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The Ketubah Art of Albe

"I couldn't be like them." Albert Hakakian left the decadent world of New York artists to pursue holy creations

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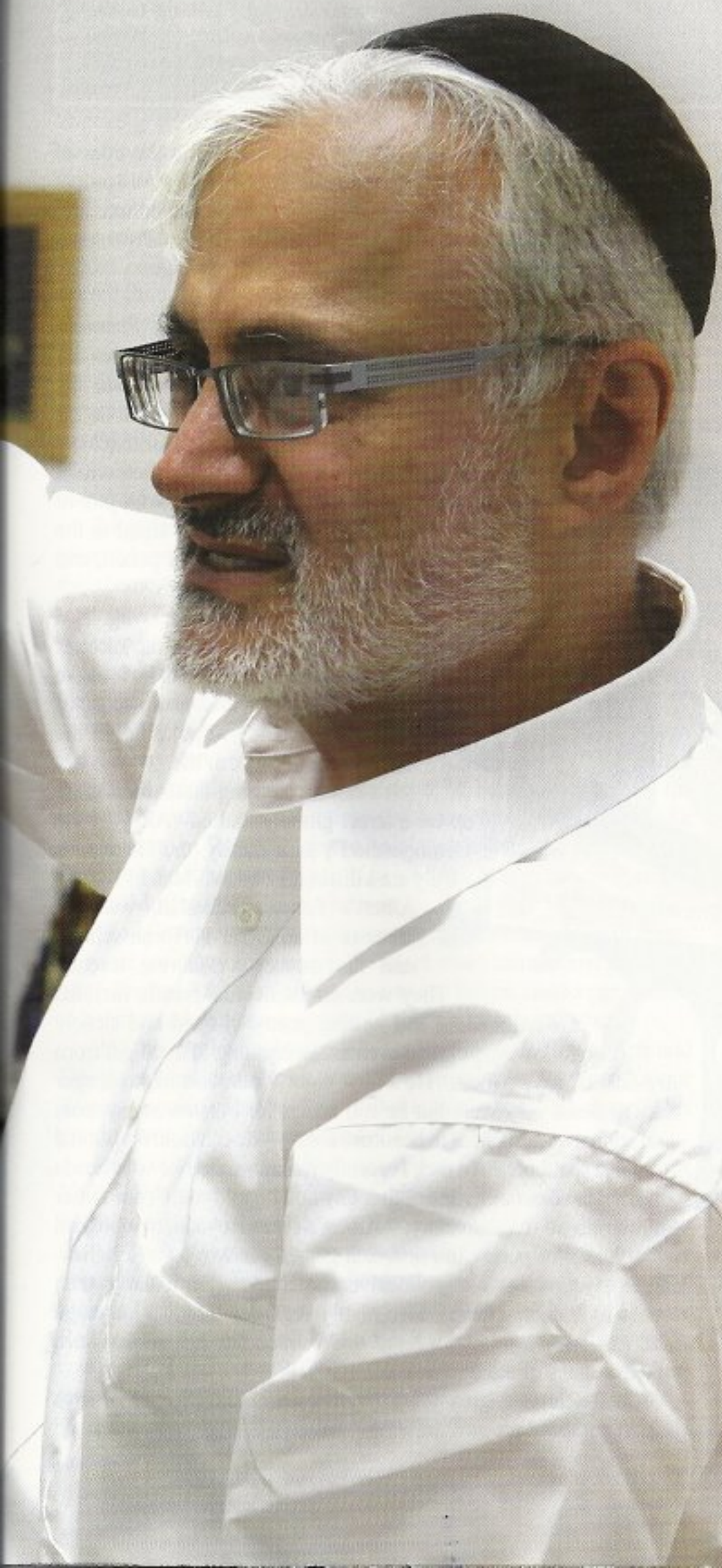


