

by Gavriel Horan

For years he was among the most sensational artists around — a young painter who dazzled the Israeli art world, making a name for himself before he was twenty. Binyamin Basteker's peers went on to become the most famous of Israeli artists, the likes of Anna Ticho, Calman Shemi, and Mordecai Ardon, whose works fill the museums and galleries of Tel Aviv and sell for five digit figures to Jewish collectors around the world. Basteker's own art was displayed in the Helena Rubenstein Pavilion at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the Museum of Haifa, the Betzalel Academy, and the Jerusalem Theater, to name a few, and remains part of these museums' permanent collections to this day. He became a fellow at a prestigious art school at the age of twenty-one and had already helped to establish two new branches of the school before he was married.

If he had continued in this vein, his name would today be on the lips of every art expert in Israel, and his work would be worth a small fortune. That's what would have happened. So what caused Binyamin Basteker to leave the art world behind, giving up almost certain fame and fortune?

I arranged to meet Binyamin in his Jerusalem home to hear his story firsthand. When I arrived — in the largely secular neighborhood of Pisgat Zeev — I was surprised to find a distinguished looking chareidi man with a long beard answering the door. Had I arrived at the right address? When the door swung open, all doubts left me as the strong smell of linseed oil and turpentine registered; I had definitely come to the right place. Reb Binyamin's bright smile illuminated his dark, good-natured face as he shook my hand firmly and welcomed me into his home.

The walls of his small house were glowing with colorful artworks; many more were piled up on the floor. He showed me from one canvas to the next, brimming over with excitement as he described each piece in detail. Hanging in the bedroom was a huge life-size portrait of an old Rabbi — "Chacham David," of the Bucharian neighborhood — at his seat in an old shul. The painting was adorned with an ornate, antique-looking frame that seemed somewhat out of place in the bedroom, it looked more fitting for a museum.

The white, plastic dining room table was covered with oil paints, brushes, sketch pads, and art books — I had to make room for my tape recorder. The Bastekers were excited to tell me the table's history. Many years ago, this cheap plastic table was all they could afford, but when it arrived, they realized they'd forgotten about the delivery fee. Binyamin took down one of his paintings from the wall — worth many times more — and gave it to the delivery boy. The boy walked away with the better deal, but the Bastekers were happy to have a dining room table, humble as it was.

The Return of an Artist

Twenty years ago Indian-born painter, Binyamin Basteker, was poised to shake up the Israeli art scene. And if everything had gone as planned, the gifted young man would have become one of the most famous artists in Israel. But he suddenly vanished from the public eye, only to reappear last summer with a very different picture to share with the world

