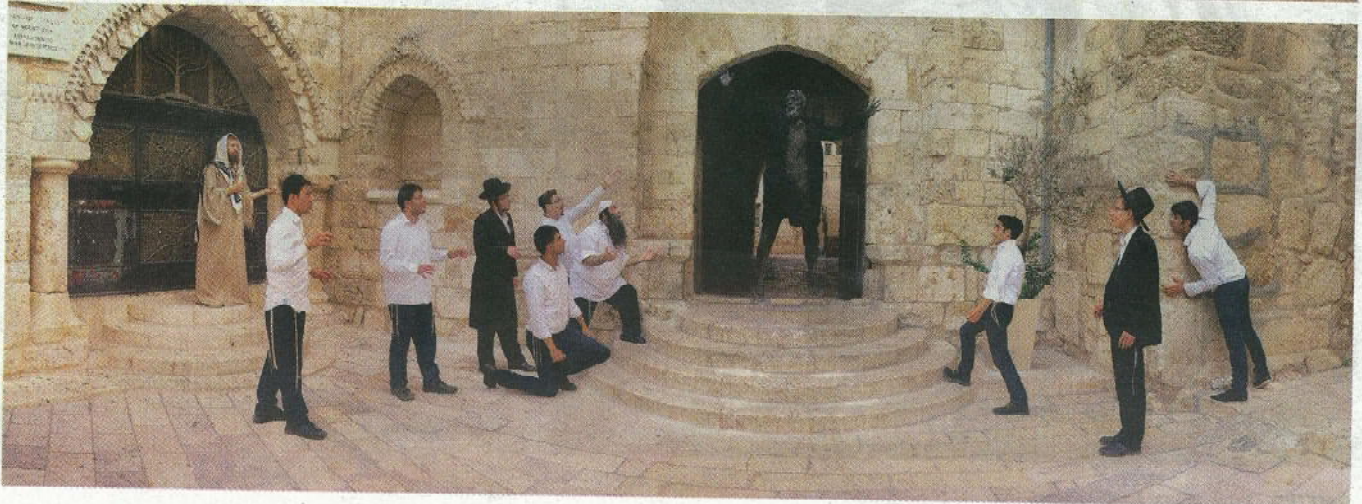
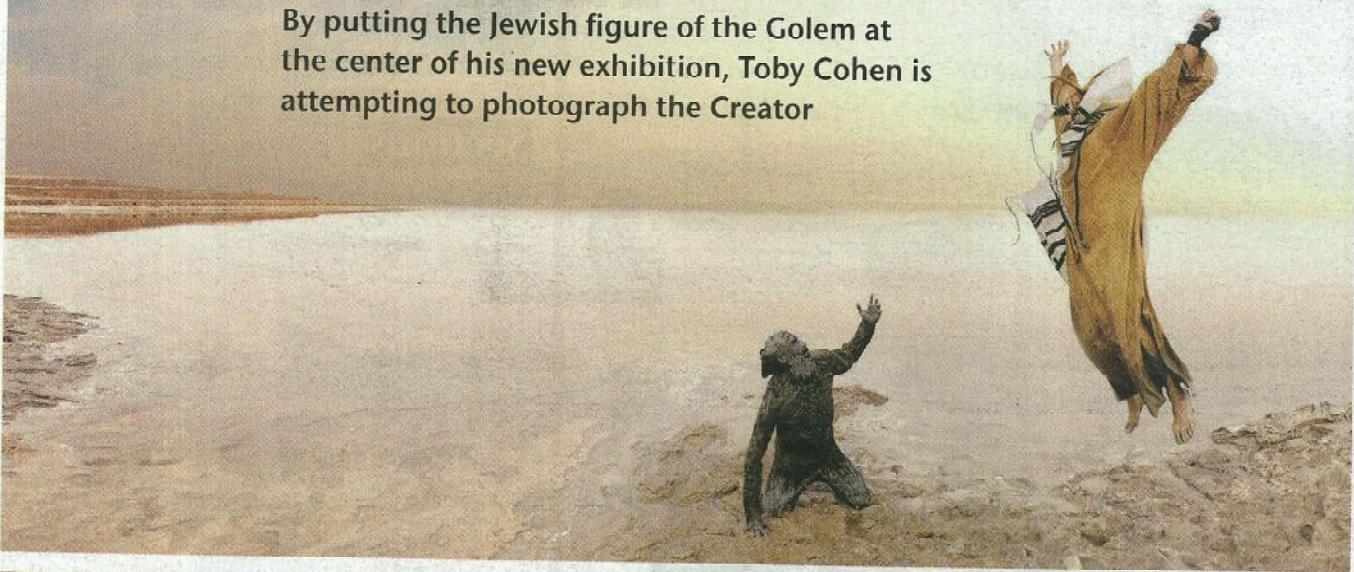


CLOSER to GOD

By putting the Jewish figure of the Golem at the center of his new exhibition, Toby Cohen is attempting to photograph the Creator



'Golem No. 2, Created'. (Photos: Toby Cohen)



Bringing back the **Golem**, one more time

Just how close can a talented artist get to photographing God?