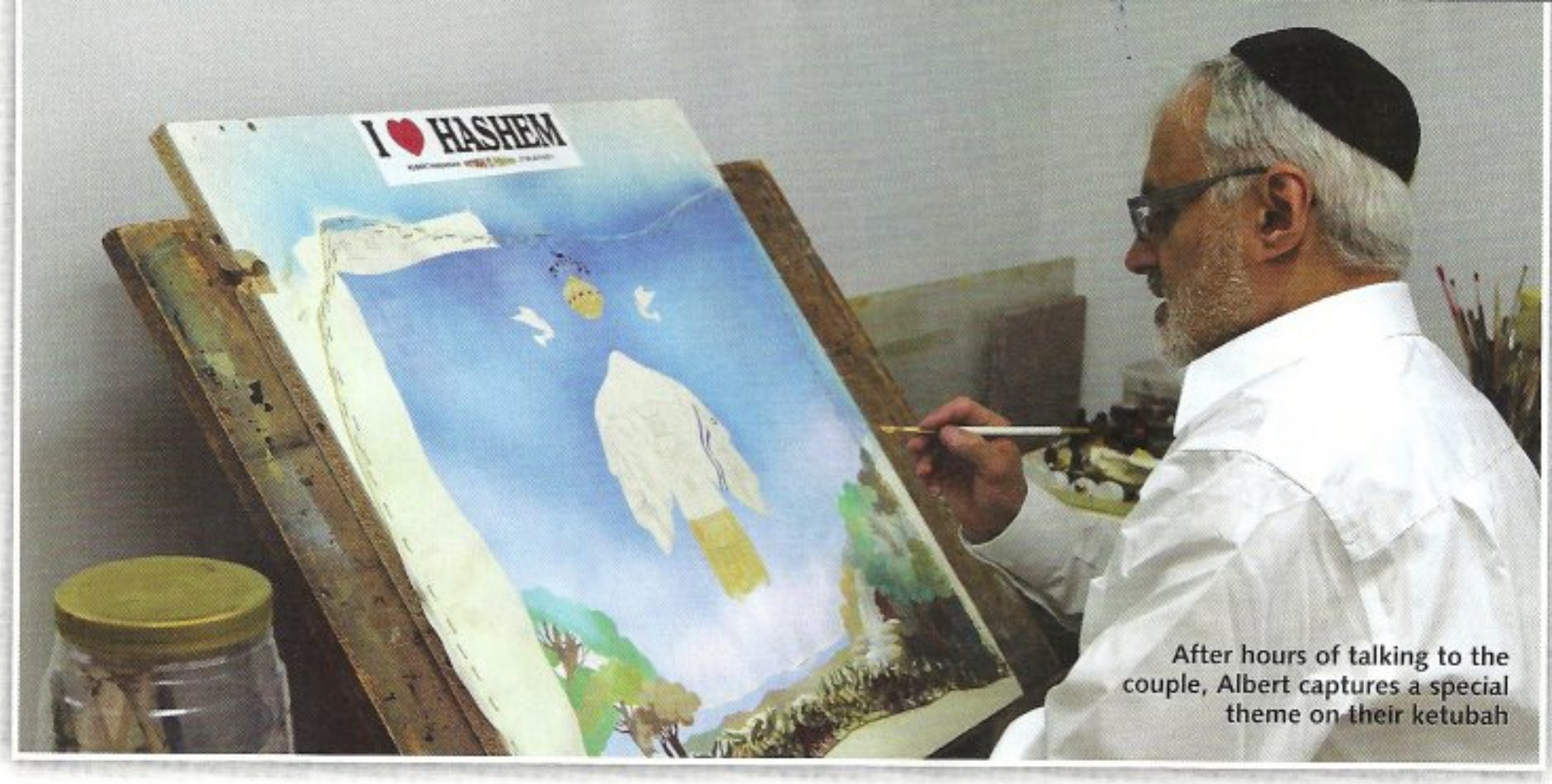
Couples from around the world come to him, looking for a ketubah that is not simply a legal document, but a work of art reflecting the deep commitment of their hearts. "A ketubah is a sacred contract," says artist Albert Hakakian. "I want to portray spiritual concepts in a way that is fresh, imaginative, personal, and holy; I want to create a ketubah that's beautiful in Hashem's Eyes." But Albert's ketubahs are more than just illuminated parchment. Since he's frequently approached by couples with little religious background, he has become a spokesman for the significance and sanctity of Jewish marriage

Barbara Bensoussan

Photos: Menachem Kozlovsky

After twenty-five years in the business, Tehran-born artist Albert [Aharon] Hakakian is now able to say with a shake of the head, "A ketubah is never just a ketubah." When Albert embarks on one of his personalized, one-of-a-kind ketubah commissions, it becomes not just an artistic endeavor, but a meeting of minds with his clients, and a vehicle for raising their Jewish awareness.

