

To paint? To lead as a rabbi? What to do?

Rabbi David Greenstein, about to retire from his pulpit, talks about not having to choose

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March 30, 2022, 7:59 pm



Rabbi David Greenstein stands in front of "Thirteen Petalled Rose," a 2021 work made of a metal tallit collar, paper, oil on paper, mesh, aluminum foil, pipe cleaner, wire, string, paper filling, cloth petals, plastic beads, and feathers. (Nick Levitin)

It's not as if interviewing Rabbi David Greenstein for two hours can provide an interviewer with any real insight into who he is as a person, Rabbi David Greenstein helpfully pointed out at the end of a two-hour interview.

He's entirely right. Even once you've gotten beyond the true-if-clichéd observation that nobody can ever really know anybody, it's still true that it's impossible to know anybody after two hours on the phone.

But it's also true that an interviewer knows more about Rabbi Greenstein after that interview-closing comment than she would have otherwise.

So, with that as a preamble — that necessarily this will be an entirely incomplete introduction to a very complex man — reader, please meet Rabbi David Greenstein.

This is an opportune time to meet him. After 13 years as the rabbi of Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Montclair, he's retiring. And now — and for the next few weeks — some of his artwork, along with pieces by local artist Harriet Finck, are hanging in the shul's Upstairs Gallery.

Those two facts — that he's a rabbi, and that he's a painter — are two of the main threads in Rabbi Greenstein's life. Sometimes they are at odds with each other, sometimes the work together well, and always they keep him busy. Very very busy.

Rabbi Greenstein's connection to Judaism goes back as far as he can remember. "God gave me a love for Torah," he said. "And I had no choice. God gave me what God gave me."

His paternal grandfather, Zvi Greenstein, was "loving and wise and a great teacher," Rabbi Greenstein said. "He had been many things over the course of his life."

Zvi Greenstein was born in Lithuania, "was a yeshiva bochur, very learned, very promising, and then he ran away to Israel, made aliyah, in 1909." That lasted until 1913 when he came to the United States. David's father, Joseph, was born in this country; Joseph's father always meant to go back to Israel, "but life happened," his grandson said. "When I knew him, he was the age I am now, and he was an ancient, ancient man." More prosaically, he owned a candy store in Richmond Hill, Queens, where he lived with his wife, Frieda.



Wavelength, 2018; oil on canvas, plastic eye patch, mesh, plastic, and shawl hem. (Nick Levitin)

Young David and his grandfather "spent a lot of time studying together, speaking Hebrew together. He gave me the great gift of comfort with Hebrew, and he gave me the chance to experience our great tradition together."

David's father also was consumed with Judaism, but his relationship with it was less straightforward. He was a rabbi, a Jewish educator, and a Jewish communal worker, but he loved his tradition more than he cared to live by all of its strictures. "He was very iconoclastic," his son said. "He was basically an apikoros," a heretic. Nonetheless, he taught at YU's education school. "He was a consummate educator."

David Greenstein was born in Jersey City but the family moved to Bayside, Queens, and then on to Long Island fairly quickly. "My father was a very forceful person and wasn't always easy to get along with," his son said. They lived in Baldwin, on the Island, and then moved to Brooklyn; "my father's last career was as executive director of the Boro Park Y."

Joseph Greenstein insisted that his son get a traditional Jewish education, so as he grew up and as the family moved, David went from the Hebrew Academy of North Queens, to the Hebrew Academy of Nassau County — HANC — to MTA, Yeshiva University's boys school in upper Manhattan, and then on to Yeshiva University itself. "I was being groomed to be a rabbi," he said. "I loved learning Talmud, so I thought of being a Talmud teacher, not a congregational rabbi. Of being a rosh yeshiva."

Rabbi Greenstein's religious affiliation could have gone in at least two directions. All of his education was in modern Orthodox institutions, but his father, despite his choice of schools for his son, was not modern Orthodox. Or any other kind of either big-O or small-o Orthodox, for that matter.