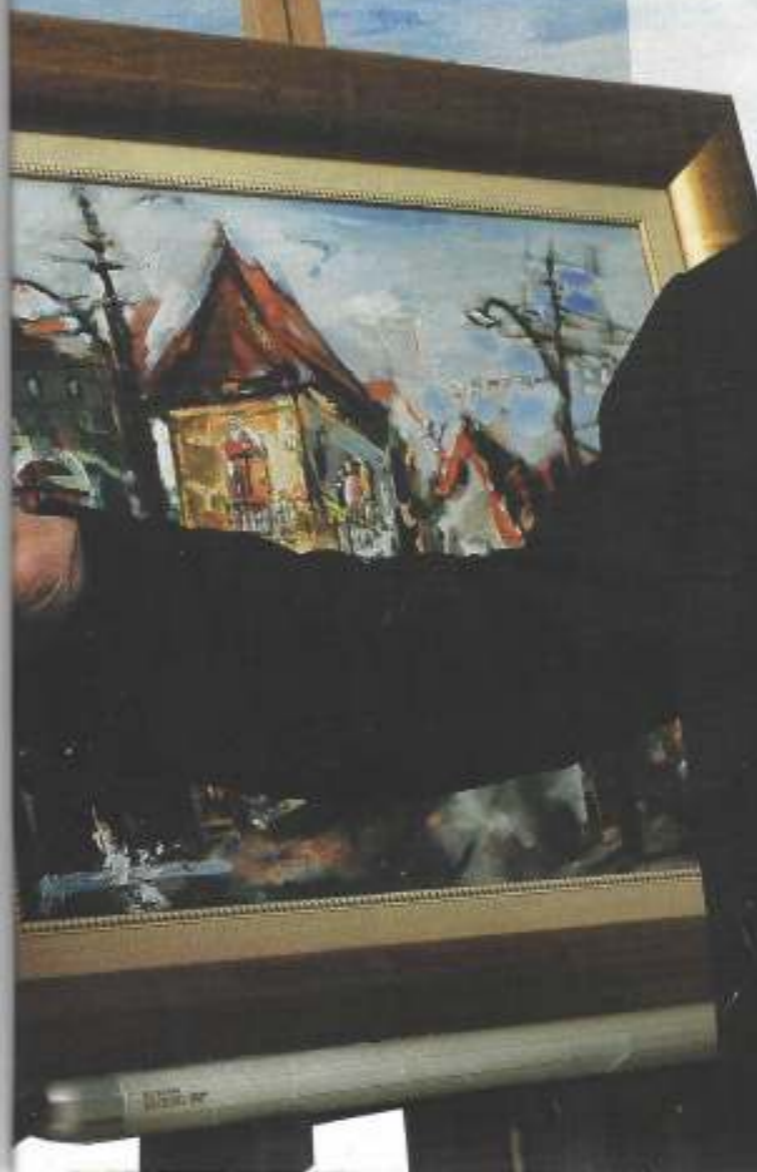
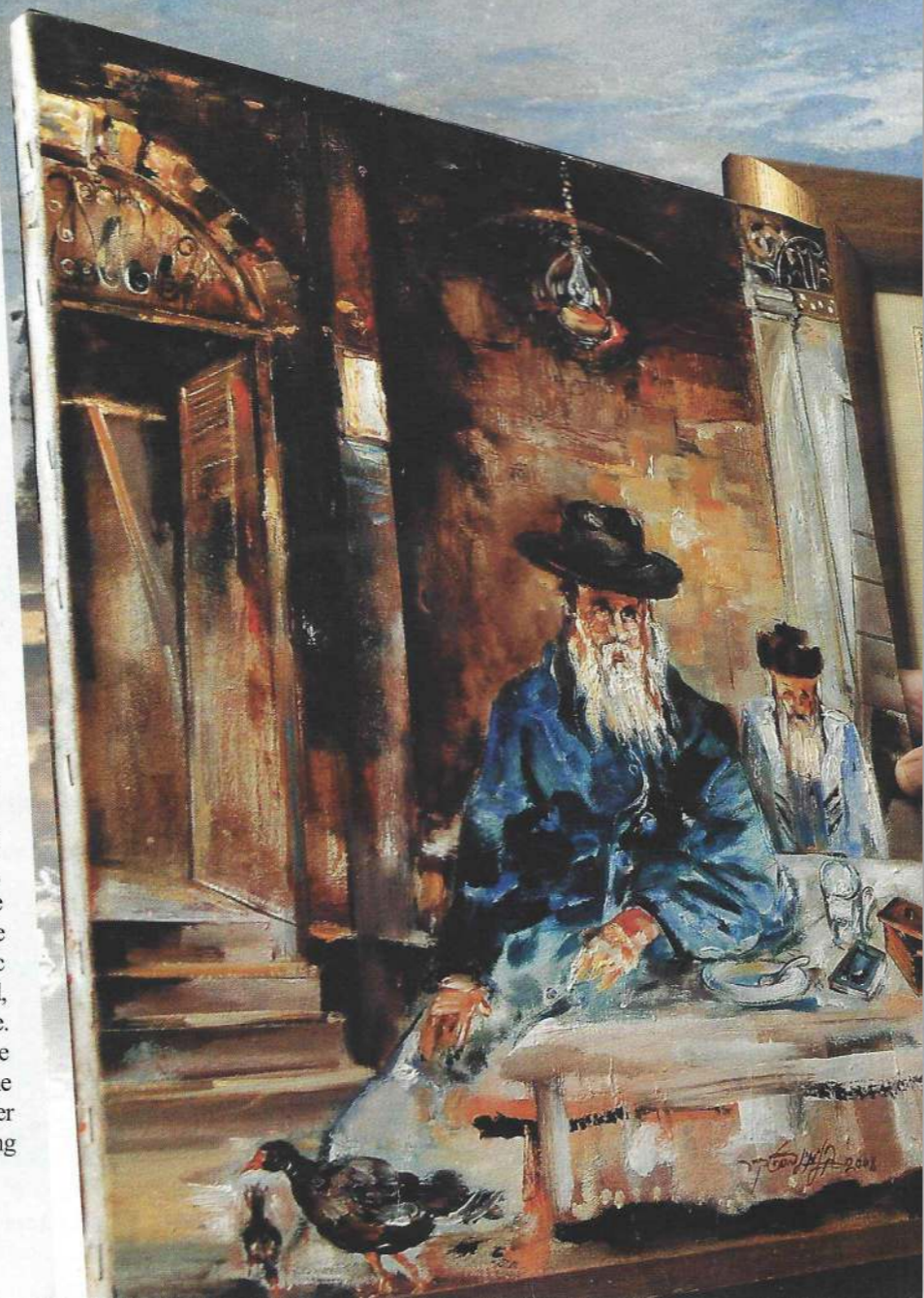