Hakakian attracts clients from coast to coast and even abroad — he recently created a ketubah for a customer from the 850-member Jewish community of Singapore. People come to him entranced by his portfolio of vividly colored, exquisitely detailed ketubahs



After hours of talking to the couple, Albert captures a special theme on their ketubah

produced for those who desire to own a ketubah that is not simply a legal document, but a work of art reflecting the deep commitment of their hearts. Drawing on his Torah knowledge, his familiarity with the art world, and his interviews with engaged couples, Albert melds his impressions and inspirations into unique masterpieces destined to become family heirlooms. "For me," he says, "a blank parchment represents infinite possibility."

A glimpse through Albert's portfolio displays the range of his vision. Some of his ketubahs, embellished with architectural details, intricate floral designs, and Biblical figures, recall the lavish Italian ketubahs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Others are colored in deep, vivid hues and employ more modern imagery, from tulips to guitars to wedding bands. Arabesques, *hamsas*, elaborate borders, and script in Farsi give a distinctly Oriental feel to some of the ketubahs created for Sephardic customers.

Albert didn't expect to devote himself to producing ketubahs while growing up in Iran. Born into a traditional family, he might have happily continued producing paintings and cartoons and adhering to the basics of Judaism, without feeling any particular compulsion to intensify his observance. But the tides of unrest that culminated in the Iranian Revolution of 1979 would propel him out of that familiar and beloved circle of family and culture into an entirely new world, where it was necessary to forge his own path and listen ever more closely to the promptings of his soul.


The essence of evil?


With Rav Avigdor Miller, *ztz"l*.
A longing for more *kedushah*

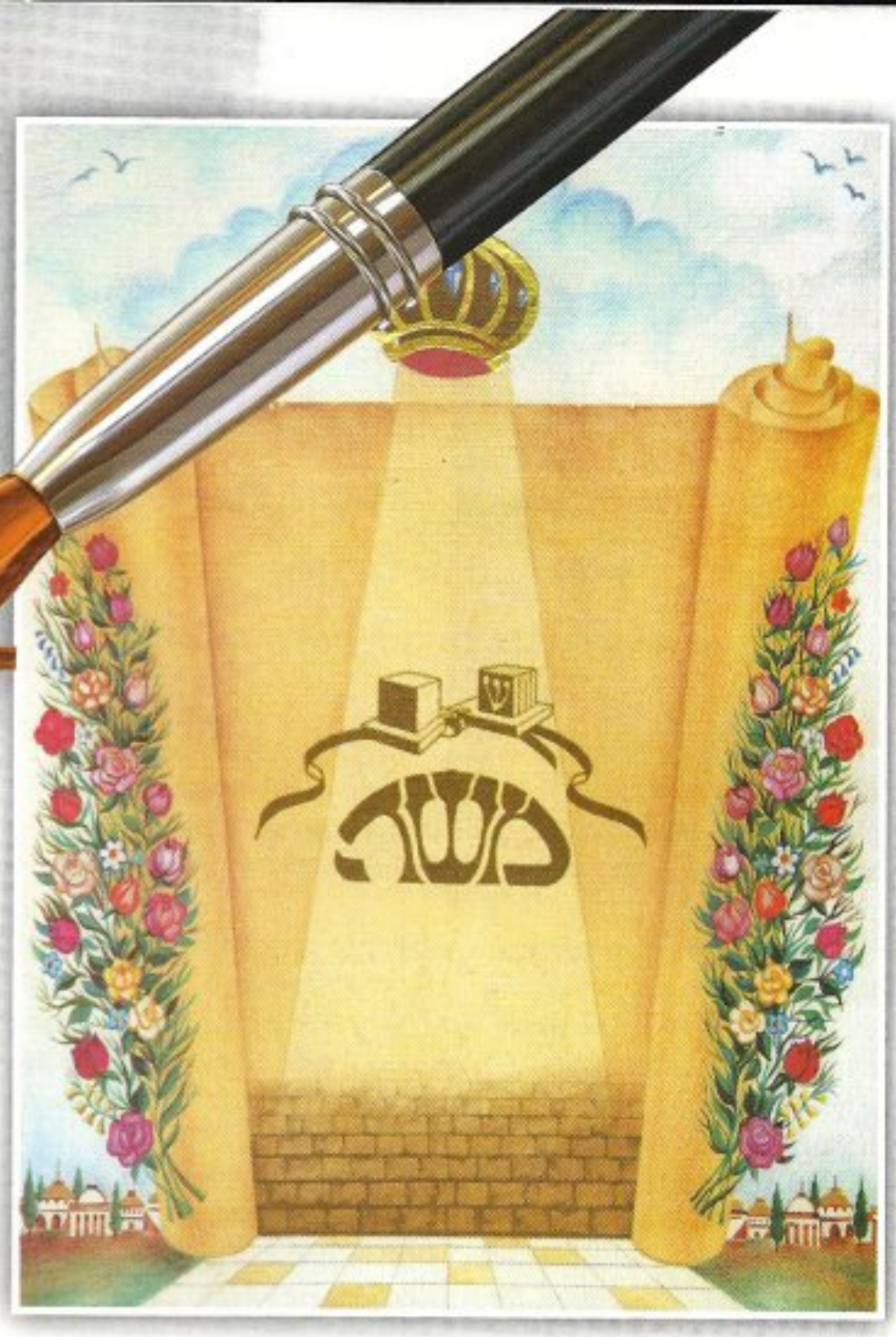
Time to Leave Albert receives us in his home in Flatbush, a modest house in a side street off Avenue L. A few canvases lay stacked against one wall; other paintings, framed, decorate the living and dining room space. He shows us his studio near the back of the house, an immaculate space painted bright white and furnished with a drafting table and a stand crowded with jars of brushes and paints. A ketubah lies taped to the drafting table, partially sketched in pencil, and partially filled in with brilliant colors.