• By CARL HOFFMAN

Toby Cohen experienced a life-changing epiphany around 10 years ago in a Jacuzzi at the Daniel Hotel in Herzliya, talking to a strange old guy named Musa. At that point in his life, Cohen was a hotshot, successful press photographer and paparazzo in his late 20s, whose photographs were already emblazoned on the front pages of such Fleet Street icons as the *Daily Express*, *News of the World*, the *Mirror*, the *Evening Standard*, and the *Independent* by the time he was 21. He photographed the rich and famous, developed professional relationships with people like David and Victoria Beckham, maintained a personal relationship with then-prime minister Tony Blair, and was building a reputation as a photojournalist whose career was rocketing

skyward. Cohen's work took him all over Europe, to India and the Andaman Islands, and eventually to Israel and his chance meeting with Musa in a Herzliya hot tub.

Cohen described the encounter when I met him in 2010.

"He must have been about 70 years old. I introduced myself. He told me in Hebrew, 'I am Musa. My father was an Arab and my mother was a Jew.' He was angry, aggressive, and condescending. He asked me what I did. I told him I was a photographer. He said, 'So you take a few pictures. Do you really think that makes you a photographer?' He then asked me if I believe in God. I replied, 'Sometimes.' He said, 'Okay, if you're such a great photographer, why don't you photograph God?' Well, the age-old argument is that anything can be God – a blade of grass, a flower. But after this encounter, I began to think

'Golem No. 7, Raged': Cohen has 'an obsessive compulsion to portray the connection between people, God and the Land of Israel in panoramic photographs.'

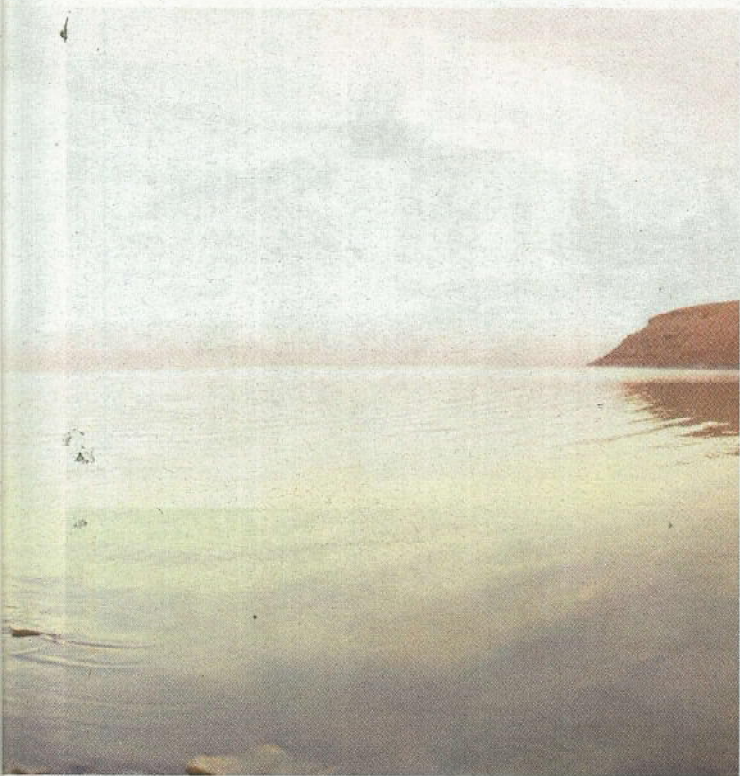


about trying to find a way to capture people connecting to God. So, through Breslov Hassidism and hassidic meditation I found people who were at the closest point to God that I had ever seen. They were meditating in nature. And that was the connection between the people, the land and God."

That was also the beginning of Cohen's obsessive compulsion to portray this connection between people, God and the Land of Israel in spectacular, highly detailed panoramic photographs. This almost irresistible compulsion led to his first solo exhibition, "Cherubim and Angels," at the Engel

Gallery in Tel Aviv in 2010. The highlight of that show was Cohen's famous *Flying Succa*, which involved assembling a team of volunteers – all personal friends – finding a location in a valley outside Safed, hiring people to build a scaffold, having the scaffold delivered by truck to the location, building the succa, putting the succa on top of the scaffold, explaining to investigating police why they were building a flying succa, rounding up a group of Hassidic musicians to sit and play music in the succa, and creating the image to be shot panoramically.

