

ART Lessons

BY *Shira Yehudit Djilmand*
PHOTOS *Ancho Gosh*

There are plenty of Jewish artists around, and plenty of Jewish educators. But how many succeed in educating Jews through the medium of their artwork? Master craftsman Noah Greenberg's message is as simple as his multileveled Tree of Life Shtender is intricate: The Torah is the Tree of Life of the Jewish People, and he wants to pass that on to his curious young audiences and the art lovers who make up his clientele

Noah Greenberg took his carpentry woodworking skill to a new level with his intricate woodcuts

Tucked away in the corner of a winding cobbled alleyway in Tzfas’s Artists’ Quarter is an ancient, solid wooden gate. Behind it lies an entire world: the world where Rabbi Noah Greenberg lives and works; his exquisitely carved Judaica; his “box of tricks,” which he uses to inspire and educate the Jewish world.

As we enter through the gate to the Greenbergs’ home, we have to duck beneath hanging branches of vines and pomegranates before entering the spacious courtyard, once an inn during the Ottoman period. First impressions of Noah Greenberg as a gentle, jovial soul, quiet and modest, give way to something deeper; there seems to be an inner fire that drives him as he talks about his numerous projects. That fire has propelled Greenberg over the last 25 years to clock up countless air miles traveling across the globe to demonstrate his artwork — artwork that has managed to inspire and educate tens of thousands of people about Jewish life. For his stunning carved wooden items are not only pieces of exquisite beauty, but somehow have evolved into the perfect tools to teach about Judaism. His now-famous Tree of Life Shtender, his Keshet Tefillin project, and other art-based works are perfect tools to teach about Judaism, enabling Greenberg to synthesize his considerable talents as both artist and educator.

Today Noah Greenberg is a master wood carver, but the transition from craftsman to artisan was a winding path typical of most of the transformations in his life.

Born in Oakland, California, in 1955, Noah Greenberg was brought up with a love of Yiddishkeit imbued in him by his parents. “My parents were basically the founders of Beth Israel, the first Orthodox shul in Berkeley. In 1963 they brought in Rabbi Berman, the shul’s first rabbi, who was my childhood ‘rebbe.’ He has been a mentor, and has come to be a dear personal and family friend.”

Greenberg studied for a degree in horticulture from the University of California, a surprising choice perhaps for a *frum* Jewish boy, but he was goal-oriented. “I wanted to live in Eretz Yisrael and I was intrigued by the opportunity to work as an agricultural advisor. I’d spent time on a farm in Israel and it appealed to me. I enjoyed studying plants and it seemed like an agreeable way to make a living.”

But Greenberg’s life was destined to go in a very different direction. His first job after graduation in 1975 was as a building contractor in California, thanks to high school experience in the construction industry, and it was there that he gained his first taste of working with wood.

Four years later, Greenberg and his wife moved to Israel, where another “chance happening” influenced the direction of his work. “We wanted to live on a moshav, and we moved to Tzfas to base our search for a home. In Tzfas, we became friends with the owner

of our present home. The workshop was already here: the owner was something of an inventor with a multitude of serious tools. He couldn’t bear to just sell it and decided that I was the one who was going to inherit his ‘baby.’ He insisted we buy his house — and made it possible in a fantastic way. It was incredible *siyata d’Shmaya*.”

Tree of Life Greenberg opened his studio in 1980, taking his woodworking experience to a new level, specializing in the design and manufacture of specialty synagogue furniture. It was the Shtender project that encouraged an evolution from carpentry to artistry, but the artist in him was in his blood — his mother, Shoshana Greenberg, who passed away this year, was a well-known Jewish artist who exhibited extensively. In 1991 Greenberg was



“I’d never carved before, and I picked up a penknife and whittled out an experimental *esrog* box,”



“Usually shtenders just sit in the back of the shul, all scratched up”

Greenberg takes us into his workshop to give a full display performance of this magnificent piece of wood art, describing how he and his partner David Moss conceived the idea of the *shtender*, that unassuming yet always dependable piece of shul or *beis medrash* furniture.

“The *shtender* hadn’t really been addressed by the Jewish artist — usually they’re stuck in the corners of the shul, all scratched up.”

