



A view of the Umbilicus exhibition at the Tower of David Museum Jerusalem.

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# Navel of the World: Tower of David's Umbilicus exhibition

By Tirtza Gordon

**THE TOWER** of David, one of Jerusalem's first-stop museums at the entrance of the Old City, has opened its doors to a new contemporary Israeli art exhibition, Umbilicus – Navel of the World.

"The uniqueness of this exhibition not only stems from the art works of seven leading contemporary Israel artists, but from the space in which it is housed, the Kishle excavations," says Eilat Lieber, director and chief curator of the Tower of David. "In this one room, 2,800 years of Jerusalem's archaeology can be found among its excavations and it is here that for the first time, an exhibition is being held."

The impressive space, part of the Tower of David Jerusalem complex, was created following an extensive archaeological excavation in 1999-2000. It is also now a part of a future renewal project of the museum.

Designed across a narrow, intimate path of 450 meters, there is a "body-meets-soul" experience that takes place as one witnesses 10 contemporary pieces that depict birth and femininity that layer over the historical Jerusalem stones.

The archaeological excavation was led by Dr. Amit Re'em, archaeologist from the Jerusalem District of the Israel Antiquities Authority. The Kishle exhibition space reveals the remains of the Mandatory prison and graffiti of Etzel prisoners, a Jewish dye factory from the Middle Ages mentioned in the writings of Benjamin of Tudela, walls of Herod the

Great's royal palace including a drainage and escape channel cut into the bedrock, and impressive Hasmonean fortifications. The earliest and most notable remnant in the complex, is no other than an impressive wall resting on bedrock, dating back to the days of Hezekiah, King of Judah.

These findings give testimony to the westernmost borders of Jerusalem during the days of the First Temple, spanning over 2800 continuous years of history.

According to the curator of the exhibition, Dr. Adina Kamien, "Just as the navel is the middle of a person, so the Land of Israel is the navel of the world. The Jewish sages said that the "The Land of Israel sits at the center of the world, and Jerusalem at the center of the Land of Israel, and the Temple at the center of Jerusalem, and the sanctuary at the center of the Temple, and the Ark at the center of the sanctuary, and the Foundation Stone before the sanctuary, from which the world was founded."

The Church of the Sepulcher in Jerusalem concurs with the belief that the city of Jerusalem is the center of the universe; and Muslim tradition believes that the foundation stone (epicenter of where creation began) is under the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount, allowing the "Navel of the World" exhibition to live up to its name.

The exhibition reveals step-by-step how the metaphor of navel both exists within the

physical world and our physical bodies, specifically through the feminine experience. As one steps down the stairs into the exhibit, the paintings of Lihi Turjeman's murals portray contemporary archaeology through geographic maps. They reveal images of wombs while depicting both physical and conceptual boundaries.

Nine handmade jars crafted by Yehudit Saportas, introduce the exhibit, each containing different objects or sounds, showcasing subterranean psychic architecture. These jars contain information that is "lost" by one's environment, and is a 3-D representation of the phrase of "Return of Lost Property." She lost her own brother to Hamas terrorists when he was serving in the IDF in 1989.

The exhibition continues with Abu-Hussein's tribute to her grandmother, with egg replicas adorned in nylon stockings, evoking feminine symbols alongside other circular shapes throughout the exhibit.

Dancer-choreographer Sahar Zimi adds a movement piece to the exhibit, known as Water People, a choreography from the Dead Sea. This film reflects women in the water onto the ancient stones of Jerusalem, creating a dance-like effect. This combination captures the essence of the exhibit, bringing modern dance and video onto the history of these walls. Specifically, the Dead Sea goes hand-in-hand with Second Temple excavations. The work connects the Foundation Stone beneath, which is known to hold the source of all the springs and fountains from which the world drinks its waters, with a dance on the Dead Sea water. Specifically there was a night celebration during Sukkot holiday when the water would be drawn from the Temple's altar.

In varied media – video, painting, presentations, and sound – the works of Hannan Abu-Hussein, Sharon Balaban, Matan Daskal, Yehudit Sasportas, Sahar Azimi, Merav Shinn Ben-Alon, and Lihi Turjeman interact and work in synergy in the ancient space. They represent one exploring a personal journey of their own birth, and the birth of the world, emanating from Jerusalem. With images of the womb, volcanoes, moon, and physical borders, around the exhibit one can feel connected to their personal midpoint and the midpoint of Jerusalem.

"It creates a system of personal and universal symbols connected to the idea of the navel, the midpoint of the world," explains Kamien. ■