

## Art Spotlight

# CREATING SHALOM

### An interview with celebrated Jerusalem-based contemporary Jewish artist Shai Azoulay

*Bishop Paul-Gordon Chandler had the opportunity to interview the highly acclaimed Jewish artist Shai Azoulay, who participated in the “ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many” exhibition that we hosted last year. Our recent group of Wyoming pilgrims to the Holy Land had the opportunity of meeting him at his studio in West Jerusalem.*



*Shai Azoulay in his Jerusalem studio*

**Shai Azoulay** studied at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Israel, where he received both his BFA and MFA. In his paintings, Shai creates a narrative abundant with figures and scenes that radiate human warmth, compassion and slight irony. His work ranges between drawing and painting, between the sophisticated and the naïve, and between the omnipotent and the limited. Shai has held numerous solo exhibitions and has exhibited in the Tel Aviv Museum, Frieze Art Fair, and around the world, from Tokyo to Rome, Paris and New York. He is the recipient of the “Morasha” Award from the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and The Moses Prize from the Jerusalem Artist House. His works are in renowned collections around the world.

Interestingly, Shai’s family name, “Azoulay,” is a prominent Moroccan Jewish name. For example, today’s senior adviser to the King Mohammed VI of Morocco is André Azoulay, whose daughter, Ms. Audrey Azoulay, is the current Director-General of the UNESCO. Shai’s father’s family immigrated from Morocco in 1958. Carrying on his heritage, Shai often wears a traditional Moroccan hat. Shai was one of the three participating artists in the “ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many” exhibition that we hosted last year. For more information on Shai, see: [sazoulay.com](http://sazoulay.com)

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## What moves you to create and express?

**SHAI:** I would say my creativity comes from what I would call “deep memories.” I believe it is all related to experiences at an early age in childhood. My first memories... dramas, secrets, pains, joys, celebrations, etc. They are the starting point for everything... the source of it all. Then life experiences put another layer on it... and another layer... like an onion, layer upon layer. Then it becomes something like an “energy cube” that has to be released... looking for the way out. This flows then into my creative expression.



## How does your art convey your worldview and values?

**SHAI:** Well, I think that one can’t separate them... my art and worldview. It is all part of me. I am in all my art. Even the way I work in my studio, everything has a reason in what I do. So, the big things... ideas, beliefs, values, etc... are coming from an unconscious instinct. It is something that comes out with no predetermined plans. For example, I don’t work from an image. I have to trust my instinct, my subconscious... I need to trust that which is in me and let it come out. Sometimes I have a starter... such as a sketch. And then I let it develop in various ways. I let the color and drawing take me. Even if I have a more specific idea in mind, it becomes a mixture with the unexpected... with surprise.



I am a colorist. More than anything else, color is how I express. If I use a type of red, I then instinctively feel what type of blue I need to use. So, I am constantly reacting to color. I love color. There is a lot of joy in it. There is a lot of emotion in color, and I want to touch my emotions when doing a painting. Color is energy to me. In my own culture, color was not common in contemporary art. Art to local contemporary artists was more often than not related to the trauma of the Holocaust, which affected the palette, making it heavier and darker. My starting point was somewhat different as my parents came from Morocco... and weren’t directly affected by the Holocaust as were those that came from Europe.

## Have you ever felt constrained as an artist? And what helped you?

**SHAI:** It took me a long time to break my own chains. When I graduated with my BFA, I was an “academic artist.” It took me a long time to realize my own vocation as an artist. Being an artist is not an easy life... so it is critical that it reflect who I really am, and that I enjoy it. It is very important to find oneself. It took six years for me to break those chains... and to find my language, “to find my color,” as I like to put it. Interestingly, it was also around the time I became more devout in my faith as well.

I grew up in a family that was not so religious... we went to the synagogue once a year. But we didn't keep Shabbat. After leaving home, I traveled the world. I remember when reading Paulo Coelho's book *The Alchemist* that it started me thinking more about the spiritual life. Then I met my wife, who had come from an even less religious family than my own. However, she was reading some spiritual literature, the mystical writings of Rabbi Nachman, who died in 1810. His religious philosophy revolved around closeness to God and speaking to God in normal conversation “as you would with a best friend.” As I read his writings, I felt that my soul recognized it – it was like a *déjà vu* – like I had met it before. And my spiritual journey went on from there.



Shai Azoulay, *The Lake*, 2017, Oil on canvas, 199x266cm

## Why did participating in the “ABRAHAM: Out of One, Many” exhibition interest you?

**SHAI:** Because I thought it was a great challenge to explore this big issue. Abraham was a big man... with so much love. It is what we are trying to find in this crazy world... which is often so gray... with so much hate. I felt led to try and understand Abraham... and to paint his story.

## What role does art have in the wider context of bridge-building? Do you feel art can make a meaningful impact in today’s world?

**SHAI:** I think that the art of painting is so powerful because it has no words. It can be read by anyone from anywhere. There is no language to learn. With my brush I can communicate to everyone. And everyone has done a painting in their life... such as when they were a child. And an artist is just someone who has continued doing it. I see art as giving the person the moment and the ability to express something from his or her origin... something very basic and primitive. This is the magic! It is like eating bread. A very basic expression. In painting one need only to use your finger to make a line. It is so basic! So human and so communicative. So, I believe painting can be very influential. One of the problems today is that the contemporary art world is too often very distant from the average person. Some try to make it something for the elite. But the irony is that nothing is more primitive.



Shai Azoulay, *Sacrificial Love*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 40x60cm



Shai Azoulay, *The dog walk*, Oil on canvas

## What do you view as your greatest artistic achievement so far?

One might expect me to mention awards that I have received, or something like that. However, for me, what is most important to me is that children are coming to my exhibitions and having fun. And that my mother is enjoying my painting. At the end of it, when my painting communicates, and when someone expresses something as a result of my painting... like laughter, or joy, wonder... this is the most meaningful thing.