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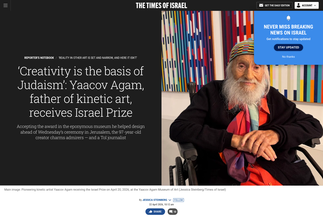
'Creativity is the basis of Judaism': Yaacov Agam, father of kinetic art, receives Israel Prize

Accepting the award, the renowned artist pulls out the helped design plans for a pedestrian bridge connecting Ben Yehuda and one-of-a-kind creative obstacle course and a TV personality



Main image: Pioneering kinetic artist Yaacov Agam receiving the Israel Prize on April 30, 2026, at the Tapuz Agam Museum of Art, with President Benzion Ruth Allocution (Jessica Steinberg/Times of Israel)

By JESSICA STEINBERG
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On Monday morning, two days before Independence Day, artist Yaacov Agam — a pioneer of literal "op art" and the father of the vibrant, abstract geometric shapes — entered the museum that bears his name.

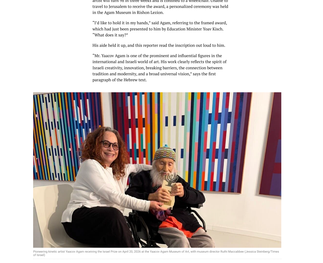
Small, bearded, and wearing a colorful, graphic crocheted beanie that echoed the vivid artworks in the room, Agam had arrived together with his family to receive the 2026 Israel Prize for Visual Arts.

The award is usually presented at the national independence Day ceremony, which will take place on Wednesday. However, the renowned artist will turn 98 in three weeks and is confined to a wheelchair. Unable to travel to Jerusalem to receive the award, a personalized ceremony was held in the Agam Museum in Rishon Letzion.

"I'd like to hold it on my hands," said Agam, referring to the framed award, which had just been presented to him by Education Minister Yoav Kisch. "What does it say?"

His aide held it up, and this reporter read the inscription out loud to him.

"Mr. Yaacov Agam is one of the prominent and influential figures in the contemporary art world, a pioneer of kinetic art, whose work, the spirit of Israeli creativity, innovation, breaking barriers, the connection between tradition and modernity, and a broad universal vision," says the first paragraph of the Hebrew text.



Pioneering kinetic artist Yaacov Agam receiving the Israel Prize on April 30, 2026, at the Tapuz Agam Museum of Art, with President Benzion Ruth Allocution (Jessica Steinberg/Times of Israel)

Agam asked about the use of the word "universal," puzzled that the transliterated term was used — universal — instead of the Hebrew word, olami.

"When I look around at my works, what I see is beyond the pieces themselves," said Agam. "I turn my head and see something different. Everything changes here. That's the reality. Reality is other art is set and narrow, and here it isn't — it's open, and it changes and brings you closer to seeing the reality of Hebrew and Judaism."

It's an apt description of Agam's kinetic art, which he has often described as art in motion, in which the art doesn't move, but the viewer does.

"I grew up with an instinctive sense of creativity, and that's the basis of Judaism, the sense of creativity, that nothing stands in one place, that change is based on the viewer's position, and things look different every time," Agam said.

Pioneering kinetic artist Yaacov Agam receiving the Israel Prize from Education Minister Yoav Kisch on April 30, 2026, at the Tapuz Agam Museum of Art (Jessica Steinberg/Times of Israel)

The rabbi's son

The artist, who was born Yaacov Gilboiten and later changed his last name to Agam, was born in British Mandate Palestine, with a father who was a rabbi and a kabbalist.

He trained at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design before moving to Zurich in 1949 for his studies, and then to Paris, where he lived for the next few decades.

Agam was quickly recognized for his kinetic art and sculptures, eventually showing his works at the first Biennale in Paris, New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, Centre Pompidou, and a host of other institutions.

Photo of Agam Yaacov, Israeli artist, reclining on one of his works at the Georges Pompidou Art Center, June 26, 2002, in Paris where his works of kinetic sculpture are on exhibit. (Jack Guez / AFP)

Agam became known for massive, colorful sculptures, including "Double Metamorphosis III," the fountain at the La Defense district in Paris, and the Fire and Water Fountain in Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Square.

When asked on Monday about the Dizengoff Square fountain, Agam recalled the dozens of angles visible every time it moved.

"The reality is what shifts, and that's to open your thoughts and creativity and understanding and expression of the reality in another way," he said of the fountain.

Yaacov Agam's iconic fountain in Dizengoff Square in Tel Aviv, August 2012 (Michal Fattal)

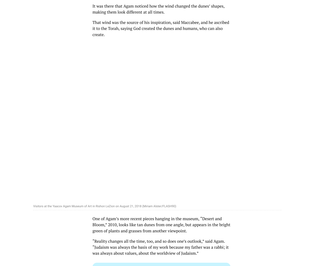
(The fountain was removed from Dizengoff Square in 2016 for renovations and returned two years later, but is still without its full color and water mechanism, something which Tel Aviv residents complain about regularly. Kisch said during his meeting with Agam that he would "look into it.")

Agam's second home

Agam and his family have more influence at the Yaacov Agam Museum of Art, which opened in 2019 after Agam proposed the idea to the city of Rishon Letzion, where he grew up in the 1920s and 1940s.

The museum has become a second home for Agam, housing his artwork and acting as the arbiter of his legacy.

Agam was heavily involved in its design, working with architect David Nofar to design the building's sharp angles and spaces, including the outdoor pavilion filled with the 29 "Pillars of Cilla," named for his late wife.



The Pillars of Cilla at the Yaacov Agam Museum of Art on April 30, 2026, (Jessica Steinberg/Times of Israel)

His sculptural, raised "gymnotraph" artworks line the walls, while the gallery floor includes the 72-foot-long Panoramagram that runs the winding length of the gallery, a "Jacob's Ladder," a blue, red, and white pillar rises in the center of the gallery that is reflected with surrounding mirrors.

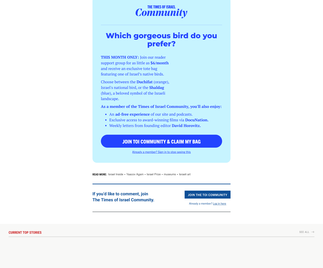
"I always say this place is like a water jam of colors," said Ruthi Macadoo, the museum's director.

Macadoo and her staff, who run the museum for the municipality, are like an extension of Agam's family, and were thrilled to see him in person as they each took selfies.

Macadoo, a self-described "Agamophile," related that Agam wasn't much of a student and would run away from school to Rishon Letzion's dunes, back when the shifting hillocks of sand were a visible part of the landscape.

It was there that Agam noticed how the wind changed the dunes' shapes, making them look different at all times.

That wind was the source of his inspiration, said Macadoo, and he ascribed it to the Torah, saying God created the dunes and humans, who can also create.



Visitors at the Yaacov Agam Museum of Art in Rishon Letzion on August 21, 2018 (Miriam Alster/FLASH90)

One of Agam's more recent pieces hanging in the museum, "Desert and Heaven," 2010, looks like tan dunes from one angle, but appears in the bright green of plants and grasses from another viewpoint.

"Reality changes all the time, too, and so does one's outlook," said Agam. "Judaism was always the basis of my work because my father was a rabbi; it was always about values, about the worldview of Judaism."

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