Albert has a reserved, dignified demeanor that goes beyond the niceties of Persian good manners. But he is also a former cartoonist with a sharp sense of humor, ever ready to poke fun at the absurdities of modern life.

It's not for nothing that Albert grew up on a street grandly named "Alley of the Distinguished"; as a family, the Hakakians truly are a distinguished lot. Back in Tehran, Albert's father, Yecheskel, was the director of an Otzar HaTorah school, and his mother a Hebrew teacher. They were an intellectual bunch, inclined toward reading and writing poetry in Farsi and closely following political events. "Everything I have I get from my father," says Albert. "He's now eighty-four, and he no longer sees or hears very well, but he still writes for Persian newspapers and addresses audiences in beautiful Farsi — he can hold traditional Iranians spellbound. In fact, I recently ran into someone who heads an Iranian community in another city and he told me, 'Your father still writes so magnificently.'" Albert's sister Roya also published two volumes of poetry in Farsi, and gained renown as an English-language journalist and political commentator (particularly with respect to Iranian affairs). Her highly regarded English-language memoir, *Journey from the Land of No*, recounts her adolescence amid the chaos of the Iranian Revolution.

Albert's artistic gifts were evident early on. "I was always passionate about art and drawing," he says. "When I was around

"Sometimes I convince people to change rabbis — there are certain shuls and rabbis I won't work with. In the Iranian community, unfortunately, there's been a certain polarization between the people who remained traditional and those who became more religious"



bar mitzvah age, the queen of Iran sponsored an art competition in Tehran — she herself had studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, and she was trying to orient Iran toward the West." Albert won the competition, and a messenger from the Shah's palace came knocking on the family's door with the gift of a children's book accompanied by a letter. "It wasn't such a big gift, but the queen wrote a nice letter, and it was a boost for my ego," Albert grins.

His father subscribed to a satirical political newspaper that used to feature first-rate cartoons, and the young Albert, inspired, would copy them. "My father wrote poetry for the paper, and I started drawing cartoons of my own," he recounts. "The paper was called *Tofigh*, which means 'success.' My father took me to meet the cartoonist, and then I began submitting cartoons that the editors liked so much they published them. They began listing me as part of the staff — me, a thirteen-year-old kid!"

By the time he was seventeen, he had already launched his own art show in Tehran. "It was controversial," he admits. "The artwork conveyed the problematic conditions in the country under the Shah — the polarization between the rich, Westernized classes and the poor, Islamic populace." His cartoons for *Tofigh*, also dealing with this theme, ran the risk of pushing the thin envelope of the regime's tolerance. Fearing he might be arrested by SAVAK, the Shah's secret police who punished outspoken intellectuals and artists with prison sentences, murder, and torture, Albert's family began urging him to leave the country.