"My father constantly presented a challenging picture to me," Rabbi Greenstein said. "It was a constant in-my-face struggle. Here was a man who knew what he was doing, cared passionately for what he was doing for Judaism and the Jewish people, knocking himself out doing that, but not abiding by the official rules.

"There was a dissonance there. My father was a tremendous man, and I loved him tremendously, and I respected him.

"It was a real gift for me. He expanded my sense of possibilities, humanly and Jewishly and in relationships. When I was younger, I was angry. In the end, I was very grateful to him.

But before he got to the gratitude, "the way I rebelled was that I became Orthodox," Rabbi Greenstein said. "Instead of doing drugs, I did Torah."



Curtain III, 2019; oil on canvas, oil on paper, fabric, wire, and mesh. (Nick Levitin)

Rabbi Greenstein's mother, Esta, grew up in a Syrian family from which she became estranged. "Both my parents lived through the Depression and knew terrible poverty. She came from a family that was dirt poor. And as a girl and then as a woman, she was not given the support she needed; she got her support from outside the family." Although she was estranged from the culture, still she spoke Arabic with her sisters, Rabbi Greenstein added.

"She also was the wife of a Jewish educator, who made bupkis, so she was always knocking herself out," he said; she worked in real estate, for the city housing authority, and then as an arranger who brought groups to Israel.

The family was very Zionist, he added.

Meanwhile, David grew up loving art, and his school recognized his talent. "Teachers would show my parents, 'Oh, look, David made this picture of a boat, and look, it has a little perspective to it.'" He now realizes what a powerful difference a good art teacher can make.

"So I knew that I loved making art," he said, but once he got to MTA, which had "a required art class that was really deadly. It was the worst. So as an artist, I went into hibernation."

In 1970 — a time before the Orthodox world began sending rising college freshman off on gap year trips to Israel — Rabbi Greenstein took a still fairly uncommon but not unheard of junior year abroad. He went to Israel. “This is the part of the story that everyone loves hearing,” he announced, as he embarked on it.

“I went to Kerem B’Yavneh. It’s a well-known hesder yeshiva, the first one. The yeshivas always start in the month before Rosh Hashanah — Elul z’mán. It was August, and I am starting to get antsy, and there was an extraordinary man there, Rabbi Chaim Lifshitz, and there was an extraordinary man there, Rabbi Chaim Lifshitz, an Israeli-born psychologist who later moved to Switzerland and studied with Piaget, and also “did some sculpture on the side,” Rabbi Greenstein reported. He also was the yeshiva’s mashgiach ruchani, its spiritual adviser.

“I told him that I wanted to leave the yeshiva; it wasn’t really for me,” Rabbi Greenstein said. So Rabbi Lifshitz asked David Greenstein to draw a picture of a tree and write a story, for diagnostic purposes. And it worked. He saw that his student was depressed, and that he really could draw a tree. So he devised a schedule that saw Rabbi Greenstein skip the daily siesta — because Israel is a Mediterranean country, and it was a slower time — and use that time to make art.

That worked, more or less. And then Rabbi Greenstein went to Jerusalem during the post-Sukkot break, and he met a “woman who was very intriguing, and who was hanging out with my friends in their apartment, and we got to talking.” Her name was Zelda, and, reader, you can guess the rest of it. She was Zelda Tauber then, she was from Brooklyn, she was Orthodox, and for the last 50 years she’s been Zelda Greenstein.



Standard, 2021; oil on canvas, silver mylar, wire, packaging, grommets, screws, and hair bands. (Nick Levitin)

The couple went back to the States after that year — he back to YU, she back to Brooklyn College — and they got married in Queens. “Our first couch was from the foam rubber packing for the mirrors of the brand-new catering hall where we got married,” he said.

