m x 2 m)
31	Coral Formations at Hilton Hotel, Tel Aviv	1965	Brass, bronze and copper (7.6 m x 6.4 m)
32	Diamonds at Hennig House Diamond Center	1972	Cast concrete (2.4 m x 1.2 m)
33	Carved wall in the Israeli Lounge and detail (below)	1972-3	Carved African walnut wood with metallic finish (5.5 m x 5.5 m)
35	Dorot (The Family) at the Sheba Medical Centre, Tel Aviv (originally at Plaza Tel Aviv)	1972	Carved and painted mahogany (1.8 x 3 m)
35	Nigerian and African Folk Magic Figures, Owerri	1982	Carved wood (4.8 x 7.6 m)
36	Dunes Erosion Forms installed at Sheba Medical Centre, Tel Aviv	1983	Carved Canadian pine (7 m x 3 m)
36	Erosion by Water Forms	1992	Copper and stainless steel (2.4 m) high
37	First Step After	1984	Copper sheet (height 2.75 m)
38	Caught in a Rim	1980	Bronze (330 mm high x 330 mm wide)
38	View from Above	1982	Bronze (870 mm high x 120 mm wide)
38	Self Reflection	1982	Bronze (270 mm high x 300 mm wide x 430 mm deep)
38	Metamorphosis	1986	Wood (98 cm high x 15 cm wide x 100 cm deep)
39	Gaia's Progeny	1979-1996	Painted wood (180cm high x 118cm wide x 96cm deep)
39	Erosion by Nature and Man	2006	Wood and bronze (78 cm high x 307 cm wide x 83 cm deep)
39	Touch Me Not	2007	Painted wood
39	Astarte	2004-6	Wood & bronze (172 cm high x 62 cm wide x 43 cm deep)

