

AN INDEPENDENT SOLDIER WITH WOOD – NOT ARMOR

BY DINI HARRIS

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a white shirt and a black kippah, is sitting on a wooden chair. He is holding a large, round, light-colored drum. To his right is a tall, slender wooden sculpture of a man in a suit and hat, playing a trumpet. Behind the man is another wooden sculpture of a man playing a saxophone. The background is a large, circular, light-colored wood slice. The text "A visit with Mr. Shimon Tayar, wood artisan, sculptor" is written on the drum.

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Modern Israel, modern roads, modern construction and modern traffic jams — that's what characterized the drive from Afula to Tzomet Yagur, the busy junction where three major highways meet just east of the urban metropolis of Haifa. And a few kilometers after the turnoff, there's an intersection marked "Tzomet Chassidim." A right turn and then another after a big traffic circle takes one into a completely different sphere. I enter Kfar Chassidim and the world regresses.

The roads are paved and there's electricity too, but still, a lot in the village looks as though it hasn't changed since the early 1900s. A long winding road takes me past big sprawling houses surrounded by large plots of land. Much is uncultivated and appears slightly neglected, with a sprinkling of modernized estates dressed in up-to-date landscaping and electric fences.

It's the trees, shrubbery and spirited flowers that spontaneously border the road and occasionally arch over it that make the biggest impression — that and the majestic mountain range that borders the fields behind the *moshav*. The mix of natural beauty and old-fashioned living helps my modern me decelerate and triggers a surrealistic feeling.

This unreal feeling stays with me as I pass the big *refet* — cattle farm — signaling the turn into my destination, a gravel driveway that ends in front of an unimposing building that looks like a neglected shed. This feeling is perhaps the best preparation for my visit with Mr. Shimon Tayar, wood artisan, sculptor, music-man and independent *oved Hashem*.

There are no clocks in this workshop, and here Shimon Tayar has created a spiritual island where he and his visitors can take a break from the stressful demands of modern life and the limitations of a sometimes pedantic society. In the workshop, he places himself in a realm where he can focus on what *he* wants to do, what *he* wants to become and how he can use his talents to serve his Creator.

Do It Yourself

The things inside the workshop are just plain fun. Every

corner seems to be home to another quirky creation. Though he works mainly with wood, Shimon Tayar doesn't introduce himself as a wood sculptor; though he has drawn a number of amazingly true-to-life sketches, he doesn't consider himself an artist; and though he plays the drum and has a separate room dedicated to the musical instruments he crafted with his own hands and ingenuity, he would describe himself neither as a musician nor as an instrument maker.

He's an independent, not limited to any material or technique. On a stage at the front of the workshop there is a life-size band playing different musical instruments he sculpted out of wood. One wall is decorated with a thin strip of wood shaped into an outline of a boy, hand raised, as he scribbles graffiti on the wall: *Am Yisrael Chai!* The drums Shimon created for his

LIFE-SIZE MASTERPIECES

"One day, the head of the community council, Rabbi Yitzchak Reich, visited my workshop," says Shimon Tayar.

"Rabbi Reich told me that the council wished to dedicate a traffic circle as a memorial to Rav Ovadia Yosef, *zt"l*. They had various ideas, sculptures in metal or plastic, but nothing seemed to be working out. When the idea of a wood sculpture was presented someone mentioned that there's a local artist who works with this medium.

"Rabbi Reich had an idea about what he wanted, but it wasn't something I could work with. I have a lot of *hakaras hatov* to him, because he trusted I would do a good job and gave me freedom to do as I wished.

"It was easy to decide what to make. What represents Harav Ovadia? *Sefarim*. So I sculpted *sefarim*. I decided on several giant *sefarim* rather than many small ones. So I chose to make the most prominent of Rav Ovadia's works, *Yechaveh Daat* and *Chazon Ovadia*, and the *Meor Yisrael*, because I thought that was a fitting title for Rav Ovadia. And then, after the *sefarim*, I added some concepts that represented him: the table with open *sefarim* and his special hat.