David and Zelda, both very socially conscious, became part of a chavurah as soon as they moved back. “It was rooted in YU, and we were trying to pay attention to the problem of poverty on the Lower East Side,” he said. They moved downtown, started an independent minyan, and “to set the record straight, we were the founders, with this group of people, of Project Ezra,” Rabbi Greenstein said. “I made up the name because of the meaning of the word ezra, to help or protect, and in commemoration of Ezra as a rejuvenating figure in Jewish life. We had high hopes that we were going to be some kind of new, cutting-edge Jewish community.”

The earnest young couple worked downtown for a number of years. “I was basically an uncredentialed social worker and ba’al tefilah,” service leader, Rabbi Greenstein said.

He graduated from YU, earned a master’s degree in Talmud, studying under Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, began the smicha program at RIETS, YU’s rabbinical seminary, and then dropped out of it. “It wasn’t for me,” he said about that program, as he’d said about Kerem B’Yavneh years earlier.

Instead, he did art; after a year at the Art Students League, he went to the New York Studio School, which basically “was an art yeshiva,” he said, demanding the same fierce dedication. It was a very pure place — it was founded by people who’d left Cooper Union because they thought it had sold out and gone too commercial — “and the only thing that you could do at the Studio School was drawing, painting, and sculpture, all day long. For half a day you drew, and then for the other half a day you sculpted or painted.

“God forbid you were a photographer...

“As an ex-yeshiva-bochur, it was perfect for me. It was great. It was super great. I loved it.” He loved it so much that he was there from 1973 until 1977.

Meanwhile Zelda, who also was trying to figure out what she wanted to do and who she wanted to be, became a documentary film editor. “She’s terrific,” David said. “Some of the movies she’s edit are ‘Praying With Lior,’ and ‘Hiding and Seeking.’” Most but not all of them are somehow Jewish, he added.

As they practiced their art, the Greensteins continued to work in the community, but it was not an easy way to live. They didn’t mind, though; they had a goal. They planned to make aliyah.



Zelda and David Greenstein stand in front of one of his paintings. (Nick Levitin)

They went to Israel in 1978, right after David’s first one-man show, at the Educational Alliance, closed.

“We stayed for four years,” he said. “We failed miserably in our attempt to live there.” At that point in Israel’s history, it was possible to be religious or to be secular. There was no bridge between those worlds. And both David and Zelda, to different degrees, had left Orthodoxy. They no longer could be religious in the way they were expected to be in Israel, but they didn’t want to be secular either. It was hard. “I was a totally incomprehensible person who wanted both,” Rabbi Greenstein said. “And I ended up not fitting in anywhere.”

When they got back to New York, Rabbi Greenstein — who also always loved to sing, and has a voice that other people love to listen to — supported himself as a chazan as he earned a master’s degree in art at Queens College. He was getting back into Jewish life, and he was continuing to paint.

In 1989, the Greensteins had a child, Yonah Zvi; his middle name is in memory of Rabbi Greenstein's grandfather, and his first name "is after the Book of Yonah," Jonah, "because it is about the impossibility of running away from God. I tried and I tried and I tried and I tried and I didn't succeed. I failed in running away from God."

When Yonah was about 3, his parents, as they considered where to send him to school, founded one. It was called the Gesher School — gesher means bridge — "because it was near the Brooklyn Bridge, and it was to bridge the gap between the modern world and our Jewish heritage. (Soon, the school would change its name and become the Hannah Senesh Community School. It's flourishing under that name today.)

Through his work with the school, he met Sammy Barth, who then was the rabbi of the Park Slope Jewish Center and dean of the Academy for Jewish Religion. "He told me that AJR was a pluralistic, independent rabbinical school, and I said that I wanted to teach there. I had a master's degree in Talmud, and it sounded like the place I had been looking for my entire life.

"And he said, 'You can't teach there. You're not a rabbi.'"

At that point, Rabbi Greenstein was the chazan at the New Hyde Park Jewish Community Center, a small synagogue just east of the border between Queens and Nassau County. The rabbi there died of a heart attack between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in 1993, during Rabbi Greenstein's third year there. "They came to me and said, 'We want you to be our rabbi.' It was the furthest thing from my mind. It wasn't for me. And they said, 'Look, we know you. We know that you can be our rabbi. We want you to be our rabbi.' At that point I had to take it.