He'd been accepted by the University of Tehran, which he says was "a very good school for art," and wasn't in a hurry to leave. But events conspired to convince him he'd be better off pursuing his studies abroad. "Around that time, the Asian Soccer League hosted a soccer game in Tehran — it was Israel versus Iran," he recalls. "The Iranians began threatening us, 'If Israel wins, you're dead!' Even the secular Muslims threatened violence.

"So of course Israel won the game, and the Iranians went crazy. I myself got hit by someone in the street, and I came home bleeding. That clinched it for me. I refused to stay any longer. I no longer wanted to be involved with these people. I knew Israel was my place."

He thought he might enroll in the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. But it was 1974, shortly after the Yom Kippur War, and cousin of his had been killed in the fighting. He changed his mind, opting for the relative safety of the US instead.

Once in New York, Albert enrolled in the City College of New York's department of architecture and fine arts, where he earned a bachelor's degree in architecture. Having received a scholarship from the Art Students League, he continued on at CCNY to earn a master's degree in fine arts. While there, he also had the good luck to secure an apprenticeship with Jerry Robinson at the Parson School of Design. Robinson is the cartoonist best known for his work on the Batman comic books and a strip in the *New York Sunday News*; he also served terms as president of both the National Cartoonists Society and the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists. Albert and Robinson clicked and remained close over the years.

"I never knew he was Jewish," Albert says. "He seemed to have such a secular life. But when he came to my wedding, there he was, sitting with a Lubavitcher friend of mine, and I found out he was Jewish and had made contributions to Chabad."

Although New York offered much in the way of education, Albert remembers those early years as a very lonely time. "I had no one," he says; his brothers Javid and Behzad didn't leave Iran until 1978, and his parents and sister came after the Revolution. At least his first roommate was a fellow Jewish Persian — Mordechai Kashani, a computer science student who would eventually go on to become the Rabbi Kashani who founded the Torat Chaim schools for Iranian Jewry in Great Neck and Richmond Hills. "He's changed the face of *chinuch* in our community," Albert maintains.

But back then, Albert wanted to integrate into the American art world. One of his art professors in Iran had given him the name of her brother, a highly respected, non-Jewish Iranian artist in New York; Albert made contact and began spending time with him and his crowd. "I was in awe of him," Albert says. "I had a lot of appreciation for his art."

But the more time he spent with this man, the more he realized that artistic talent and a refined personality do not necessarily go hand in hand. "This man and his crowd would go to art shows, and then get roaring drunk afterward," Albert remembers. "I'd call up Jerry Robinson and say, 'This guy's so famous, but he says such awful things! He really seems like a bum!' Robinson himself wasn't like that. He was a pretty clean guy.

"My idol began to fall from his pedestal. I realized I didn't want to be like him at all, or most of the other people I was meeting in the art world — I'd had it with their fancy art openings and dissolute lifestyles. You know, you have to remember that I had come from Iran, which, despite the Shah, was still very traditional. I was shocked by the *pritzut* I saw in America."

Albert had taken a trip to Iran in 1979 to see his family, right before

One *kallah* told him, "I really like my *chattan*, but we're so different!" He designed a dramatic ketubah for them. Next to the *kallah* is an ascending ladder bordered with billowing water, while the *chattan* stands next to an ascending ladder bordered with fire. The ladders then meet in the heavens, a joining of opposites

the Revolution. "I could feel that something was brewing. I urged all my family and friends to get out immediately. I even composed a book of artwork and poetry that I entitled *Fresh Air*, to convince people to leave."

He had brought with him a new, fancy camera, and while walking the streets one day, he snapped an image that seemed to him to sum up the entire state of his conflicted country: "I saw a lady walking down one side of the street, in very inadequate Western clothing, and on the other side, walking in the opposite direction, was a lady clothed from head to foot in a burka."

When the Iranian Revolution finally exploded in 1979, Albert says "it created a revolution in my *neshamah*." He was terrified for his family, especially his father, who as the *menahel* of a Jewish school would be an obvious target for persecution. He took to calling them frequently, shouting frantically, "*You have to get out!*"

Albert had been feeling the stirrings of a longing for greater *kedushah* for some time already, but now he really began to feel the need to pray. "The Revolution helped me get closer to Hashem," he says in retrospect. "I had no way to help my family, except through *tefillah*."

