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# JUF NEWS

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## *Windows on Creation*

**Temple Beth El in Northbrook  
showcases stained glass  
by artist Chana Zelig**

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## A touch of glass: Artist Chana Zelig offers windows on creation



By AARON B. COHEN  
Executive Editor

**GORGEOUS IS A WORD** Chana Zelig isn't afraid to use, and for good reason. Her latest creation—ten stained-glass windows set astride the ark in the sanctuary of Temple Beth El in Northbrook—transforms light into a serenely gorgeous revelation about fundamental ideas of Jewish ethical monotheism. Spirited, gregarious, and as articulate with words as she is with light and color, Zelig met me in the sanctuary for a conversation about her work and the well-spring of inspiration she has only begun to tap in her relatively young career as a visual artist.

Before talking I spent time looking, moving around the unlit sanctuary hoping to find an ideal viewing angle to absorb the work as a whole. Finished in beige paint and fabric with touches of warm wood and white marble, the room displayed a simple elegance even on a drab Friday morning. Yet my first feeling on seeing Zelig's windows was frustration. The windows are small, each measuring approximately 20 inches by 4.5 feet; are separated from each other by significant expanses of wall; and are recessed from both the inner and outer surfaces of the building so that they must be viewed head-on to grasp their luminescence.

Why, I wondered, had the architect of this new building provided such a small and segmented canvas for works of such radiance?

The frustration, arising from a visceral desire to be bathed in the gold-specked blues and yellows and crimsons shimmering from the windows, soon yielded to a feeling of elevation. As the meaning of the images—Hebrew letters surrounded by auras of color rising upward—began to dawn, I saw that Zelig had captured something fundamental about the human condition in relation to the divine.

Zelig knows her *midrash* (classical interpretation); she chose a motif for her work that takes clever advantage of the complicated space to make a statement about the revelation of the Ten Commandments. What is hidden,

her windows tell us, comes startlingly to light only when we are properly positioned to see it.

Raised in a fervently observant environment, Zelig has studied the Jewish wisdom tradition in the original Hebrew and Aramaic. No longer Orthodox, gorgeous is a word she uses to describe the essence of Judaism, what she calls her creative “vocabulary.”

The Beth El windows, Zelig's first foray into the medium of glass and her most important commission to date, establish the Chicago artist as a force for bringing profound ideas about faith and spirituality into public space. The synagogue—a group of people she now describes as “family”—has also hired her to produce a setting for the donor-recognition wall, which Zelig will create in textile.

Whoever the client and whatever her medium—Zelig has painted on fabric and paper (see the cover of the April 2006 issue of JUF News) as well as glass—she says her primary focus is to create an energy and an atmosphere, to produce art that can be both “a means to personal transcendence and a tribute to its cultural context.

“I want to be multicultural in my artwork; it really is all about humanity and universality,” Zelig says, “but the vocabulary to talk

about it is going to be Jewish, because that's what I think about. I like the idea of floating letters, and that words have an animate quality of their own. That's what poetry is, letters that are floating...”

**JUF NEWS: The imagery—black Hebrew letters zooming around in brilliant color—is unlike anything one associates with traditional stained glass. What inspired the concept?**

**Chana Zelig:** There's a *midrash* about Moses, that when he drops the tablets the letters fly up. Thus the letters have an animate quality to them. In the Talmud there's an image of the letters of the Ten Commandments as black fire on white fire, and in the Zohar (the fundamental work of *Kabbalah*, Jewish mysticism) there's a story that all Israel saw the letters, which were randomly flying around with sparks, and then the letters assembled themselves onto the tablets.

So you see in the windows that the letters are crowded at the bottom, and they start to get lighter and lighter as they ascend. And the color gets less dense; there's less intensity and saturation. At the very top they spell *Anochi* (I), which is the first word of the Ten Commandments.



**Did you need to walk a fine line between being too abstract and too literal?**

It's boring to be literal; also, ecclesiastic art shouldn't be so literal that it doesn't give you a chance to contemplate or to use your imagination. I wanted to inspire contemplation, but I didn't want to be so abstract that [the image] could be anything. I needed it rooted in Judaism. I also don't believe ecclesiastic art should tell a simple story, because that's a waste... I wanted to tell a story that actually is a vehicle to transcendence, which is what light is. Windows are light art; they are the art playing in light.

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Photos by  
Cheri Eisenberg



Temple Beth-El in Northbrook, with Chana Zelig's stained-glass windows.





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## ZELIG

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**Many who have left Orthodoxy seem to have thrown out the baby with the bathwater. You decided to nurture the baby, which seems unusual.**

In Judaism there's so much that's wise and meaningful and beautiful, and there's so much in me that's searching for beauty, meaning and wisdom. That's my vocabulary, and I'm not going to find it elsewhere, because anything else I do is going to be self-conscious. Judaism is what I've got; it's the way I'm wired. If I tried to become, say, a Buddhist,

## ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

I wouldn't be very successful, because it would be completely self-conscious, a completely egotistical endeavor. I would constantly be looking back on myself and saying, 'look how cool' or 'look how interesting this is' or whatever. It would be unnatural.