"So, 20 years after I ran away from it, it caught up with me."



Zelda and David Greenstein walk in the Celebrate Israel parade in Manhattan in 2014.

Rabbi Greenstein was ordained at the Academy for Jewish Religion in 1996. He taught there, he worked there as a dean and as rabbi in residence on and off until 2009.

The Academy is nondenominational. That's fine in theory but can be hard in practice.

"The rule at the time was that if you wanted to apply to a synagogue, you had to be part of a movement," Rabbi Greenstein said. "I wasn't Reform. I was very traditional. And I wasn't Orthodox. I had a job at a shul that had dropped out of United Synagogue" — in other words, it was Conservative in practice but was no longer affiliated officially with the movement — "so it wasn't bound by those rules, but I decided that I had to join the Conservative movement."

There was a whole process involved in being able to join the Rabbinical Assembly, but Rabbi Greenstein did join it. The last step was an in-person interview in front of a large committee. "They asked me why I wanted to join the

Conservative movement, when you are such a pluralist. And I answered that it is the one movement that I don't fit into the least."

Back at the New Hyde Park Jewish Community Center, which was struggling — its neighborhood had stopped being particularly Jewish some time earlier — "there was nothing left when I got there. No young people. No Hebrew school. No nothing. That was a blessing in disguise. I could try to create something from scratch.

"So I created Project Elijah; the idea of Elijah as the one who will restore the parents to their children and their children to their parents."

The parent education project that replaced regular Hebrew school "grew, with tremendous dedication and help from the members, until the congregation couldn't sustain it anymore. We were small — by the time we closed we had 80 members — and yet, to sing their praises, we had a daily minyan because the younger people who came, attracted to the family education program, had such a sense of devotion and connection that as they saw that the elders no longer were around, they stepped up and took turns coming in.

"They kept it going until the last day. I am awed by the dedication of that community. It was exceptional."

Eventually, demographics trumped dedication, and the small shul had to merge with a much larger, blandly suburban-model one not far away. But Rabbi Greenstein, like other members of the community, remembers the real, hand-built, homemade sense of community with love and pride.



Rabbi Greenstein stands in front of one of his paintings, *Curtain III*, from 1993. It's hanging at Shomrei Emunah. (Nick Levitin)

"In 2009, we moved to Montclair to be part of this amazing community," he said.

During much of the time that he has been a pulpit rabbi, Rabbi Greenstein stopped painting. "I was painting until my father got terminally ill," he said. He'd had a studio in Williamsburg, "but all of my time was spent driving back and forth" to be with his father. And it's expensive to maintain a studio that you can't use. "So I closed down the studio, and I just reconciled myself to the fact that I was doing something that directly affected people" — rabbi-ing — "as opposed to my art, which wasn't relevant to anyone except me.

“But then, in 2011, Hurricane Irene happened. Devastating flooding got our house and garage.” The garage had housed all the family’s junk, “but I’d occasionally look at it, and think that it would be such a great studio.” But he hadn’t done anything about it, and the flood turned everything in the garage to mucky garbage.

“In 2013, Zelda and I went to Europe for a vacation, and Yonah picked us up from the airport. It’s like midnight, and he tells me, ‘Dad, I want to show you something in the garage,’ and my heart sinks. So we walk down the long road to the garage, and he opens the garage door, turns on the light, and it is completely clean. He and his best friend had hauled out 50 garbage bags full of junk, and he put up 10 Ikea shelves.

“Yonah is totally not handy. He doesn’t have 10 thumbs. He has 10 pinkies. He doesn’t know which end of the hammer to hold.” But he and his friend cleaned out the entire garage, and turned it into a studio.

“So for the last nine years, thanks to the wonderful thing my son did, I have been able to steal some time for art,” Rabbi Greenstein said.