He did make an effort to approach Rabbi Yechiel Perr, who was involved in helping Iranian Jews get out of their country. "When I went to Boro Park to see him, he told me, 'It's time for Minchah now, come with me to shul first.' He took me to a *shtiebel*, and when I walked in and saw the place and the rabbi, I almost fainted — the holiness was so intense."

He'd been sharing an apartment with his brother near Yeshiva University in Washington Heights, but now he decided to move to Boro Park. Once there, he started to get to know all sorts of chassidim. "A Persian Chabad *shaliach* from Beverly Hills took me to Crown Heights and showed me around 770," he recalls. "After that I used to go to the Lubavitcher Rebbe every Sunday and take the dollar. It gave me a lot of *chizuk*.

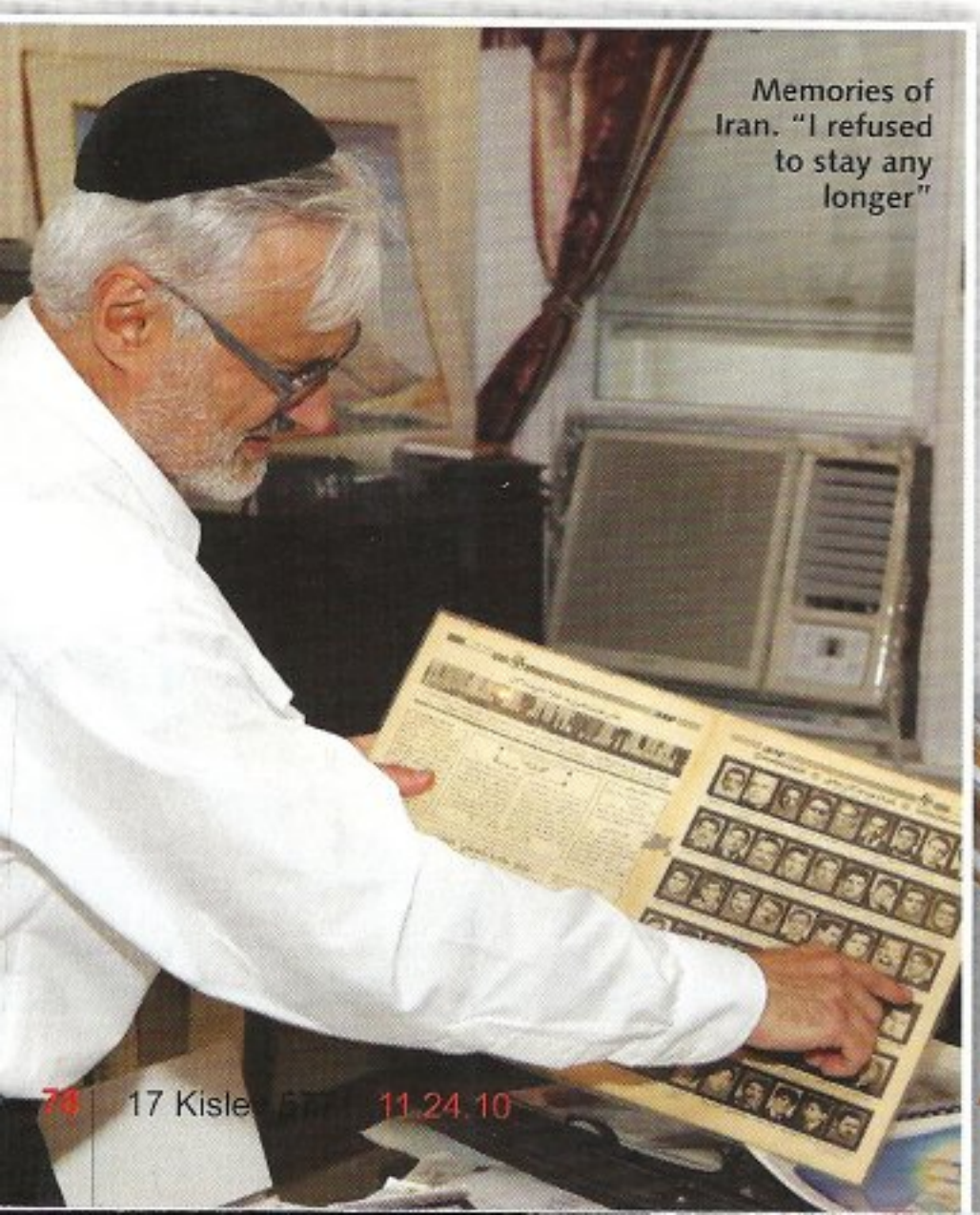
"I didn't realize it at the time, but the apartment I'd rented was right across the street from the Bluzhever Rebbe, *ztz"l*. I remember the first time I saw him. I started shaking all over — and I didn't even know who he was. But I knew I was in the presence of a holy man. Today I'm still close to the family."