Moss and Greenberg contemplated how the *shtender* represents two of the three pillars of Jewish life — study and prayer — but the third pillar, *maaseh*, physical acts of

Judaism, was missing. So they thought of creating a *shtender* that would look quite ordinary from the outside, but would actually be a treasure chest of all the ritual objects needed for daily, weekly, and annual use. The pair decided on a direction, but it took a year before they had their first prototype ready for production.

“It had a very long gestation period, going through many stages before it was finally born. Originally I used a more modern design, but then one day I decided to try carving. I’d never carved before, and I picked up a penknife and whittled out an experimental *esrog* box. We were amazed how successful it was — that was what encouraged us to use carving as the art form for our *shtender*.”

And then the motif of the *shtender* became clear — the *shivas haminim*, which also allowed Greenberg, who has a degree in

awarded a grant from the Project Judaica Foundation for continuing his work on the Tree of Life project, and has since lectured at a wide range of Jewish institutions, including Yeshiva University, synagogues, and Jewish community centers around the world.

The Tree of Life Shtender, says Greenberg, took his craft to a new level. This intricate, carved wood *shtender* is more than meets the eye. It’s like a kit on Jewish life; hidden within its compartments are other necessary ritual items such as a tefillin box, *tzedakah* box, menorah, and *megillah*.

Greenberg’s message might look as complicated as his multilayered *shtender*, but it’s really simple: the Torah is the Tree of Life of the Jewish People, and observance of the Torah’s mitzvot is what keeps the Jewish People alive.

horticulture, to express his love for botany. The *shtender*, he explains, is divided into compartments — the top for daily mitzvos, the front for weekly mitzvos, and the sides for annual mitzvos.

Greenberg opens the top and the show begins. For 45 minutes I am awed and astounded by the presentation of this unique, beautiful, and ingenious work of art, as he pulls one item after another out of the seemingly bottomless space. (For a detailed description of the items in the *shtender* and their significance, see sidebar.)

As each successive item emerged, it became clear that this was no simple woodwork display. It reminded me of a magic show, where the magician pulls out a constant stream of rabbits, doves, and other furry creatures from his hat. Greenberg has amazingly succeeded in fitting so many items into such a small space while retaining the simple elegance of the *shtender* itself. But there the similarity ends. He isn't pulling out rabbits, but rather a succession of incredibly beautiful Jewish items, crafted with multilayered significance — and that's more impressive than any furry rabbit.

Greenberg's performance for our cameras not only demonstrates the ease and fluency that comes from having given the same demonstration many hundreds of times, but also displays his natural skill as an educator.

That the Tree of Life Shtender makes an innovative educational tool to introduce Jewish ideas is clear, but how did the evolution from artist to educator occur? "The *shtenders* were being produced abroad. I had to travel extensively — for many years I was going to Italy and the Far East as often as every two weeks. Sometimes, I had to do presentations for sales purposes," explains Greenberg. "I saw the potential for *chinuch* and sort of eased into doing programming with the *shtender*. It became almost addictive; people who see the demonstration are incredibly moved — the effect is very far-reaching.

"At one point I was traveling regularly through Hong Kong. Of course, in my travels, I meet a lot of people. A few years ago, at a wedding in Jerusalem, a woman sitting near my wife asked her, 'Are you Noah Greenberg's wife?' She told my wife that my work in Hong Kong had changed her life — she now lives in Jerusalem, is

married to a man with a *shtreimel*, and has a boy in cheder. When I hear a story like this," says Greenberg, "I see it was worth going out to Hong Kong all those uncountable times. Perhaps HaKadosh Baruch Hu sent me there just to save this one person."

Greenberg travels the world with his art, offering his presentations to Jewish groups and institutions from chareidi to secular and everything in between. And it's the fact that the presentations are seen as "art" rather than "education" that opens the doors. As he explained, "I always work in consultation with *rabbanim*; prominent among them was Rabbi Noach Weinberg *ztz"l*. As he once put it, my art projects are a way to 'get to people through the back door.' Not everyone wants Jewish education. In some places they let me come because they think it's 'only an artist coming' — they wouldn't let a rabbi through the door."

