

A CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL BEACON

In addition to being a world-class attraction welcoming over 120,000 visitors a year, the **Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem** is extraordinary in its community outreach and educational efforts – constantly developing programs designed to bolster and empower all segments of Israeli society / Darryl Egnal

The Bible Lands Museum, located on Museum Row in the cultural heart of Jerusalem, is currently celebrating 18 years of existence. “At 18, we are at a very interesting crossroads,” says Amanda Weiss, director of the museum and daughter of co-founder Batya Borowski. “We have already established ourselves as a leading museum and now we are looking towards the future, and children are our future and our vision. They carry our hopes and our dreams. Therefore, providing them with a broad, open, balanced education is essential. In fact, it’s what keeps me here at the museum.”

Making history come alive

“These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations; and of these were the

nations divided in the earth after the flood” (Genesis 10:32). As you walk into the first gallery of the Bible Lands Museum, this quote stands on the wall in front of you. It is the first part of the exhibit that shows we are all descendants of Noah, whether Jewish, Christian, Moslem, religious or secular. With this in mind, the Bible Lands Museum has embarked on a variety of educational programs that bring together people of different faiths.

Indeed, through programs that inspire children to understand and take pride in their history and heritage – to adult education and scholarly symposia – the BLMJ is in a constant state of growth and expansion, developing programs that face the greatest needs within the community. “Our goal is to bring the best to the public – whether it be in our exhibitions and their accompanying catalogs, our family activities or our exclusive Bar-Bat Mitzvah program that offers a strong content-based option for the family and guests, bringing them back to their roots – all of these and much more are the core of our museum,” explains Weiss.

Promoting coexistence

“The Image of Abraham,” a project which brings together Arab and Jewish children in the fourth and fifth grades to explore their shared common heritage in the museum, has been running very successfully since 1996. According to Yehuda Kaplan, the museum’s education director, it is probably one of the few opportunities in Jerusalem for children of both sides to come together and learn about each other. “We’re dealing with children who have real things in common, so we bring them together for a series of meetings to enable them to discover their similarities and appreciate and respect their differences – religious, cultural and linguistic,” he notes.

The children don’t speak a common language; the

Arab children hardly know any Hebrew and the Jews don’t know Arabic, but the group is led by two guides who are both bilingual so that everyone can understand. They conduct workshops together, they play together, and there is a final event in which the parents come to hear about the project and see the interaction.

This year, the “Image of Abraham” project is facing new challenges: the partner schools have insisted that the museum include additional classes. “We have managed to overcome the logistical hurdle to do so, but now we must find the matching funds to make it happen! After 14 years, this project has become our flagship program for coexistence and with each passing year, anecdotal stories of how this project impacted the lives, impressions and attitudes of the participating children and parents give us new strength and inspiration,” asserts Weiss.

Three years ago, the museum’s education department created a similar pilot program for teenagers. “We wanted to move one step forward because you’re limited when you work with fourth graders. Our main goal is really to bring them together. We don’t have the time and they don’t have the tools to speak about their politics and about their situation,” says Kaplan. “So we brought together a group of teenagers using the same concept – to learn through what we have in the museum, but to focus more on their lives today in Jerusalem, with all the problems of Jerusalem, with the history, with the archaeology. We held the pilot project two years ago. It was amazing to see the openness of the kids; they had more tools with which to communicate because they spoke some English and some of the Arab teenagers knew Hebrew. The pertinent and timely issues they raised in these meetings for me, they were really touching. Unfortunately, the war in Gaza stopped it, but it’s an important project that we want to start again.”

One of the aims of the program is to foster leadership through working with a group of teenagers. ▶



UNIQUE TREASURES

According to the Bible Lands Museum’s co-founder, the late Dr. Elie Borowski, “the future of mankind has its roots in the past and only through understanding our history can we build a better future.” Elie, together with his wife Batya, moved mountains to enable a better understanding of ancient lands through the establishment of the museum in 1992.

“Since then, the museum has earned international acclaim as a universal center for cultural and educational programming,” says Amanda Weiss, the museum’s director. “It is the only museum of its kind in the world where the civilizations of the Ancient Near East are brought to life from the dawn of civilization to the early Christian era.” The museum is in fact an interactive time capsule for visitors of all ages and faiths, laymen and scholars alike. Visitors from Israel and from around the world enjoy touring through the galleries and discovering the wonders of the ancient cultures and their inter-relationships.