He says he was attracted to chassidim and felt at home with them, even though their dress and accents were unfamiliar to a boy from Tehran. "I met many creative people, and there's something about Chassidus that I find very nourishing to my *neshamah*." Yet it wasn't long before he also became enamored of the *litvishe* world, becoming a regular at the Thursday evening *shiurim* of Rabbi Avigdor Miller, *ztz"l*, often accompanying him on his daily walks down Kings Highway in order to pepper him with questions. He began learning Gemara and "some of the imagery in the Gemara reminds me of surrealistic paintings," he comments.

After Albert finished his studies, he went to work for several years in an architectural office on Manhattan's Park Avenue, plying his skills in graphic architecture. But as he became more involved in Judaism he felt he needed to be doing Jewish art. Figuring it was best to make the bold move into self-employment while still single, he quit his job and struck out on his own. He created artwork for Iranian Jewish calendars and newspapers, sold a few paintings, and illustrated a Jewish children's book entitled *The House that Shlomo Built* (Ruth Zakutinsky, Aura Press), which tells the story of the Beis HaMikdash.

Then orders began coming in from clients, mostly wealthy Iranians, to commission ketubahs and commemorative artwork. Many of them were referred by rabbis in Great Neck or Beverly Hills who knew Albert and respected him and his art. While there were those who advised him that he could make more money doing commercial art, he wasn't interested; he would later write pointedly on his website, "I had a couple of years of that, and there are plenty of people who can advertise better about cat food and ketchup bottles, and not enough people who can advertise about Torah."

After many years of searching, Albert finally found his *bashert*, marrying in 1991 and taking an apartment in Flatbush. Dalia Hakakian, a native of Shiraz, was smuggled out of Iran in 1989, at the age of twenty-two, in the back of a truck along with her sister and other Jews. Dalia still can't shake the terrifying memories of those post-Revolutionary days: going to university wearing a chador, the terror of leaving her family not knowing if her smugglers could be trusted or not, the challenges of getting by in Pakistan until Jewish agencies transported her and her sister to Vienna, the hardships of adjusting to life in New York. Like Albert's father and sister, Dalia has a talent for poetry in Farsi, and was able to complete her college degrees in New York; the couple has a daughter, Atara, currently a high school senior.



Memories of Iran. "I refused to stay any longer"

Ketubahs and Much More A ketubah is a sacred contract, and Albert approaches it in this spirit. "I'm not interested in doing *tchotchkeh* ketubahs," he declares. "I'm not going to throw in a menorah or Magen David somewhere just to give a Jewish feel. I want to portray spiritual concepts in a way that is fresh, imaginative, personal, and holy; I want to create a ketubah that's beautiful in Hashem's Eyes." The average ketubah, he says, takes him between thirty and forty hours of work.

He shows us a ketubah he did for one couple. "The husband's name means 'the world' in Persian," he explains. "So I represented the three pillars that hold up the world: Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilut chesed*. I show the *chattan* and *kallah* standing on the pillar of *chesed*, because of the importance of *chesed* in a marriage." He has also woven in symbolism of other sets of three pillars in Judaism: the three Avos, the Shalosh Regalim. A pair of trees on each side of the text have branches that intertwine beneath a crown; Albert says this also ties in with the theme of *chesed*, referring to a *gemara* in *Taanit* that talks about a starving man who finds a tree and blesses it after nourishing himself from its fruit and benefiting from its shade. Another tree reference comes from a *gemara* that speaks about planting a tree when a baby is born, in order to later use the branches for a *chuppah* when he is ready to marry. "I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to the Islamic section, for visual inspiration," he says. "I found a beautiful image of a gold floating tree that I adapted for my purposes."