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Reb Binyamin's paintings are mostly of landscapes and cityscapes of different locations in Israel: *tashlich* in old Tiberia, the hills of Ein Kerem overlooking Jerusalem, the Bucharian market. Although at times he delves into the more emotional world of expressionism — reflecting on the human emotions of sadness, yearning, and joy — his art is generally bright and airy in the style of the French Impressionists, infusing the viewer with energy and hope.

Each painting draws you into the mysterious world that he has created, and seeks to reveal the beauty and depth that exist in Hashem's world. His brush strokes are quick and spontaneous and give a feeling of levity and invigoration. Much of his work is based on open-air sketches done on location, after which he adds in details from his own imagination. It could take as many as five visits to a spot before he starts to paint. He sometimes spends hours studying the effects of light on one particular spot at different times of the day before choosing the exact moment that best expresses the uniqueness of the location.

"I want to bring out what is uniquely Jewish about each location. I go to the holy places to draw — the Kosel, Tzfas, Tiberia — because they pull me. I see HaKodosh Baruch Hu in the world, and I want to show all the beautiful ways in which He creates the world anew every minute."

Humble Beginnings Reb Binyamin was born in a small town outside of Mumbai, India, (then known as Bombay). His family were members of the Bene Israel community, who had lived in India since the Second Temple period. The Bene Israel follow the customs of the Ben Ish Chai, and although many of the Bene Israel families have become more observant since making aliyah in the 1970s, back in India most of them were traditional. Binyamin Basteker's family observed the holidays, lit candles, went to shul on Shabbos, and kept some standard of kashrus. His father was the exclusive slaughterer for the family, even though he didn't actually know the laws of *shechitah*. There were only ten Jews in their town, so Binyamin went to a Christian school.

"We were very proud that we were the sole representatives of Judaism in our school," he says. "I always knew that a Jew has to believe in Hashem, but I didn't really know how to connect to Him." One time his father went to visit the school and saw that the students were polishing the religious utensils from the church. "I was an innocent child, and I didn't understand what we were doing," Binyamin recalled. His father headed straight to the principal and demanded that his children be excused from this activity, so once a week they



DISCOVERING A MASTER

Mrs. Chana Goldberg* received a call from Mrs. Ohra Basteker, who expressed interest in enrolling in her advanced class in Judaic art. Ohra wanted to meet the teacher in person before signing up for the course. Mrs. Goldberg was surprised that Ohra arrived with her husband. Mrs. Goldberg told them the details about her course and showed them her artwork.

Reb Binyamin kept complimenting her work, and as they were leaving, he humbly mentioned that he also painted. She didn't take it very seriously because she often meets people who pride themselves on being amateur artists.