Although most of Greenberg's programs are done abroad, he also receives numerous groups in his studio in Tzfas. Groups come from synagogues, youth groups, Birthright, and others. He has worked extensively with the educational corps of the IDF — at one time, he was seeing a few hundred soldiers each week.

"They always come at ten o'clock at night for some reason, and I always get the two typical requests from the guides — 'Don't talk about Judaism' and 'Keep it quick.' Nonetheless, I usually have to throw them out some time around midnight."

Too Many Good Ideas Noah Greenberg's intricate wood creations include *aronos*

How did he succeed in fitting a year's worth of Judaica into the body of this Tree of Life?



A chunk of wood is transformed into a holy artifact

“Not everyone wants Jewish education. In some places they let me come because they think it's 'only an artist coming'”

kodesh, *bimahs*, and cases for *Sifrei Torah*. One Torah case for a special friend was literally years in the making. His designs grace private homes and synagogues and museums around the world, but not everything is the size of a *shtender* or *aron kodesh*. He created something called the Tzedakah Collection, a series of *tzedakah* boxes designed for the UJA as a tool for its annual international fundraising campaign. And on the shelf of his showroom are a set of intricately carved mezuzah covers, also based on the *shivas haminim* theme. Between the mezuzahs and the *shtenders*, this seems to hold special significance.

"A Jew davens three times a day to be living in Eretz Israel," he says. "But have you noticed that not all of us are actually here? What is the overpowering symbol of Eretz Israel? Certainly the *shivas haminim*. By putting these *batei mezuzah* on our doorposts, we're surrounding ourselves with Eretz Israel, bringing it into our own homes — wherever they are."

Greenberg related how one of his clients, a wealthy collector of Judaica, was so taken with the set of seven mezuzah covers that he exclaimed, "I'm gonna hang the set right there on that wall in front of you!" Greenberg was understandably upset and told him, "No, I really don't want you to do that. These are *batei mezuzah* — I want you to put them on your doorposts!" The client made a mental calculation and said, "But I don't have seven doorposts ... You know what? I'm gonna build an extension so I can put up all seven."

Greenberg's workshop is also a testimony to something all artists know: not every project has its time. On one shelf is a curious mezuzah cover, carved in what looks like the shape of an ornate building. This, Greenberg explains, is one of a series of *batei mezuzah* reflecting the *aronos kodesh* of shuls that were destroyed during the Shoah. But the project never quite happened, as other ideas took over, and this one carving remains on hold.

"It's not a good idea to have too many good ideas," he says ruefully.

The workshop, with its high, curved ceilings, was once the stable of an inn in Ottoman times, but it's now infused with the smell of wood rather than horses and on every surface rest intriguing half-finished blocks of carved wood. Working away diligently there is Yaron Amir, Greenberg's student, now working on some stunning mezuzah covers made from the twisted branches of various native trees found throughout the Galilee.

I had also read about an upcoming project based on the mitzvah of *hachnassas orchim*, and so I asked Greenberg about it. He points to a large, square carving on the worktable, obviously not finished. "You want to know how I get ideas?" Greenberg says. "The *hachnassas orchim* piece is a good example. I was in the office of one of our *shtender* owners — a major collector of Judaica. Among other pieces that he wanted to order, he suddenly pointed to a candy dish and said 'And I want one of those.' Taken aback, I said, 'No, I don't "do" candy dishes.' Then it suddenly came to me, what is a candy dish for? *Hachnassas orchim*! 'You want something for *hachnassas orchim*, right?' 'That's exactly what I want!' he said, and the project was born."

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“One boy was so taken with the project that he actually used his bar mitzvah gift money to pay for me to come back the following year to teach other kids,”

The unfinished, partly carved block on the workbench looks intriguing. What’s the idea behind it?

“Who was the quintessential *machnis orchim*? Avraham Avinu. The Midrash says that there were four entrances to Avraham Avinu’s tent. It says in the *parshah* that Avraham planted an ‘*eshel*.’ Rav said that the *eshel* was a *pundak*, an inn, while Shmuel wrote that it was a *pardes*, an orchard. My design is a synthesis of both: the four tent stakes of the *pundak* will be branches of the trees that were in the *pardes*; grapes, pomegranates, and figs.”

