Living the Bible and its Lands

By Pamela Peled

In 1929, when Batya Borowski’s parents left Palestine for America hoping to find the proverbial pavements lined with gold, they crash-landed into the Great Depression. How strange life is: almost a century later their daughter is back in Israel, and instrumental in mounting a glittering exhibition of pure gold in the most fitting place on earth for such a show – The Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem, the city of gold.

The story of the museum’s inception is no less fascinating than the stunning archeological artifacts that it houses.

In 1981 Batya (then Weiss) met Dr. Eli Borowski in a bar at the King David Hotel, after they had both attended an event at the Israel Museum. Borowski’s personal history mirrors the story of 20th century European Jews: he was born in Poland, educated in Italy, France and Switzerland, served as a soldier in the French army and was later interned in Switzerland where he survived the ravages of the Holocaust before finally relocating to Canada and becoming a world-renowned expert on ancient art.
Above: Inside the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem
Right: Eli and Batya Borowski

For over half a century he assembled a priceless collection of Ancient Near Eastern Art from biblical times, and in the early '80s he was ready to share his treasures. "Mine is the most important collection in the world for the Jewish people," he claimed, adding that he planned to display it in a museum in Toronto. "Toronto?" Weiss retorted. "Where is Toronto? Shouldn't this collection live in the most important city for the Jewish people - in Jerusalem?"

Weiss sat up all night reading the catalogue, and the next morning she declared that she would help to make the museum happen in Israel's capital.

A year later she and Borowski were married. Building (funded by them) began on the site four years after that.

In 1991, when the couple moved to Israel to supervise their project, Batya invited her daughter from a previous marriage to relocate to Jerusalem and join the team.

"I had a great life in the States," recalls Amanda Weiss, the elegant powerhouse current director of the BLMJ. "I was very amicably divorced, had two young sons, and I was certainly not about to get up and leave."

But, weirdly, fate intervened. "I said no to a Jerusalem adventure, and took my boys to the playground down the street," she explains, "and en route I looked up at a giant wall that fronted a highway. There, in great black letters was the legend: WE WATCH. WE WAIT. With a swastika scrawled between the phrases."

Amanda ran home and rang her mother. "We're coming with you to Israel," she announced. Shortly afterwards, Weiss' eldest sister, Jessica Waller, also joined them in Jerusalem, eventually becoming the Museum's chief exhibition designer.

Thus, and with the enthusiastic support of Teddy Kollek, the then-mayor of Jerusalem, the Bible Lands Museum was born.

Today its airy rooms and sense of space charm visitors into an ancient world and the artifacts it holds catapult viewers straight into stories from the Tanach. Remember the teraphim (the little clay gods) which Rachel stole from her dad and then broke in her saddle bag? They're there, tiny little figurines, •
We’re drawn into a wondrous world

together with an enormous headless statue of Ramses II (with shattered kneecaps).

Despite the focus on the bible, the collection most definitely does not showcase exclusively Jewish culture and narrative.

A biblical injunction to “be fruitful and multiply, replenish the earth … and have dominion over it and every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28) accompanies an exhibition of permanent agricultural settlements in the Levant, western Iran and Anatolia, where the abundant rainfall gave man the power to dominate the land productively.

Our common ancestry is a unifying motif in the genealogies of multiple nations: Adam and Eve simply started it all, for all of us. The peoples of the Middle East have more commonality than difference, and these common human traits and rituals are traced back in time.

Mesopotamians, for instance, believed that the gods created the first man out of clay of the earth mixed with the blood and flesh of a divinity, not too dissimilar from the Israelites whose God created Adam from the dust of the earth.

A Babylonian clay tablet from Abraham’s day proclaims in tiny dense cuneiform that ancient festivals begin at sunset and last until three stars wink in the sky the following night … reminiscent of the rules of Shabbat and every Jewish festival.

The Canaanites are on show, and the Assyrians, together with the Egyptians, the Bactrians of Afghanistan, and the Urartians of Armenia.

A chart of acrophonic script deciphers how even the disparate alphabets of different languages have a common thread: an aleph and an A stem from a sign depicting the head of a bull.

And whatever the lingo, your lineage can be traced back to the mother of all mothers and her mate in the Garden of Eden … in fact all that’s missing from this uplifting account is John Lennon in the background ‘imagining all the people sharing all the world’.

The BLMJ seems to suggest that fundamentally we are all family and, “c’mon guys! It’s time to learn to get along”!

And what a rich and cultural clan is the family of man! The artifacts draw us into a wondrous world of work, play and overreaching power that guides our lives here on earth, despite darker powers who work to thwart our dreams. Death played a huge part in the lives of our forebears.

An excavated miniature Egyptian boat, for example, equipped with sailors and oars, stands ready to row the rivers of the underworld. Egyptians were buried with food and drink and family artifacts and believed that their rowboats would be magically activated in the next world.

Jews, too, had a healthy dose of superstition: demon bowls from 500 or 600 CE engraved with circular lines in ancient Babylonian Jewish Aramaic have been dug up from under thresholds where they were buried to catch evil spirits and ensnare them in the spinning script.

Hundreds of artifacts each tell their own, ancient story and the stories collate into the narrative of what we ourselves are doing here on this earth.

A wreath of laurel leaves and four rosettes in gold, Greco-Roman, 4th-3rd century BCE

Then there was the temporary “Pure Gold” exhibition, which started in June 2012 and was extended to the end of May 2013 due to overwhelming demand. The stunning contemporary-looking jewelry (also collected by Borowski) just begs to be worn; no one should leave home without a 2nd Century choker shimmering on their skin, or at least a dangling pair of Egyptian alluvial gold earrings.

Then there was the must-have Apulian Kantheros from around 300 BCE, and the gilt silver Kylix from about the 2nd century BCE. How about displaying an Oinochoe Clay marvel in your living room (appx. 330 BCE), or giving an Apulian pyxis from the same period as a wedding gift? Intrigued? Make sure to catch this exhibition next time it is shown, or get hold of the catalogue and see what you missed.

Future plans for the museum include another astonishing exhibition — “Book of Books” — to showcase the Jewish roots of Christianity through a multitude of manuscripts, scrolls and bibles.

Long-term plans include a huge renovation to quadruple the gallery space within the next decade. And then the masses can flow into the museum from all the corners of the earth, learning about their common path and who knows … maybe teaching us to forge a common future.

Dr Pamela Peled teaches Literature at Beit Berl and also teaches at the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center.