Judaism is the medium in which I was grown, and at a certain point you accept who you are and who you're going to be. I have to be who I am; I'm really lucky that the stuff of Judaism is beautiful, is artistic. I think about this a lot.

**What do you mean, Judaism is artistic?**

I mean that it's a tradition with a creative impulse. I think the third commandment (forbidding graven images) isn't about a distrust of visual art. Actually, it's meant to keep the tradition creative. Idolatry is when a thing or an idea that is supposed to lift you to higher thoughts gets stuck as an end in itself. An empty symbol. To avoid that the tradition insists on being 'performance art,'

which unfolds over time.

Of course, performing rituals can be idolatry too, when they become rigid. Then they're empty gestures. Or people can idolize their own, inner lives or abstractions. That's a perversion of Jewish ideas I find beautiful: that a meaningful life happens in space and in time and in common, that we have a relationship with one another that's more important than our relationship with ourselves, that there's divinity in every person, that actions matter most, and what you're feeling inside doesn't mean anything to anyone else unless you find a way to communicate it.

Oh...and bringing ethical monotheism to the world was a pretty good idea too!

Lots of what's here is gorgeous and it inspires the things I make, which validate and honor people's lives. I think that's what makes my work 'Jewish.'

**You made these windows, which were technically complex to produce, using a fabricator in Germany. That was no**

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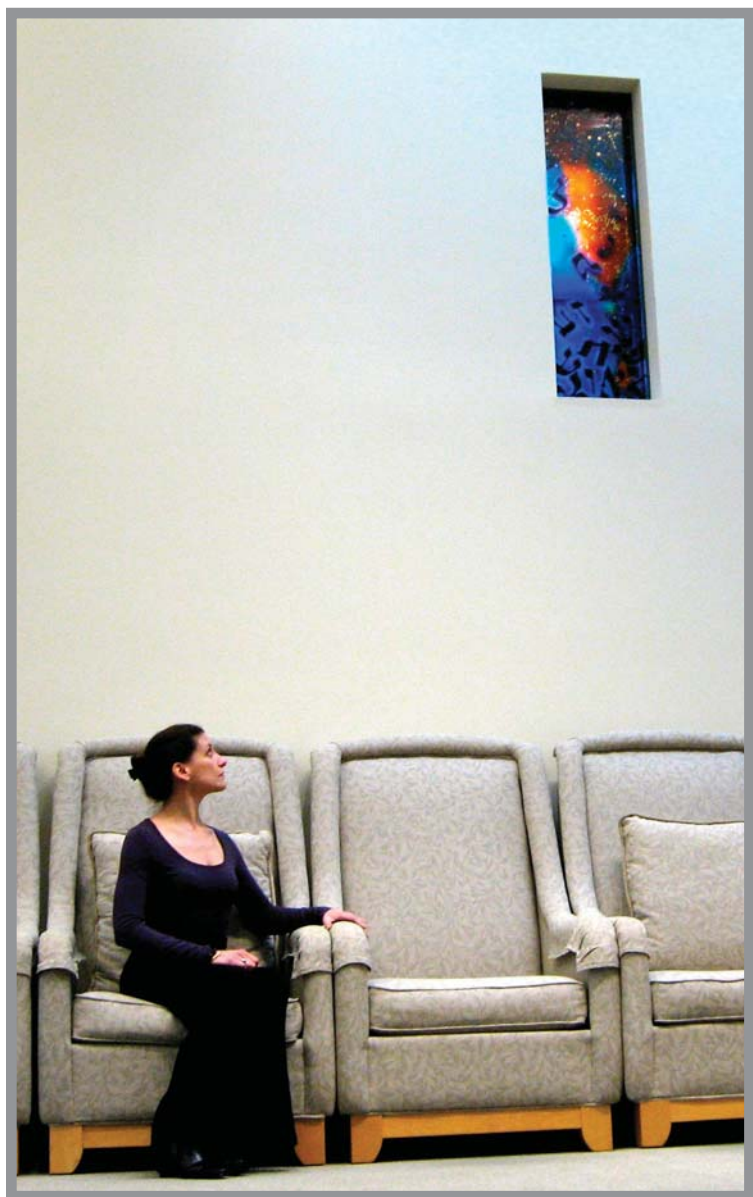
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random decision or one you took lightly. And I understand there were both pragmatic and existential reasons.

