

## *The Gates* by Henri Nehemiah Azaz

The Rissman Family Kol Ami Museum is a unique collection of Jewish art, artifacts and ritual objects. In addition to preserving significant objects for posterity, the museum seeks to develop programs and exhibitions that are designed to educate the congregation and promote an appreciation for works of Judaica.

Exhibit Curator:  
Ilana Segal  
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*North Suburban  
Synagogue*  
**Beth El**  
בית כנסת בית אל



**The Arnold Rissman Family  
Kol Ami Museum**

The monumental cast iron doors at the entrance of the Rissman Kol Ami Museum were commissioned by Maurice Spertus in 1962. *The Gates* were officially presented to North Suburban Synagogue Beth El in 1963, with the stated hope that they “ever be open to reveal the voice, the wisdom, the spiritual tradition of the Jewish people.”

The Hebrew words that appear on *The Gates* are drawn from the morning prayers. They are from a section of the siddur, between yishtabach and the Shema, that focuses on God’s mastery over nature. The prayer begins “*El baruch gadol deah...*”

*The blessed God who is great in knowledge, prepared and worked on the rays of the sun; the Beneficent One fashioned honor for His Name, He placed luminaries all around His power; the leaders of His legions, holy ones, exalt the Almighty, constantly relate the honor of God and His sanctity.*

The prayer is an alphabetical acrostic - the first word begins with the letter aleph, the second with a bet and so on. The use of an alphabetical acrostic conveys the idea that we praise God to the utmost, using every available letter. It may also express that God’s greatness is complete and perfect, “from “aleph to tav.” In this commission, sculptor Henri Nehemiah Azaz (1932-2008) emphasizes the acrostic structure of the prayer by doubling or tripling the initial letters.

The striking artworks of Israeli sculptor Henri Nehemiah Azaz can be seen in synagogues, schools, hotels and offices in Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States. For his largely abstract and monumental works, he used stained glass, cement, wood and stone.



Born in Berlin in 1932, Henri Nehemiah Azaz was taken at age three months to British-mandate Palestine, where his Zionist father worked in the vineyards of Zichron Ya’akov. At a young age he apprenticed with Italian monumental stonemasons in Bologna and stained glassmakers in Amsterdam. From 1949-50 he studied in Paris at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière.

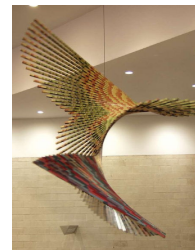


Returning to Israel, Azaz served as an officer in the Israeli Army, where he was inspired by the abstract beauty of the Negev desert. In 1956 he settled in Be’er Sheva, where he founded a pottery school. He produced his first major commission in 1958 for the Evening News offices in Tel Aviv. His first major American commission was the Beth El *Gates*, followed soon after by *Hands of Peace*, a commission for the Chicago Loop Synagogue. It shows a raised pair of hands, juxtaposed with the Hebrew and English wording of the priestly blessing.



In 1965 Azaz designed silver and bronze ark doors with a bronze candelabrum and *ner tamid* for a new synagogue in Belfast, Ireland. He also began to make stained glass windows at Marble Arch Synagogue, London.

In 1972 Azaz was asked by Yitzhak Rabin, then Israel’s ambassador to the US, to sculpt an artwork for the Israel Hall at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. The result was a vast walnut panel, showing forty-three musical instruments named in the Bible. The instruments were identified by their Hebrew names, which appeared in English characters. Other major works by Azaz include optical mobile sculptures at St. Thomas Hospital, London, and the Warwick Arts Centre, as well as a partition for St. Barbara Church in Essen, Germany. Azaz died in 2008 at age 85.



Presented in this exhibit are preparatory materials for *The Gates* that include a remarkable pen and ink drawing, a study in the round, and a maquette (a small scale model for an architectural work or sculpture). The artist likely created these materials to aid him in visualizing and testing his concepts for *The Gates*. They were presented to his clients for their advance approval. We are fortunate to have this unique record of Azaz’s creativity and working process.