The museum’s permanent exhibition spans more than 20 galleries, taking visitors through the chronological history of the Bible lands, whose geographical boundaries extend from Afghanistan in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west, and from the Caucasian mountains in the north to Nubia in the south. The exhibition features rare and unique treasures from these lands dating from the earliest civilizations to the Byzantine period, enabling visitors to discover the remarkable wealth of the neighboring cultures and how they have influenced each other.

Each year, the museum curates at least one major temporary exhibition that continues throughout the year in order to create educational programs around the topic, such as the interesting and intriguing “Angels and Demons - Jewish Magic through the Ages.” There are also various shorter and smaller exhibitions at any given time.

At the 18th anniversary gala dinner in May this year, Nir Barkat, the mayor of Jerusalem, awarded Batya Borowski, co-founder and chair of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, the highest and most honorable title to be bestowed by the city – “Guardian of the City of Jerusalem.” In receiving this award, Batya joins her late husband Elie, who received the same title 12 years earlier from Ehud Olmert during his tenure as mayor.

Part of the Bible Lands Museum’s permanent collection

Young immigrant participants on the Olim I’ Museum program explore the treasures of ancient Greece



Aaron Novak



Female figurine from Mesopotamia or Syria, ca. 5300-4500 BCE

Young visitors to the Bible Lands Museum with an ancient oil press



Amanda Weiss

“The museum’s most recent project brings new immigrant children from disadvantaged communities in Jerusalem to the museum for an afternoon enrichment program”



◀ By participating in the project, they will gain the skills to contribute back into their own communities and continue to work towards building a shared society based on mutual respect. “We know it’s very complicated, we’re not that naive, but this gave us the opportunity to see that there is a chance to do something like this here,” says Kaplan.

Reaching out to new immigrants

The museum’s most recent project, which is being launched this year, brings new immigrant children from disadvantaged communities in Jerusalem to the museum for an afternoon enrichment program throughout the school year. This project is aimed to counteract the distressing reality of life for an increasingly large number of immigrant children, in particular within the Ethiopian community.

This community is faced with some of the most difficult challenges in their absorption process, and to that end the museum has identified a core group of Ethiopian teenagers to work with younger Ethiopian children on this project. The young teenagers are hired by the museum to work after school as group leaders for the afternoon activities and are trained as assistant guides in the museum, thus enabling the museum team to work together to bridge the cultural differences and reach a greater level of appreciation.

The Ministry of Immigrant Absorption has partnered with the museum for the first pilot season, which was launched last month. According to Kaplan, “There’s a lot of excitement about the pilot project in the Ministry. They really want to work with us. The teenagers (16 and 17-year-olds), who have been through a selection process to get into the program, will eventually serve as role models for the younger children to show them what can be achieved if they work hard.”


The museum is actively seeking partners to help build and support this project. There is no doubt that strengthening these children’s sense of identity and acknowledgement of their heritage is the key to building a stronger future for them.

Activities for all

These major educational projects are not the only events for youth at the BLMJ. There are summer day camps, theater shows, films, Bible stories which are brought to life, and more. Every holiday throughout the year is enthusiastically planned by the Education Department’s creative and experienced staff. For example, during Sukkot the museum was teeming with activity as families participated in a wide range of activities including a search for ancient amulets, spells and blessings during an enchanted, guided tour led by costumed actors, creative workshops and much more.

But the events and educational programs are not limited to children. Lectures, films, gallery tours, courses for tour guides, Saturday Night Concerts and many other entertaining experiences are available for adults.

In a film screened at the 18th anniversary dinner, honoring founder Batya Borowski on her 80th birthday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised Mrs. Borowski for her diligence and commitment to the museum, which he said “has become a vital part of Israel’s cultural landscape and has rightfully taken its place among Israel’s leading cultural and educational institutions.” Netanyahu also emphasized the importance of the connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel and added: “If you want to understand the extent and depth of this connection, read the Bible. If you want to understand the Bible even more, come to the Bible Lands Museum.” ■

 A detailed history of the museum, a biography of Elie Borowski, the events calendar and further information on the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem can be found at www.blmj.org.