Yonah lives in Harlem now; “he helps disadvantaged youth succeed in school and get into college. He loves basketball, has been a passionate basketball lover forever, and he uses basketball as a hook.

“He started his own program, called Dream to Achieve, and now he’s working for iMentor.”

Yonah loves basketball so much, his father said, that he chose his college — Bard — based on where he could be on the basketball team. He’s 5 foot 9, so the opportunities weren’t infinite, but “Bard is an artsy-fartsy school so he was a starter on Day 1, and was team captain for his junior and senior years. He started Dream to Achieve and got Bard to donate its campus for the summer program so kids could spend a week in the dorms, at this beautiful campus, and get a taste of a different kind of life.

“He is a terrific, amazing, amazing person.”

And, his proud father reported, Yonah is getting married.

When he retires from Shomrei Emunah, he and Zelda will leave Montclair, Rabbi Greenstein said. “I think it’s a good idea for the shul, for its transition, for us to leave,” he said. He plans to “paint a lot,” he said. “I’ll be painting and teaching and writing.” He’s already written a book, “Roads to Utopia: Walking Stories of the Zohar,” published by Stanford University Press, and he plans to write more.

Turning to the paintings now up at the shul, Rabbi Greenstein said that although he used to paint large pieces, now he creates smaller ones. “Painting big was part of how I felt connected to the work,” he said. “But for years I’ve had to paint on a catch-as-catch-can basis, so I had to develop a different way of working.

“I paint with oils, not acrylics. I love the slowness and the muckiness of it.”

He incorporates found objects into his work now. “I have always been interested in collecting junk,” he said. “This is one of my main philosophical epiphanies. This is my wisdom. Not everything in the garbage is garbage, and not everything not in the garbage is not garbage. So I like to find things.

“I know that everything has a history. Nobody knows everything. Really, nobody knows anything. We can just get hints of things that point to something way beyond what we can know or understand.

“There is a gemara about this. The Torah says that you should show honor and respect to an old person. But who is an old person? Who counts? Is it anybody who is old, or just someone who has earned a position of respect?

“One of the sages would stand up before any old person, and would exclaim, ‘How many life adventures has this person gone through?’ He doesn’t know what the adventures are, he just knows that this is a wrinkled, beaten-up old being, who has been through adventures. To know just that is to know a lot.”

That means that there is much more about Rabbi Greenstein that I don't know than I do know, or that I possibly can know, much less put in a newspaper feature. That's an unassailable truth.

But that doesn't mean that I don't know enough to be able to honor him, to retell that miniscule percentage of his stories that he told me, or to go look with delight at the art, whose stories and histories are closed to me but whose beauty is both open and apparent to me, and to everyone else who goes to look at them.

The Upstairs Gallery at Shomrei Emunah is open when the shul is open; the exhibit most likely will be up through the spring.

The art up now is by Rabbi David Greenstein and Harriet Finck, who lives in Montclair and works in Manufacturer's Village in East Orange.

This is what Ms. Finck says about her art:

"I describe what I do as 'organic abstraction.' I am interested in growth patterns, mineral, vegetable, at various scales. Tiny forms coalesce; large ones disintegrate.

"Layered upon this is an attraction to Jewish texts, a trove that occupied a dusty old geniza in my brain, until I opened it one day with the help of an Artists Beit Midrash at my shul in Teaneck.

"I love to access this archive and let the words fly out.

"They join my swarms and particles; the old stories, the polished sentences. The loaded phrases ("and Aaron was silent" !) break down, crack open, and, I hope, reveal new meanings.

"An old friend, Helene Aylon, made a piece for the Jewish Museum called "the Liberation of G-d." Liberation indeed. To rescue the precious texts from rigidity; it is a delicious activity, subversive and, ultimately, respectful; an homage."

Shomrei Emunah, at 67 Park Street in Montclair, invites the community to come see the art of Harriet Finck and Rabbi David Greenstein.