The foliage of the trees joins together in a canopy. Underneath them will be a tent, and nesting in the foliage will be a set of dishes to serve guests, while the box itself will open up to become a table and the tent turns over to become a bread dish. It sounds awesome. I ask when it will be finished.

“I’m still working on it,” he says, “but I keep getting interrupted.”

Kesher Tefillin One reason why Greenberg’s *hachnasas orchim* project keeps getting interrupted is that for the last few years, most of Greenberg’s time, attention, and energies have been invested in another educational project that makes use of both his artistic skills and educational talent. Kesher Tefillin is a hands-on workshop where boys over bar mitzvah actually make their own tefillin, using a unique method developed by Greenberg. How did he dream up such a project? “I was learning with

my son for his bar mitzvah, and of course we were learning the halachos of tefillin. I started thinking about how tefillin are made with such heavy leather, needing hydraulic presses and all kinds of sophisticated machinery. Moshe Rabbeinu also wore tefillin — I don’t think he had that machinery in the *midbar*.”

Greenberg, who consults with rabbinic authorities for the plethora of complicated halachic questions involved, had the idea to use thin parchment instead of thick leather, and to use an origami-like method to construct the *batim*. Using goatskin parchment and a lot of thought, he succeeded in designing a single piece, which could be folded to form the *batim* of the tefillin. The boys use special hammers to cut the parchment, which is then folded and colored black; they then emboss the *shins* in the leather of the *tefillin shel rosh*. Greenberg brings kosher *parshiyos*, which the boys tie up with calf hair and insert into the *batim*. The tefillin are then sewn with cows’ sinew and the boys learn to tie the special knots in the straps.

Every one of the ten steps that are *halachah l’Moshe miSinai*, from the initial cutting to tying the straps, is done by the boys themselves — *l’sheim kedushas tefillin* (for the sake of the holiness of the tefillin). Finally, the boys, who were over bar mitzvah when they began the project, get to lay their very own tefillin — some of them for the first time in their lives.

Before launching the project, Greenberg took the prototype tefillin to Rav Nissim Karelitz in Bnei Brak for approval. Says

Greenberg, “Rav Karelitz and his entire *beis din* opened them up, checked them, and asked lots of questions as to how they were made. He finally pronounced, ‘These are tefillin!’”

Although the tefillin are 100 percent kosher, in order to make the project affordable, Greenberg had to make them a little less “*mehudar*.” For example, the scrolls themselves are relatively inexpensive and perhaps less beautiful than more expensive ones. Of course, these tefillin are not the preferred type for the typical *frum* bar mitzvah boy, but it is nevertheless an effective *kiruv* tool for those on the way to observance.

But beauty isn’t just about externals — as one father wrote to Greenberg, “My son has made *the* most beautiful tefillin I have ever seen! I know he put his heart and soul into it and I just wish you could have been there to see his face when he gave them to me. I believe it means more to him than we’ll ever know ... and *that* is what makes this set so beautiful!”

Greenberg has taken his Kesher Tefillin project to schools, summer camps, and synagogues around the world, reaching Jews of every affiliation. “I’ve had children come back to me years later, telling me how this program changed their lives. In fact one boy, who was in the original pilot program, was so taken with the project that he actually used his bar mitzvah gift money to pay for me to come back the following year to teach other kids.

“Why do they get so excited? Because they feel it’s real — these children work hard, investing 15 hours into making their own tefillin, and when they finish, they truly ‘own’ this mitzvah. Putting on the tefillin for the first time and saying Kriyas Shema ... I watch the most difficult children simply melt. The moment is electric.”

So, does Noah Greenberg see himself as an artist or educator? He doesn’t like the question. “I don’t think that is an appropriate question for a Jew. We shouldn’t define ourselves by our professions. My occupation is what I do, not who I am. A Jew’s mission is to be an *oved Hashem*; his occupation is only a means to achieving that objective.

“But, if you want to know what am I most gratified by doing? In the throes of the *shtender* project I thought to myself, what am I doing, spending 20 years chopping up blocks of wood? Over the years, though, I’ve seen the incredible impact my work is making on vast numbers of people in an entire spectrum of circumstances. I must have done the *shtender* presentation thousands of times, but each time there are new people, new reactions — it’s actually refreshing and invigorating.”