"I call my panoramics a marriage of



portraiture and landscape. These are usually two distinct disciplines," he explained to me at that exhibition.

"I try to imagine my final piece as a giant canvas, and I'm just using the camera as a paintbrush to fill in all of the spaces. The reason I do it this way instead of shooting one picture is that I'm able to retain the high details in every part of the picture. So I choose my canvas, set up my camera completely manually, set all my exposures exactly the same, wait for the right time of the day, and then boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom," he said, simulating the snapping of a shutter as

he moved his imaginary camera in an arc slowly across the room.

"I put that all together, using stitching software, Photoshop, and then I work on it afterwards. Aside from that, there's the whole magic. It's a combination of all the work and technology — and a bit of magic."

Many of Cohen's works reflect what he calls his "intense homage" to classical paintings done by old masters, so aside from the panoramic pictures, "Cherubim and Angels" also featured a photographic recreation of a 19th century painting, Maurycy Gottlieb's famous *Jews Praying in the Synagogue on*



Toby Cohen with the 'Golem suit.'
(Carl Hoffman)

Yom Kippur. Creating this photo, at a total cost of \$10,000, involved renting a theater in Herzliya; hiring an artist to build and paint a set; enlisting friends, relatives, a former girlfriend, and even his parents — flown in from London at great expense — to "play the characters" in Gottlieb's painting; not to mention rummaging around the flea market in Jaffa for old prayer books, old synagogue furnishings, and old material for costumes; and finally creating a photograph so uncannily expressive of the original painting that the Tel Aviv Museum of Art happily displayed a video of the making of the photograph just a few feet away from the actual painting.

Cohen followed this show with another solo exhibition two years later, called, "Project Abraham." As he told me at that time, "When my last exhibition finished and everything died down, I started to search for more artistic images. This time around, I've used a lot of Gustave Doré's illustrations for inspiration, as well as Rembrandt and James Tissot. Among the Doré images, the one that grabbed me the most was the idea of shooting the scene of Abraham hosting the three angels in the desert."

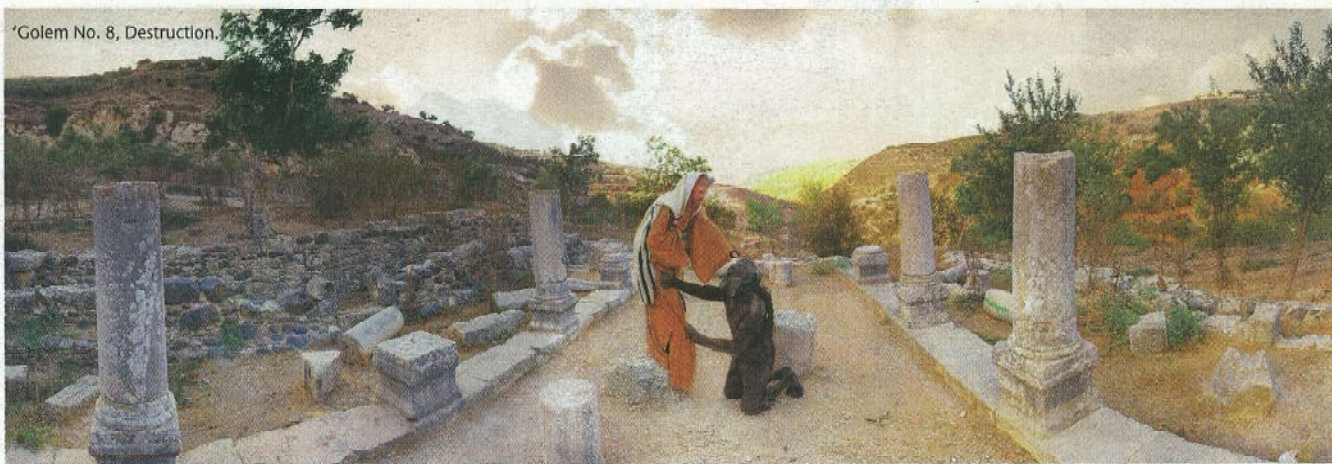
And shoot he did, rounding up his usual coterie of "mad collaborators," buying a jeep, driving into the desert, selecting the perfect tree to shelter Abraham's tent, and choosing "ac-

tors" to "play" the various personages in the Bible story — Abraham, Sarah, the three angels and Ishmael. The resulting photograph, *Abraham Hosting the Three Angels*, was both enormous in size and vividly detailed enough to allow viewers to see virtually every pebble and clump of grass, even part of a tiny green "Jaffa Oranges" supermarket sticker deliberately left on one of the oranges being offered as part of Abraham's hospitality.