I wanted to use Derix Glasstudios because they are one of the best in the world, and also because Derix is very collegial. It's a family-owned business and they treat everyone like family. Derix is known for great public art projects, and the most astonishing techniques. Nothing like these windows exists in the world; they're unique in the way they were made.

Once I decided to work with Derix, I began to realize what it would mean to go to Germany. I grew up thinking about *Kristallnacht* (the destruction of German and Austrian synagogues on the night of Nov. 9-10, 1938), the breaking of glass in synagogues. Given that history, I thought that putting a window into a synagogue is a kind of holy act. Breaking and putting together again is a powerful image, especially in Reform Judaism (Beth El is a Reform synagogue), with its emphasis

on *tikkun olam* (repairing the world).

I wanted to be in Germany for a *chag* (Jewish holiday), and I went to the synagogue in Frankfurt, which I discovered was the only one to survive *Kristallnacht* in Germany. So I thought, I'm going to be watching people dancing with a Torah in a synagogue that has the only windows that survived, and I'm going to create synagogue glass in Germany... that feels like a huge *mitzvah*. It was one of the top Jewish experiences of my life.

**How did it feel when the windows first came out of the kiln?**

I burst into tears. They just glowed. It felt like a revelation. It was nothing, and then it was something.

**How has this experience transformed you as an artist?**

Growing up I was always very creative, but I never saw myself as an "artist." In my circle people

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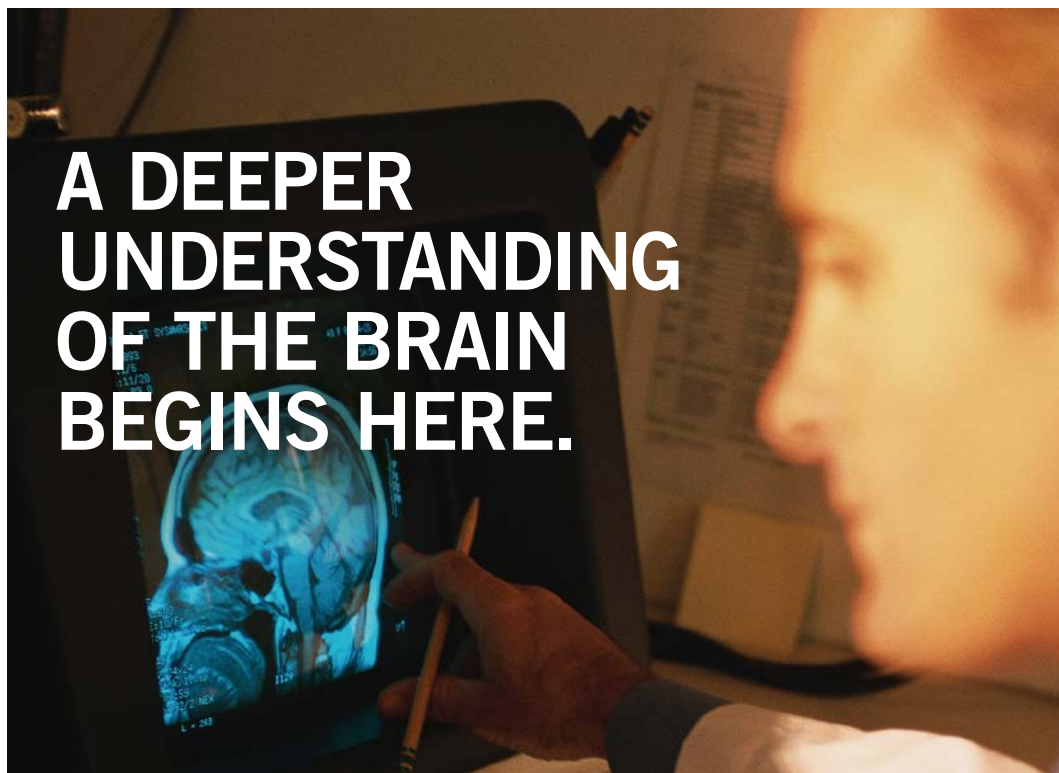
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**ZELIG**

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thought, if you’re creative, that’s “nice,” but not the one characteristic that defines your whole being. So when people would compliment me and ask, “Why don’t you *do* something with your art?” I knew they were thinking in practical terms, not in terms of who I was at my core. I also had this stereotype of the “artiste” as a broody, *schmerz*-ridden, self-obsessed person who had to express some inner anxiety that no one else could understand. I didn’t want any part of that! So when I started making

Jewish art objects, I knew they were nice and that people liked them, but I still didn’t see myself as an artist. I was simply someone who made things.

This project—having the temple put their confidence in me, having to rise to their expectations—was humbling and transforming... I now see myself not as one who makes Judaica but as an artist who’s Jewish. It’s okay to be an artist, and to have that drive, that vision, define who I am. I understand that rather than alienating me from others, it actually connects me. ■

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