



HOW THE COMMISSION PROCESS WORKS

Frequently Rabbis or Building Committee chairmen — people not generally timid — tell me that they are scared of the commission process. What they mean is that they are afraid that their congregation might end up with something expensive and not what they had in mind. This hesitation is understandable in a culture which usually buys “off the rack” and frequently on sale or with return privileges. However, commissions are designed to deliver exactly what the client wants, at a reasonable cost. The process has several stages, outlined here from the point of view of the congregation.



PRELIMINARY DECISIONS

- a) What is desired: in the short term? Is a staged plan appropriate for the longer term?
- b) Who will take responsibility for the project: the Rabbi? An existing committee? A new committee? The donor?
- c) Budget: Is there a set amount? Will it be decided with the artist? Do some informal pricing enquiries through other congregational administrators, journal ads, crafts councils, catalogues, retailers.
- d) How it will be paid for: existing funds or donor? money yet to be raised?
- e) What is the time frame? Timing is highly variable, but are frequently longer than clients anticipate.

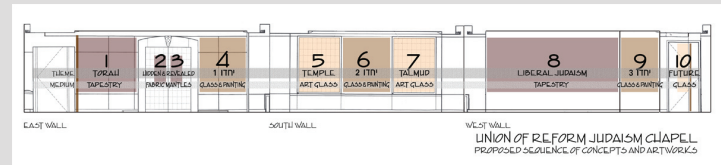
For a wedding canopy, for example, under the aegis of a volunteer committee allow at least:

- 1 month for preliminaries
- 2-6 months for choosing an artist
- 3-6 months for final design and approvals
- 4-12 months for fabrication and installation.

CHOOSING AN ARTIST

If you have already selected an artist, go to the next section. Otherwise:

- a) Formulate a letter asking artists to respond if they have an interest in your project. Ask them to submit information that they can readily supply: for example, a C.V., list of recent projects, 10-20 annotated images showing overall shots and details. Slides provide the most accurate colouring; high-resolution digital photos are the current convention. Project images on a screen in order to permit group discussion.
- b) Cast your net widely; again, other administrators, journal ads, crafts councils, will be helpful. So will finding out who did a piece you admire (even if it is not in a synagogue), or placing a call for entry in Jewish journals or the newsletters of appropriate arts organizations. Since the latter are published only a few times a year, allow adequate lead time.
- c) Review the slides. Do not plan to find “your” piece already made; rather, respond to an artist’s aesthetic sensibility and to elements in the work that feel right to you. Keep an open



mind about media, since many artists work (or have their designs fabricated by other artisans) in materials other than their primary medium.

d) Short-list 3-5 artists.

e) Interview the artists, preferably in person. Be prepared to pay travel costs. At the very least, arrange a conference call to include your committee, any staff members involved, and the artist. You are looking for someone whose ways of problem-solving and working with people inspire your confidence. Ask for references if you are prepared to check them.

Although you may explain your project to the interviewee, it is unreasonable to expect a “solution” or sketch from an artist who has not been hired nor had the chance to research and contemplate. You have much to learn, however, from the questions (s)he might ask you.



WORKING WITH YOUR ARTIST

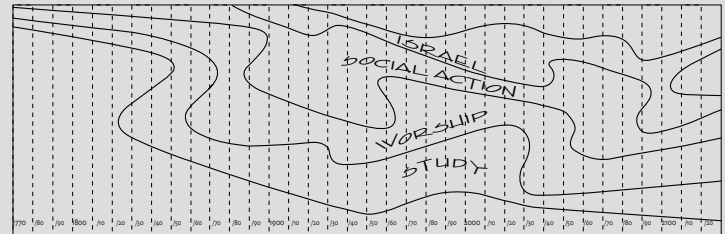
a) A site visit is well worth any costs involved. Your congregation has many “pulses”; you certainly expect your doctor to examine yours before recommending action!

Assemble helpful information such as architectural drawings, archival material, furnishing samples.

Establish who will be the primary contact. Discuss the desired time frame and budget.

b) The next stage—developing a concept, producing a model or rendering, selecting materials, testing techniques—is crucial. The artist will work with your information, so make sure your input is complete and accurate. Both of you are now committed to working together.

At this point most artists charge for their time. Determine if the formal presentation is a separately billed item or if it is included in the project. Clarify what the cost will be if, after the





URJ CHAPEL TORAH MANTLES
HIDDEN AND REVEALED
FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN

presentation, you decide not to proceed with the commission.

c) The artist should make a presentation to the client in person in order to receive and respond to feedback. (S)he will likely bring drawings, samples of materials, perhaps a scale model.

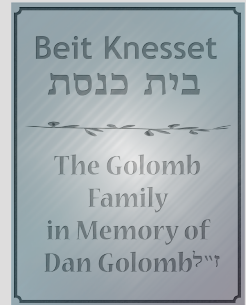
The presentation is sometimes stressful, since both client and artist have been nurturing separate mental pictures. Also, the rendering may be somewhat vague or impressionistic, often intentionally. This is in part because of the impossibility of translating a large three-dimensional object into a small-scale drawing, in part because many rich details develop in the course of actualizing the work.

Minor revisions may be suggested and incorporated without further ado, allowing approval to be given, deposit paid, and allow the project to proceed. The artist may draft a letter of understanding defining the project, time frame, payment schedule, etc., and both parties sign this. The rendering and samples generally remain the property of the artist.

d) Like childbirth, the delivery and installation of a commission is often highly charged and involves much supportive waiting. Keep curious onlookers to a minimum during installation. Staff may need to be coached on correct set-up, storage and maintenance of a piece. through demonstration and written instructions.

e) When client and artist are satisfied, everyone, including the congregation, usually welcome something that provides a sense of closure, such as a dedication ceremony, photo shoot, or bulletin article.

But most of all . . . *shep naches* from your commission for many years!



IMAGES ARE FROM THE GOLOMB CHAPEL AT URJ IN NEW YORK. PHOTOS ON PAGE 1: TORAH MANTLES, BEADING DETAIL, SECTION OF "REFORM JUDAISM" SCULPTURAL TAPESTRY. OTHER IMAGES ARE PRESENTATION RENDERINGS.



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