Art, says Greenberg, is so much more than just doodling on paper. “The concept of ‘art’ needs to be interpreted in a much broader way, more organic. People often ask if my wife is also an artist. I tell them, my wife bore and raised eight children — I can’t think of anything more artistic than that. I work with blocks of wood — she works with *neshamos*.”

Indeed, in that broader sense, perhaps art and education are not so far apart after all. Both involve taking raw material and polishing and shaping it into a beautiful finished product. And whether he’s shaping blocks of wood or Jewish *neshamos*, Rabbi Noah Greenberg certainly knows his craft.



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What Feeds the Tree of Life?

The Tree of Life Shtender project has been a full-time occupation for master carver Noah Greenberg, combining his unique wood carving art form with computer-generated design to create what he considers the quintessential Jewish product. How does he manage to fit all these items into such a small space? A demonstration reveals some of the embedded secrets.



1

Tefillin in a Box

First, Greenberg pulls out of the hand-carved *shtender* items for daily use — a tefillin box, (a tefillin box?) which, apparently, is the first tefillin box ever designed. Museum curators affirmed that tefillin have always before been contained in a soft pouch. The tefillin box is engraved with apple branches, reminiscent of the *pasuk* in *Shir HaShirim*, “Under the apple tree I awakened you.” Just as the mystical apple orchard hints of the secrets of the Redemption, so, too, the tefillin hold the secrets of the Torah.



2

Time for Minchah

Next out comes a *tzedakah* box, beautifully engraved with figs, followed by a rather unusual siddur. With a wooden cover, carved with a motif of wheat and olives, the siddur is for Minchah, reminding us of the *Korban Minchah*: wheat flour and olive oil. The siddur is also unusual in that each *brachah* is given a full page. “We hoped it might encourage people to daven a bit more slowly,” smiles Greenberg.



3

Challah Board Secrets

At the front of the *shtender* are hidden the ritual items for weekly use. First out is the Shabbos menorah; seven-branched and made of one solid piece of wood, it reminds us of the Menorah in the Beis Ha-Mikdash. The challah board, logically, is decorated with wheat, but there is a surprise — inside the board is a knife, and inside the knife is a tiny but exquisite saltshaker. The Kiddush cup, together with four small cups, is hidden within a mass of carved vines, and within the vines there is a secret carving, hinting at the saying “*nichnas yayin yatza sod* — when wine goes in, secrets come out.” The Havdalah box is equally fascinating. Decorated with myrtle leaves, it even includes aromatic wood, which is automatically scraped when pulling out the candle, releasing the scent so one can make the *atsei bsamim* blessing.



4

Annual Treasures

Now Greenberg reveals the items for annual use. Designed to remind us of the Rosh HaShanah Torah reading about the Akeidah, the shofar, tiny but beautiful and kosher, peeks out from a thicket of thorns, as did the ram caught in the bush in the Akeidah.

“We don’t have a succah in the *shtender*,” jokes Greenberg. But

what he does have for Succos is amazing enough. Aside from a gorgeous *esrog* box, a full-length wooden case for the *lulav* emerges, complete with a unique pull-out extension (how did that fit?). Decorated with carved olives, the Chanukah menorah features nine brass oil lamps, each one shaped like an olive and holding enough oil to burn for the correct length of time according to halachah.





5

Pesach in Parts

The Pesach plate is a folded-up surprise. Engraved with hyssop with a motif of horseradish, the plate is ingeniously constructed to fold up. Indeed, it was an engineering challenge to get the Pesach plate into the *shtender*, Greenberg explains, and as he carefully unfolds the myriad parts and puts them together, I see just what he means.



6

Countdown

Now emerges an odd, long, slim piece of wood — the *sefiras haOmer* calendar. This ingenious device slots onto the top of the *shtender*, and, using an abacus-like method, counting the Omer is just about guaranteed. “With this calendar, people won’t forget to count,” says Greenberg.

For the finale, Greenberg pulled out a surprise — a hidden *Megillas Esther*, which, with an ironic touch, is decorated with a rope and attached by a magnet, which effectively means that Haman is hanging all year-round. ●