"It was a huge project. I worked on

different sections of the sculpture and then put them all together. We had it ready in time for Rav Ovadia's *yahrtzeit* on 3 Cheshvan, but we pushed off the ceremony for about a week so that Harav Yitzchak Yosef could attend.

"After creating this work, I started on a sculpture for Kikar Hayeshivah — the traffic circle in front of the esteemed Yeshivat Knesset Chizkiyahu. What would be more appropriate than a chair and *shtender*? I used maple burl wood to create the image of upholstery on the chair.

"Right now, I hope I will be given the opportunity to create a memorial in honor of Harav Ovadia Yosef at the Bar Ilan junction near Sanhedria [in Yerushalayim]. I want to design a sculpture on the wall at the corner in front of the Sanhedria cemetery, where Harav Ovadia is buried.

"I envision a Yerushalmi stone base that will support gigantic *sefarim* — much bigger than what I made in Rechasim. This exhibit will be topped by a glass ceiling that will protect the wood sculpture and have lights to illuminate it. If I get a chance to do this project, the corner of Rechov Bar Ilan will become a Yerushalayim landmark, like the Gesher Hameitarim, the String Bridge, for the Jerusalem Light Rail."



new endeavor, Uper — Unique Percussion, are made out of pumpkins!

Shimon credits his father for his fearless approach to any type of material or job. “My two brothers and I grew up in Kiryat Chaim, near Haifa,” he says. “My father always told us that we can do whatever we want to do, and that’s what we did.

“If we wanted to add another room to our house or tile our backyard, we did it ourselves. We never called a plumber, electrician or anybody else to help us. When our



Above: At the traffic circle in front of the esteemed Yeshivat Knesset Chizkiyahu. What would be more appropriate than a chair and *shtender*?
Left and below: Carving and delivering the *sefer Chazon Ovadia* for the traffic circle memorial to Harav Ovadia Yosef, zt”l.



car died, we dug a pit in the dirt so that we could get under the car and do the overhaul ourselves. When my mother said she could no longer work in her kitchen, we took a saw, connected it to a washing machine motor to turn it, used a joint-distributed metal bed frame as a table and built her a new one.

"We always had to be working; my father couldn't see us standing around doing nothing. I remember when I was 25, already married, I still made sure that my father never saw me during work hours doing nothing. Even though I was a freelancer, it would be *my* fault if I didn't have work. Someone who wants to work, has work. That was my father. He was loving and caring and a great role model of the work ethic."

First-Rate Carpenter

Perhaps it was their success at building their mother's kitchen that convinced all three Tayar boys to open a carpentry shop. Shimon's two brothers were partners, but he worked in the same shop independently.

Over the years, work picked up. Eventually, Shimon had five to six people working for him and he was building between five to 10 kitchens a month, generally in Tel Aviv. But, then, at about 40 years of age, Shimon shifted gears.

"I just started having different thoughts," he recounts.



"I wanted to know, what is this reality? What is the sun, the tree? How does it all work? I started reading about different cultures, until slowly I started shifting to books about *Yahadut*.

"In Haifa there was a *sefarim* store in a basement. I went down there and saw rows and rows of books, all black and serious. But I found a small red book that didn't look too threatening, *Derech Hashem* by the Ramchal. What a *sefer*!

"It clarified everything for me; it was so clear and amazing. I ran back and bought 15 copies and gave them to everyone I knew, but they had no idea what I wanted



The ceremony commemorating Rav Ovadia's *yahrtzeit* that Harav Yitzchak Yosef attended a week after the *yahrtzeit*.



Mr. Tayar's workshop.

from them. Now I understand that it's a complex book, but I connected to it immediately.

"I was a married man with two children — my daughter was already in high school! So I took a patient approach toward my family. I thought it would be hard to draw my wife to *Yahadut*. She grew up in Morocco, where her father was the head of the secular Alliance school. They were high-society intellectuals and quite far from religion.

