



Creating Connections from Broken Glass: The *Hiddur Mitzvah* Project



BY ROCHELLE KRAUT

What can be done with a bag filled with pieces of broken glass? These fragments can serve as more than raw material for a piece of art. They can also serve as a catalyst for learning about Jewish rituals, for building community, and for reaching out to help others. The bits and pieces of glass can add up to something that is greater than the sum of its parts. It can add up to the *Hiddur Mitzvah* Project.

Hiddur mitzvah, “beautification of a commandment,” requires that we make the performance of *mitzvot* pleasing and beautiful. For a Jewish artist, *hiddur mitzvah* is the foundation for creating Judaica.

Gary Rosenthal, an internationally known artist specializing in fused glass and metal art and sculpture, has enjoyed particular success in creating ritual items for the home and synagogue. In the early 1990’s, he began to think about extending his work, connecting it somehow to his passion for community service and social action. His dream was to bring people together and give them the opportunity to do a *mitzvah* at the same time.

This past year, to accomplish that goal, Rosenthal created the *Hiddur Mitzvah* Project, which combines art enrichment and Jewish education with community service. As part of this program, students, families, and adults attend workshops where they create beautiful pieces of Judaica – for example, dreidels, *mezuzot*, *menorot*, and *tzedakah* boxes – while raising funds for their synagogue or another worthy cause.

Rosenthal provides the pre-cut form

for these objects and pieces of colorful, fusible glass for the mosaic. The glass is applied to the form with glue. The object is then sent to the artist’s studio for the firing that fuses the glass into a seamless mosaic. Rosenthal’s assistants mount the solid glass piece on the item that was chosen, finish it, and return it to the maker. The individual now has a piece that will become a cherished family heirloom.

According to Rosenthal, the goal of the workshops is to combine the concept of *hiddur mitzvah* with *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*.

Repairing the world can take the form of mothers and daughters creating *Shabbat* candlesticks to be sent to families in Argentina as part of a support and relief program; or it might be a “twinning project” where *b’nai mitzvah* students create two *yadgyim* (pointers), one that the students use for their own *semaḥot* and one that is sent to a child in another country for his or her *bar/bat mitzvah*. It can also take the form of a fundraiser for a synagogue school.

Adas Israel Congregation in Washington, DC, has always given the 12th grade post-confirmation students books as graduation gifts. When Shoshana Marcus, Director of Education, learned about the *Hiddur Mitzvah* project, she decided that *mezuzot* would be ideal gifts for the graduates.

In May 2003, the students went to

Rosenthal’s gallery and studio. Ms. Marcus remarked, “It was interesting for the children to see the studio of a working artist, and a Jewish artist at that, engaged in Jewish projects for synagogues and college campuses. They saw a Torah Ark he was working on for a college. It was also good for them to see that Judaism is alive and well on college campuses.”

While the students worked on their *mezuzot*, they learned about the art form and the significance of the *mezuzah*. The students also created a *mezuzah* for the school as a gift from the class.

Ms. Marcus adds:

“When students are going off on their own for the first time, a *mezuzah* is a great symbol and declaration of their identity. They can be recognized by others, and this can help create a Jewish community on campus. Our congregation will definitely

repeat this experience.”
Cantor Audrey Abrams of Beth El Synagogue in Minneapolis, MN, learned of the *Hiddur Mitzvah* Project through word of mouth. In addition to her role as cantor, she also serves as program director and works with the congregation’s Talmud Torah.

When Cantor Abrams heard that Rosenthal was going to be in Minneapolis in November 2003, she decided that – while there wasn’t sufficient time to arrange for a program at the synagogue – something could be done fairly quickly at the Talmud Torah, the after-school program of three Conservative congregations.

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Despite short notice, 300 people attended.

Participants were offered a choice of objects to make – from dreidels to *mezuzot*. Cantor Abrams notes that “many people wound up making more than one because they loved doing it.” In fact, the program was so successful that she coordinated a similar event in February 2004. This time, *yadayim* were included as a choice for the *b'nai mitzvah* students, and a congregant at the synagogue gave each *b'nai mitzvah* student the gift of coming to the workshop to make a ritual object of his or her choice.

The project was conducted as a fundraiser, with participants paying for the pieces they made. The money was shared between the *Hiddur Mitzvah* Project, which supplied the materials and did the finishing work, and the Talmud Torah.

For B'nai Israel in Rockville, MD, the opening of a new education wing in September 2003 provided an ideal opportunity for working with the *Hiddur Mitzvah* Project. Fran Zavin, education director at B'nai Israel, said Rosenthal, who has long been associated with that synagogue, wanted to do something with the confirmation class. She notes that “when the artist spoke to the class about *hiddur mitzvah*, it was a lesson on art as well.”

Zavin adds that the 10th-grade confirmation class of 5763 wanted to give something back to the school and decided to make a large *tzedakah* box for the chapel in the new education wing. The class of 5764 created a stand for the box. In another project, the children of the congregation made *tzedakah* boxes for



With Gary Rosenthal looking on, the 12th graders and education director, Shoshana Marcus, of Adas Israel, Washington, DC, work on their mezuzot project at Gary's studio.

all 26 classrooms of the new wing, mounted to the wall of each room. The workshops were so popular that in February 2004, Rosenthal was asked to lead a workshop for the congregation to raise funds for the school. “Now people are asking me when we are going to do it again,” says Zavin.

In addition to helping synagogues raise funds for themselves, Rosenthal is committed to helping Jewish communities all over the world. Through the *Hiddur Mitzvah* Project, he worked with KULANU, started by Conservative rabbis to help the Abayudaya, a community of Jews in Uganda. In order to facilitate a Purim celebration, Rosenthal donated groggers made by his workshop to the community in Uganda and asked Rabbi Joseph Prouser of Little Neck Jewish Center, NY, to lead the celebrations there in March 2004.

Says Rabbi Prouser: “I brought my wife and three children. We made costumes and performed a play with the community, and we read the *Megillah* by flashlight.” The entire project was funded by Gary Rosenthal.

Under the rubric of the *Hiddur Mitzvah* Project, a congregation can offer a Jewish learning experience, create a beautiful artwork, and raise funds at the same time. The combinations are as varied as the bits of glass that are fused to become rich patterns of color and shape. In Rosenthal's vision, these bits of glass are a metaphor for bringing together people, ideas and the dream of *tikkun olam*.

The author is Assistant Director of the USCJ Department of Public Affairs and Associate Editor of the Review. To learn more about the Hiddur Mitzvah Project, visit www.collectgaryrosenthal.com/hiddur.