After showing me other panoramic photographs, like *Abraham's Tent*, in which Cohen staged the scene of Abraham washing the angels' feet, and another variation of Abraham and the angels — this one inspired by a 1897 painting by Tissot — Cohen told me that his next project and solo exhibition would involve Moses, and that I should expect to see it soon. Almost five years went by, however, without the art world seeing this, or anything else by Toby Cohen.

Asked where he has been all this time, Cohen takes a long breath and talks of being "stuck in a black hole" around half way through his 10-picture Moses project. We have all been there at one time or another, and I do not ask for details. However, he did manage to climb out of that hole long enough to meet and marry one Natalie Tzfatti — "half Syrian and half Afghan" — and produce a baby boy, Raphael, now 14

'Golem No. 8, Destruction.'



'Golem No. 4, Dine.'



months old, "named after Raphael, the angel of health from my Abraham project series."

"How am I enjoying fatherhood?" Cohen asks rhetorically. "It's like a new drug, one I hadn't tried yet. And now that we've got that out of the way, it's time to make art."

Some of that art is on display in a new solo exhibition, called "Golem," now showing at the Engel Gallery in Tel Aviv.

"Matar Engel, curator of the exhibition, turned to me around five months ago and said, 'Okay, you've had the marriage and the baby, let's get on with some work. So we sat together and decided on the subject together, then we drew up a brief story board and narrative. Matar gave me much support, and so did my actors, who were gung-ho to help me realize my dreams. There are eight pictures in this show. You can see that I'm so gung-ho and ready to create again that we produced this exhibition in about four months.'"

There are eight pictures in this exhibition. Once again, each picture is a composite of several images, seamlessly stitched together, with every part of the final photo displaying brilliant, minute detail.

"It's not really photography," Cohen says. "It's more like a digital painting, using photography in order to help me achieve that. It's a technique I have of stitching images together that makes it almost like a 180-degree perspective yet it looks normal. It looks natural to the human eye, without any distortion."

As for the pictures themselves, Engel explains, "Unlike Toby's previous exhibitions, this one is narrative-driven. Each photograph has a place in the story, which makes one big story. It's more like a story in a book or movie than just an exhibition of photographs."

The story those pictures tell is somewhat disturbing. Most of us know the traditional story of the Golem of Prague, at least in its basic outlines. An angel appears one night to Rabbi Judah Loew, otherwise known as the Maharal, and tells him that the Christians of Prague will soon stage a pogrom and attack the Jewish ghetto. The great rabbi must use kabbalistic magic to create a golem – a man-like creature made of clay – to fight off the Christians and save the Jews of Prague. The rabbi creates the golem, the pogrom occurs as predicted, and the golem not only fights off the gentile attackers but goes into the city and begins slaughtering

gentiles by the hundreds. Appalled by his creation who has transformed from protector to public menace, the Maharal follows the trail of dead bodies, finds the golem, leads him back to the Jewish quarter, and puts him to sleep in the attic of the Altneushul, in the heart of the ghetto of Prague.

Toby Cohen's golem lives and dies in Israel, however, and tells a very different story. Arranged sequentially, the pictures document the short and unhappy life of a creation that ultimately asks his creator, 'Who am I? What am I? And do I exist for nothing more than your gratification and amusement?'

Progressing from one stunning photograph to another, we see the story – "enacted" by Cohen's friends, his wife, his 14-month-old baby, and even some yeshiva students recruited on the spot – of Rabbi Judah Loew transfixed in kabbalistic meditation, the rabbi creating the golem out of Dead Sea mud, the rabbi leaping with joy as he observes his creation, the rabbi "showing off" his creation at a Passover Seder, the golem basking like a rock star in the adoration of his fans – while the rabbi looks on sadly from the sidelines, the golem raging at the world and at his creator, and the rabbi finally leading his "menace"

back to the Dead Sea, where he puts him to sleep. The viewer – or this viewer, at least – is left wondering whether Cohen's story is really about the rabbi and the golem, or rather an allegory about God and man.

"Who am I? What am I? And do I exist for nothing more than your gratification and amusement?" Adam and Eve may have asked God questions like these when they were banished from the Garden of Eden after eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.

What's next for the newly re-energized Toby Cohen? He hopes to find a patron who will allow him to finish the Moses project. He is also working on an interpretation of the story of the Children of Israel being fed manna in the desert, and contemplating what he calls a "side project" in Africa about his interpretation of stories about the Queen of Sheba. Also on a back burner is a project on hassidim.

"I've got the energy now," he says. "I just want to wake up every morning and create art and give people the opportunity to enjoy it."

"Golem" is on display until March 10 at the Engel Gallery, 100 Ben-Yehuda Street, Tel Aviv. For more information: (03) 522-5637 or www.engel-art.co.il