A year later, after Ohra was already a regular student in Mrs. Goldberg's class, Reb Binyamin came to discuss his wife's work. He brought a small portfolio with him. At the end of the meeting he asked if he could show her his sketches.

"I didn't expect more than the standard portfolio," Mrs. Goldberg recalls. "As I flipped through the pages, I felt like I was going to faint. I couldn't believe my eyes, this was outstanding! I don't know anyone in this generation who does this kind of art. He's a born artist; there's something in him that's phenomenal."

She also couldn't believe that he'd seen her art many times, offering her many compliments, without ever giving a hint of criticism. "I'm also an artist, but he's a master! It's not every day you come across someone like this who sat quietly for over twenty years."

Binyamin's newest pieces have sold almost as soon as they were finished. "Nowadays selling paintings is one of the hardest things," Mrs. Goldberg explained, "but talent like his is very rare, and people today are looking for inspiration. He often says, 'Hashem gave me talent, and I want to use it in the right way to enhance the world He gave us.'"

That's exactly what he's doing.

*name changed

got the afternoon off from school. The nuns who taught at the school tried to missionize the Jewish children by offering them special benefits that they couldn't normally afford, but since the Bastekers were wealthy, the church lacked any power over them. When they told the principal of the school that they were making aliyah, he cried because he also wished that he could travel to Jerusalem someday.

Since he was a small boy, Reb Binyamin was always immersed in art. His grandfather was an actor and playwright, and his father was an artist for the Indian government as well as a musician, playing the harp and flute. Binyamin was always near his grandfather and used to spend hours drawing the actors and their costumes. During his vacations he apprenticed with a local artist. In return, he would add color to the black-and-white photos. "All my life, art was in my genes, passed down to me from my father. I was able to express my inner self in my art," he said.

From Bombay to Jerusalem In 1967, during the Six Day War, Binyamin's father decided to make aliyah with his family so his children could fight in the Israeli army. Although his job as an artist for the British government provided him with good, steady work, he decided to leave India, which had been their family home for almost 2,000 years. Due to the security situation in Israel, they were

unable to make aliyah until two years after his initial request. The Jewish Agency in India asked them if they wanted to move to Canada, London, or America instead. His mother screamed, "No, Yerushalayim, Yerushalayim!"

In 1969 the entire family immigrated to Israel with many other members of his community — they filled the plane. Binyamin was sixteen at the time. They settled in an absorption center for Indians in Beer Yaakov. At eighteen Binyamin was inducted into the army, eventually taking part in three wars. When the Yom Kippur War started, he had already been discharged from active duty. He was in shul that day, and his father told him to offer to fight even though he hadn't been called up.

"While I was in the army I used any free time to sketch. The other soldiers told me that my pictures raised their morale so much that they would do my guard duty shifts for me if I would just keep on drawing!"

When Binyamin was in the reserves, he spent time on a kibbutz. The kibbutz members held an exhibit of his work (one of his biggest fans at that time was Moshe Dayan) and everything was sold. "He was the only one to come back from the reserves having earned a lot of money!" his wife exclaimed with pride.

Binyamin eventually enrolled in the top art school in Tel Aviv. The founder and principal, the late Aryeh Margushilsky, was a Holocaust survivor who had artwork hanging in the top museums in Russia, but he wasn't allowed to take any of it out with



him when he made aliyah. He grew up very religious in Lithuania, but after witnessing the Rav of the town brutally killed by the Nazis, he completely left religion. Margushilsky was so enamored with Binyamin's talent that he basically adopted him as his son, and Binyamin was the only one who was allowed to enter his studio.

"I loved him like a father," Binyamin recalled with admiration. Binyamin was also a protege of two of Israel's greatest artists: Avigdor Steimatzky — who insisted on keeping some of his work — and Yosef Zaritsky. After he graduated, he was immediately offered a position as a

full professor — at the age of twenty-one!