One *kallah* told him, "I really like my *chattan*, but we're so different!" One was from a Sephardic family, the other Ashkenazic, and "men and women are opposites in the best case," Albert says. "The only way to unite these profound opposites is through love and Torah." He designed a dramatic ketubah for them. Next to the *kallah* is an ascending ladder bordered with billowing water, while the *chattan* stands next to an ascending ladder bordered with fire. The ladders then meet in the heavens, a joining of opposites.

Albert often tries to weave in references to the *parshah*. Once, when he put in images of animals going into the *teivah* for a couple who got married during *Parshat Noach*, the *chattan* exclaimed joyfully, "It's a sign we'll have twins!"

In order to personalize the ketubahs, Albert often invests hours talking to the couple, to get a sense of their backgrounds and what's meaningful for them. Since he's frequently approached by couples with little religious background, he regularly finds himself engaged in long discussions about the significance of the ketubah, of Jewish marriage, and Torah in general. "My wife yells at me, 'Are you doing business, or are you doing *kiruv*?'

"Sometimes I convince people to change rabbis — there are certain shuls and rabbis I won't work with. In the Iranian community, unfortunately, there's been a certain polarization between the people who remained traditional and those who became more religious — you really see it in California."

One of his Persian clients met a woman from Mexico by chance in a Teaneck Judaica store, as she was looking for a standard printed ketubah. The client told her, "Why buy a print? My friend makes gorgeous, personalized ketubahs." This nonreligious, Spanish-speaking woman showed up on Albert's doorstep. "I thought maybe she was a cleaning lady, between the way she was dressed and her Spanish accent," Albert says. "But she was Jewish, and we ended up speaking for several hours. I told her a lot about Judaism, about the role of the *eishet chayil*. Today she lights Shabbat candles and is continuing to grow."

He's usually invited to his customers' weddings, some of them lavish, although he doesn't always go; he's not much at home among the high-glitz, low-*ruchniyus* weddings of his fancier clients. "Some of them tell me, 'Why don't you move out to Beverly Hills? You could make big money there!' But I get my inspiration from this neighborhood, where everything is kosher, where there's so much Torah. The atmosphere inspires me. What would inspire me in Beverley Hills? The Bugattis? All I aspire to is to live like a *pashuteh* Yid — *mikveh*, minyan, *daf yomi*, Shabbat."

Working independently, he says, has been an exercise in *emunah*, especially since he doesn't advertise and the role of businessman doesn't come naturally to him. "I'm not like a guy who can count on a regular paycheck," he says. "But my *parnassah* is like the *mahn* from Heaven. It falls down in the most unexpected ways, and I always see the Hand of Hashem in how it arrives … it makes me feel like I'm dancing with Hashem."

Beyond Ketubahs Doesn't the former cartoonist ever itch to do artwork that isn't a commissioned ketubah? "Of course," he replies. "I just don't have a lot of extra time.

"Here's one piece I did manage to do," Albert says, showing us a drawing of a devil-like face. "This is the face of Khomeini, depicted as the essence of evil. This one has actually been published here and abroad, of course not under my name. For me, Khomeini was the start of all the terrorism: 9/11, Kahane's murder, the intifada. I'd like to do a painting of an atomic explosion, with the faces of Iranian politicians like Ahmadinejad mixed in — I've done some sketches already."

Today, Albert has his doubts about the art world he once admired so much. "Sometimes I go to art shows or auctions, and I see people spending so much money for junk," he says incredulously. "I don't understand the *chochmah*, even though I have a master's degree in fine arts. An Andy Warhol painting recently sold for $134 million dollars, and the *goy* who bought it was very happy, but I don't get it. I even began to worry that art is no good for the *neshamah*, and I went and asked Rabbi Soleimani, my *rav*. He told me, 'It's your profession; use it for a mitzvah, and avoid the *avodah zarah* part of it.'" So now, Albert consciously approaches his art "as a way to advertise about G-d."

"At any rate," he says, "we live in dangerous times. We all have to work at bringing light into a dark world — no matter what profession we choose.". ■