

The rise, ruin, and rebirth of Jerusalem's lost crown

Text by Jay Garfinkel
Photos by Sharon Ben Dayan

HIGH ABOVE the cobbled alleys of Jerusalem's Old City, an artist stands on a narrow scaffold, brush in hand, suspended just below a freshly rebuilt dome. The stone beneath him is new, but the space he's working in carries the echoes of generations. For muralist Yariv Ben Dayan, painting the interior of the newly reconstructed Tiferet Yisrael Synagogue has been a rare kind of assignment – not just a job, but a calling.

"In this project, it wasn't just about the technical challenge," Ben Dayan says. "It was about being part of something meaningful... a story much larger than myself."

Destroyed during the 1948 War of Independence and left in ruins for over 70 years, Tiferet Yisrael – once dubbed the Crown of the Old City – has now been restored stone by stone. But it's not only the dome that's returned. It's the spirit of the place, reanimated through paint, light, and memory.

More Than a Mural

Ben Dayan is no stranger to large-scale art. He's spent over three decades painting walls, ceilings, and public spaces across Israel. But nothing prepared him for the emotional, physical, and spiritual weight of this commission.

"Every brushstroke felt like more than just another mural. If you call it holiness or something else, spiritual. I'm not religious, but I felt it deeply."

The artist spent three months on-site, painting the dome's interior nearly 10 meters above ground. Each day meant climbing scaffolds dozens of times, sometimes standing in one place for eight to ten hours straight, with muscles burn-



A view of the dome.



Yariv under the dome high above.

ing and hands steady.

"When you're on top of the scaffold, it's like a loft. You're holding a tiny half-centimeter brush, trying to recreate intricate patterns. And you realize – this isn't just technique. You're part of history."

What he recreated wasn't simply aesthetic; it was connective. As he worked, Ben Dayan kept old photographs close – grainy black-and-white images from the 1920s and '30s. These glimpses of the synagogue before its destruction guided not just the patterns he restored, but the emotions he felt while restoring them.

"I remember standing up there, looking at the photos, and thinking: I'm touching the same walls. Sometimes, elderly visitors would stop by and share stories. Some had tears in their eyes. That's when I felt it: this is a bridge between generations."

A History Carved in Stone

The history of Tiferet Yisrael stretches back to the 19th century, when Rabbi Nisan Bak, a Hasidic leader from Galicia, envisioned a grand Ashkenazi synagogue in the heart of the Old City. He secured funding from European Jews, diplomatic backing from Sir Moses Montefiore, and, it's rumored, even a donation from the Russian Tsar.

Built under Ottoman rule and completed in 1872, the synagogue stood as both a house of prayer and a symbol of Jewish permanence, topped with a striking white dome. That permanence was shattered in 1948, when Jordanian forces demolished the building during the war. For decades, its ruins were left as a silent scar, an open wound in the Jewish Quarter.

Only in recent years – led by archi-

tect Nachum Meltzer – did a full-scale reconstruction take shape. By 2023, the dome reappeared on the Jerusalem skyline. But without Ben Dayan’s hand, the crown would have remained hollow.

Restoration, Not Replication

Ben Dayan approached the ceiling with humility and a deep sense of responsibility. Rather than create something purely new or modern, his goal was to echo what once was – while adding subtle energy and movement. His palette drew on traditional motifs, but each detail was filtered through the lens of memory and interpretation.

“It’s not copying. It’s continuing,” he says. “Even when restoring, art is never just about the past – it’s for the present and the future.”

Working with such physical intensity, Ben Dayan developed a rhythm – carefully measured progress day by day. “Some days I could only move 40 centimeters,” he says. “You need strength, patience, and a deep focus. But when you have that, it becomes meditative.”

The dome’s interior now features delicate filigree patterns, subtle flourishes that blend Ottoman and Eastern European design elements. This fusion mirrors the history of the synagogue itself, which was built by Hasidim under Muslim rule in a city sacred to three faiths.

Art That Belongs

What sets Ben Dayan’s work apart is not just craftsmanship, but intention. He hopes visitors will feel more than admiration when they step inside.

“I want people to feel they belong. That this is part of their story, that tradition and creativity are connected, not opposed. That beauty can be sacred.”

His roots tie him to this mission. He grew up on a kibbutz, where his father helped open a synagogue. Though not religious in the tradition-



Yariv painting an animal.



A winter scene.



The finished dome.

al sense, Ben Dayan has long felt drawn to projects that carry weight – whether sacred or secular, as long as they carry meaning.

“I still do modern and decorative work. But projects like this... this is what I now seek out. Something I can leave behind. Something that lasts.”

Building with Memory

Tiferet Yisrael is not just a reconstruction. It’s a reclamation – a physical, visual, emotional restoration of dignity lost and slowly regained. Through the work of visionaries like Nisan Bak, architects like Nachum Meltzer, and artists like Yariv

Ben Dayan, the synagogue once again crowns the Jewish Quarter.

But the story is more than historical. It is a poignant reminder of how art and architecture can stitch together broken timelines, how a single dome can hold not just prayers, but also memory and longing.

“Some places remind you that beauty has a purpose,” Ben Dayan says. “That creating something for others, rooted in history, can be a kind of offering.”

In a city layered with ruins and reverence, the story of Tiferet Yisrael reminds us that not all monuments belong to the past. Some are still becoming. To trace the journey of this synagogue – from vision to ashes, and now to rebirth – is to witness how memory can take shape in stone, color, and light. It’s a story not only about a building, but about the quiet determination to restore what once gave people dignity, and to pass it on – anew – to the next generation. ■

Jay Garfinkel is a Jerusalem-based Still Life and Landscape photographer who has exhibited widely in the United States and Israel. His work has been featured in Landscape Photography Magazine and Lens Culture Magazine. To view his work, go to <https://jaygarfinkel.zenfolio.com/> © 2025 Jay Garfinkel