He started teaching there in 1977 during which time he helped to establish a new branch of the school in Kiryat Shemonah. He also founded an atelier — an artists' cooperative — for young artists in Ramle. In both locations, the government gave him old, abandoned Turkish palaces to use for free and both schools are still operating today. His future wife Ohra was one of his students.

"I never followed the teachers' instructions and the principal threatened to kick me out, until Binyamin intervened on my behalf," she said, fondly recalling how she met her husband over thirty years ago. They were married in 1978.

The Rebbe's Blessing A few years after getting married, the Bastekers moved to Jerusalem, where Binyamin worked as a sign maker while continuing to paint. During this time he exhibited in both group and solo shows at galleries and museums across the country, and his work was listed in a directory of the best Israeli artists.

After the birth of their first daughter, the Bastekers eagerly anticipated more children. However, as time passed, a neighbor in their increasingly religious Shmuel HaNavi neighborhood suggested that Ohra go see the Pittsburgher Rebbe, *ztz"l*, in Ashdod. Ohra was so desperate for another child that she was willing to try anything.

The Rebbe asked her if her husband put on tefillin each day. She responded in the negative. "I want to bless you," he said,



"but I can't. I need your husband's tefillin. If someone wants to transport water from one place to another, will it work if the pipe is broken in the middle? I'm not asking you to do *teshuvah*, but tefillin only takes five minutes a day. If your husband agrees, I promise to bless you and you'll have children, don't worry." Binyamin brooded for three days straight after he heard about the Rebbe's proposition. He had no idea what the Rebbe's intention was. Finally, on the third day he agreed: "I'll do it," he said, "but I don't want to hear another word about it." They gave birth to another healthy baby ten months later, and Binyamin has been putting on tefillin ever since.

Binyamin had no idea why he agreed to put on tefillin, but something clearly began to stir inside him — his Jewish soul had been awakened.

"A part of me wanted to become religious, but I was fighting it because I thought it meant I'd have to give up my freedom of expression. I was used

to following my inner voice and doing whatever I felt was right, and I didn't want to conform to the Torah's laws." Nonetheless, he began to explore the nearby frum communities, walking the streets of Jerusalem on Friday nights and often taken aback by the beauty of Shabbos.

"I was drawn to the aromatic smells, the beautiful clothing, and the holy atmosphere around the glowing Shabbos table. Everyone and everything looked so special."

Once as he was passing through the Bucharian neighborhood he overheard a group saying Tehillim together in a loud, unified voice. "It was so special, and I couldn't understand how we were all Jews — my Judaism was so different from theirs. I started to cry but I couldn't understand why I was crying. Then I realized that just as I was passionate about my art, they were passionate about their Tehillim."

Eighteen years ago, a frum relative of Ohra's passed away suddenly during childbirth. The baby boy was born healthy,

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but he was now the last of six orphans. Ohra desperately wanted to adopt the baby to help her relatives but they would never agree to let the child be raised in a non-kosher home. One day Binyamin asked her if her relatives would let them raise the child if they became religious.

"Fine," he said. "We'll become religious. If you don't want us to have a television, we won't have a television; you want us to keep kosher, we'll keep kosher; you want to use a Shabbos clock, we'll use a Shabbos clock — whatever you want!"

The Bastekers kashered their home practically overnight, and Binyamin even started going to shul three times a day, even though he hadn't yet learned a day in yeshivah. Of course it was a long and difficult process before they arrived at where they are today, but the ball was definitely rolling from that moment on.

Returning to Hashem A short while after they had started to become observant Binyamin had a job painting a sign on a public street. Rav Reuven Elbaz, the Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivat Ohr HaChaim, walked by. He asked Binyamin why he was working so hard in the hot sun. "You draw so nicely, why don't you become a *sofer* and write a *sefer Torah*?" he asked.

"I'm barely religious," Binyamin responded. "I don't even know how to learn. How can I write a *sefer Torah*?"