"My wife's family was visiting once and a big argument broke out about the *datiim* — 'the religious fanatics.' The discussion was prompted by the fact that I was obviously being *mitzhazek*, drawing closer to Torah and *mitzvah* observance.

"The conversation scared my daughter, and she asked me, 'You're going to become one of those *datiim*?' I told her we need to talk about it. We went for long walks during which I explained to her what I had learned.

"My wife was anxious about how my religious observance would affect our lifestyle — she wanted to know how I would visit her mother on Shabbat. I promised her that I would visit — and I did. It took me about two hours to trek to the other side of the city. At first I walked [by] myself. My 8-year-old son joined me soon after, and then my daughter a few weeks later. After driving herself a few times, my wife said she didn't want to be alone, so she joined us too.

"I didn't put any pressure on anyone at any time — and now they're all religious. Today my wife is stronger than me; she tells me off, 'We don't do it like that, do it like this...' Our youngest daughter was born religious."



MUSIC MAN

Music is a very important element of Shimon Tayar's life. Soft music is continually piped through his workshop, and he's played the drum since he was very young. Though he's naturally talented, he attributes his growth in music to his first cousin Udi, a *h*.

"We influenced each other," he says. "Udi learned from me how to craft instruments from wood and I learned music from him. We did lots of things together. But it was only after he died that I was brazen enough to try to make musical instruments on my own."

The first musical instruments Shimon created are the three wooden guitars hanging in his workshop. More recently, he started producing an entire line of drums he's named "Uper" — Unique Percussion.

A remark made by a visiting soundman sent Shimon looking for pumpkins — not easily found. Apparently, Africans have been using gourds as drums and shekere rattles for centuries. Shimon modernized the technique by connecting his pumpkins to microphones and mixers. He's excited about his drums, and again says that it was only because he didn't have work for a month or two that he was able to create this new line.

Shimon plays the drums with two bands. One, comprised of local *chareidi* men, is named Tzliuta. In addition to their performances, the band enjoys getting together and playing for their friends and neighbors for Rosh Chodesh and the like at — where else? — Shimon's workshop.

The Maarava Band is a group of professional musicians, all with degrees and doctorates in music. Shimon, who plays from his "*betten*," is honored that they include him as a member. The band players are a mix of secular to *chareidi* (Shimon), and they have an emotional, touching repertoire, appropriate for all audiences. As a story is told to the audience, the band plays appropriate accompanying music in the background.

Quieter Pastures

Before he was *chozer b'teshuvah*, Shimon's workshop was a noisy, busy place. "With five to six workers, you need about 50-60,000 shekels of income just to cover salaries and rent," he explains. "Obviously, I wouldn't want to take this out of my own pocket — so I would have to take jobs, even if I wasn't really earning anything from it, just to keep the place going."

"But when I started doing *teshuvah*, I connected to different *maamarei Chazal*, and the one about '*mezonotav shel adam ketzuvin lo meRosh Hashanah*' really made an impact. So I let my workers go. Eventually I remained on my own."

Another big change was the Tayar family's move to Rechasim, the city that borders Kfar Chassidim and whose population is over 80 percent *chareidi*. "*Chazal* teach us that it's better to be the tail of a lion than the head of a fox," Shimon explains the move. "That's why I'm here; they're serious '*dosim*' here. I'm very accepted here, by everyone, the biggest Rabbis. But I wouldn't really say that I'm one of them. That's fine. As far as I'm concerned, I'm just a lowly player in Hashem's army — a soldier, without any rank at all."

In this serene milieu, with his workshop in secular Kfar Chassidim and his home in *chareidi* Rechasim, Shimon doesn't make kitchens anymore. He's happy to construct *aronei kodesh*, and he has beautiful pictures of pieces he's created. But as a whole, since he believes Hashem will send him what he needs regardless of how hard he works, he unconcernedly waits for work opportunities that enable him to utilize his creativity and years of experience and expertise, such as the magnificent wood sculptures decorating two traffic circles in Rechasim.

Waiting, Creating and Reaching Out

While he waits for work, Shimon creates. He uses his tools to extract the ingenious ideas residing inside of him. His first sculpture, of an amazingly lifelike wooden undershirt hanging on a clothesline, was created the first time he had no work for two weeks. It was the first of many sculptures that added a new dimension to Shimon's work in wood.

Right now he's very excited about his handcrafted drums, a passion sparked by a visiting soundman who mentioned he had seen someone perform with half a pumpkin as a drum.

Shimon calls the creative state of mind he achieves in his workshop as "working from [his] *betten* (gut)." It can be more eloquently explained as a state of being in which he is completely in touch with his inner self so his artistic work flows straight from within. In this state he neither makes sketches to plan what he is going to create nor does he think too far ahead into the work. He just sits and does it.

It's the tranquility and disconnect from society and

pressure in the workshop that enable Shimon to reach this state of mind, and these are the qualities that draw outsiders to his shop. People stop in at the workshop all the time. He says it was just plain old good luck that no visitors stopped in while I was there taking his time and attention.

Neighbors and friends stop in when they need a break. Even some of the Rabbanim in the area visit from time to time to see if there's anything new to see in the workshop. Tour groups stop by to take a look, and busloads of art students come to visit and learn.

Shimon emphatically explains that the feeling in his workshop and his lifestyle is not based on a search for freedom and lack of constraints. "It goes without saying that we need to do things connected to time and place

An *aron kodesh*
Mr. Tayar built as a
replica of the Vilna
Shas' *shaar blatt*.
Note that the drapes
and covering on the
amud are carved
from wood too.



Some of Mr. Tayar's wood carvings.



ART AND TORAH ON SUKKOT

"The first time I made my *sukkah*," Shimon Tayar says, "I took the panels and painted pictures: Kever Rochel on one panel, someone shaking a *lulav* on another, the *Shevatim*. My wife did some panels — I gave one panel to my daughter too. That was about 15 years ago. I've been in a *Daf Yomi shiur* since about that time too. Over the year, we usually get a few *blatt* behind schedule. So on Hoshana Rabbah, we all get together in my *sukkah*. I put out some food and we get to work the entire night, filling in the gaps."

such as *davening*," he says, "and the real *avodah* is living with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* the entire time. I try to speak to Him all day long, I ask Him to help me with whatever I'm working on. But in relation to my work, I feel liberated in this workshop, working on my own."

Furthermore, Shimon views his actions and interactions as opportunities to make a *kiddush Hashem*, and he appreciates the fact that he walks between two worlds — the ones of his *chiloni* (secular) past and his *chareidi* present. In fact, that's why he chose to adopt the black-and-white *chareidi* garb, when, perhaps for an artist, something more colorful, like a big knitted *kippah*, would be more appropriate.

"Besides the fact that it would be a lot easier to get dressed that way in the morning," he jokes, "I wanted everyone to know, wherever I go, that I'm a soldier in the army of Hashem."

And it is as a soldier in Hashem's army that Shimon reaches out to everyone he meets. When groups come to visit his workshop, Shimon skillfully turns the conversation to *teshuvah* and religion, and demonstrates that art doesn't contradict religion. When he performs with his band, he thinks he makes an impact when seen as the "*dos*" sitting behind the drum set.

Shimon can recount a vast array of interesting experiences. As he says, he was *chozer b'teshuvah* at the relatively old age of 40, and there's no way to erase all of his former experiences. Nor is there a need to.

Quite the opposite: Shimon built his Torah and *mitzvah*-observant life on the heels of his decades of secular living. This gives him a unique vantage point. On one hand, secular people are open to what he says because, though he's dressed in black and white and sports a beard, they can relate to him. And, on the other hand, we religious people can enjoy his art and music, because they are imbued with his commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*. ■