"So do *teshuvah*!" was the Rav's reply. The rest is history. Binyamin went on to study *safrus*, although such a precise and rigid job was extremely challenging for such a creative person. "Early on it was difficult because I didn't think I was holy enough,

I was very scared, but the Rabbis kept on encouraging me. They said that I would be a great *sofer* because as an artist; I understand the world in a deeper way than most people. They explained to me that it would be a way for me to connect to Hashem and to make a *kiddush Hashem*."

As he grew in his level of observance, he began to feel that it was inappropriate for a religious individual to be involved with the secular art world — the bohemian lifestyle of many of his colleagues was in direct opposition to his, and he didn't want his family exposed to such influences. He therefore relegated his creative talent to his private sketch pad.

One of the hardest challenges for any artist is to hold back from expressing himself. Creativity is like a wellspring and if it is not expressed it will explode, gushing forth in a rushing torrent. For twenty years, until very recently, Reb Binyamin's tremendous talent lay hidden inside, as he struggled to support his family as a *sofer*. His name remained virtually unknown until he was "discovered" by a chareidi art teacher in Jerusalem [see sidebar], who has begun to help make his name known in the art world once again.

After years spent learning and developing himself into a *ben Torah*, Binyamin finally felt ripe to take up the challenge of visually expressing the deepest spiritual truths he had encountered. He decided to start painting professionally again, this time using religious themes. There are many frum people who enjoy and will invest in top-quality art, but it isn't easy to find good art that aligns with Jewish sensitivities.

He immediately went to ask his Rabbi if he could start selling his work again. Even though the family was struggling to support themselves on his *sofer's* wages, he wouldn't think of doing anything without first consulting *daas Torah*.

Now that he has rekindled his passion for painting, the art is just flowing out of him. Major museums around the world are now seeking to acquire his new works, and his first few pieces quickly sold. He is using his talent to try to connect people to Hashem and Torah in a deeper way.

"Many times, people think they know what they are going to do in life but if they are not *l'sheim Shamayim*, then Hashem has a way of changing their plans. I had to travel this whole path just so that I could sanctify the name of Heaven with my art. It makes me happy to work *l'sheim Shamayim* and that's when the brachah comes. Hashem took Avraham out of the most impure place and brought him to the most holy place — just like he did for me."

Seeing Hashem's Hand Today Binyamin continues to write highly regarded tefillin, mezuzos, and *megillos*, while also learning half a day — but his free time is devoted to expressing his creativity, this time using Torah and Judaism as his inspiration. He now uses modern and impressionist styles to represent the most profound Jewish principles.

"When an artist paints, he is expressing his inner self as well as depicting the person or place that he's drawing. A lot of Jews have deep *primitivus*," he explained, "but they can't express it. I can express the inner world through my art. When you read *Shir HaShirim*, or say Tehillim, there is very beautiful imagery, but you

don't see it through pictures — I do. My artwork is like a form of prayer. Hashem is hidden in nature — in trees, rocks, sky — and you can find His beauty if you look carefully. But only an artist can *always* see it, and when you present it to a person, he sees how all along he'd missed seeing Hashem's Hand."

Musicians also have the ability to present the world in a different way. "When musicians hear a beautiful waterfall, they incorporate it into their work. If you heard it on your own, you might not think about it but the musician inspires you to hear the beauty of the waterfall. An artist sees nature and can make you feel inspired in a way that you probably wouldn't on your own. The artist can make you see the beauty of Hashem behind everything in nature. Most people won't see what I see with my eyes, and I see Hashem in so many places that most people do not. Art is like *pshat*, *remez*, *drash*, and *sod*. Hashem gave each person a different way to see Him in the world."

People who own his work and see his paintings first thing in the morning have told him that it gives them strength to get through the day and see that there is a Borei Olam. "Just like music can relax someone, so too art," he explained. Binyamin is always looking at the world from an artist's perspective. He can't help sketching, even when he's in line at the bank.

"It's like breathing air for me. If I'm not drawing, then I'm drawing in my head. My purpose is just to bless and bring about praise to Hashem in the world. It is not often that we do things totally *l'sheim Shamayim*, for the sake of Heaven, but the art I do is just for Hashem, and I thank Him for giving me the talent to do it well and for being able to give people happiness." ■

