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# GALLERY

## Letter perfect

*Despite his focus on Hebrew, Oded Ezer has garnered international accolades for his fonts. Now his work is being published in a new book*

By Yuval Saar

In the preface to a new book by Oded Ezer, Museum of Modern art design curator Paola Antonelli writes that the work of this Israeli typographer “let us dream about a super-human language that is shaped by biology, rather than by culture – the dream of a universal means of communication that we have sought for centuries.” The book, “Oded Ezer: The Typographer’s Guide to the Galaxy,” is to be published next month by the respected German design books publisher Gestalten.

Also on Gestalten’s list of April releases is a book by designer Marcel Wanders. Ezer hastens to say, “With all due respect to me, there’s no comparison. He’s Marcel Wanders, I’m Oded from Givatayim.”

Ezer, 37, completed graphic design studies at Jerusalem’s Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in 1998 and teaches at the Holon Institute of Technology and at WIZO Haifa. Over the years his works have won many prizes, been displayed in museums and at exhibitions, published in international periodicals and are in the permanent collections of MoMA and of

the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

He belongs to Israel’s younger generation of font designers, which includes Michal Sahar and Danny Merav, who offer a new and contemporary interpretation of Hebrew typography and also design commercial products. Ezer designed the Alchemist, Meoded and Taagid fonts, which are used in many periodicals.

Ezer is known for stretching the boundaries of letter design. His experimental works are on the border between design and art. In these works he uses letters like modeling clay and is greatly influenced by biology and the animal world: His letters often resemble ants or spiders, for example. The new book displays mainly these experimental works, from 2000 to the present.

Japanese, Arab or Indian typography may fascinate Israelis, but they can’t judge whether it’s good, if the space between the letters is correct and the like. Ezer seems to realize, in contrast to many of his predecessors, that Hebrew typography can actually be interesting to others.

*You didn’t fear falling into the trap of exoticism?*

“First of all, of course I fell into this trap. I’m sure that the beginning of interest in me was: ‘Wow, what an exotic guy, from the back of beyond, we in Europe and the United States can define ourselves in contrast to him.’ I went for it, because it made me special. Why be embarrassed? Hebrew is a unique language. They would die to have this language. It’s beautiful. There’s something quite banal about English.”

*Because we’re so used to it?*

“That too, but also because at its core it’s based on the fundamental shapes – circle, square, triangle. That’s banal, but the typographical nuances of Hebrew are not banal. But over the years people stopped saying ‘the Hebrew font designer’ and began saying ‘the typographer Oded Ezer.’ They stopped noticing that it’s a foreign language. At the same time I also began working in English.”

Students and designers in Israel claim that there are not enough typefaces in Hebrew, that it’s much easier to work with typefaces in English. Even most of the sites of [Hebrew typographers] are in English. “People always ask me why Israelis don’t work with



“Stami V’ Klomi,” a tribute to poet Yona Wallach.

Shahaf Haber



Three dimensional typographical study.

Hebrew," Ezer said. "How many Hebrew logos of large chains do you know? Aroma? That's it, I can't recall any others. I still teach my students that if they want to succeed in the world they should work in Hebrew - just the opposite of what one might think."

And yet, the situation is not black and white, he said. "I once thought that there would be a wave of English and then people would choke on it and would want to express themselves in their mother tongue, but that's not happening in the market and there's a reason for it. Apparently the takeover by English will go beyond some kind of American cultural colonialism, and English will become an international 'programming' language. Anything that's commercial and has to live on the Internet, or outside it, will be in English first of all. At the same time, the local languages will become a cultural site, which will be rescued from the purely commercial viewpoint."

*Do you distinguish between commerce and culture?*

"I make a distinction between technology and culture. Hebrew did not really die during the years of exile as they tell us. It lived in the sacred texts, or in private conversations that expressed an attitude of 'we are unique,' a kind of cultural intimacy. That's what's going to happen. We'll be in a 'technological exile' in a certain sense. We'll speak the language of technology and create intimacy by mean of the specific languages of each nation. It's a process that on the one hand creates a separation between our global lives and our intimate lives as Jews, as Israelis, as Tel Avivians. On the other hand, it will also protect the language, distill it. This is already happening. It's a process that's related to technology far more than to some

kind of Western cultural evil."

Ezer recommends to his students, for example, to take corporate logos such as those of Disney and Microsoft and create a parallel Hebrew typeface. "As a product of the 21st century you must speak globally, but you must also know where you came from," he explains.

Students today, he says, are more intelligent and sophisticated than in the past. Talent, however, is another issue, one he thinks is related to the number of students per class, among other things: "I studied with 20 people in each year. Now in every school, whether it's Bezalel, Shenkar (College of Engineering and Design), Holon Institute of Technology or WIZO Haifa, there are four times as many students. I don't want to discuss the economic motive, but the level has declined. The best are harmed to some extent by these numbers."

### Too progressive

After he graduated from Bezalel one of his teachers, Shimon Sandhaus, brought him in to work on a redesign of the Globes financial daily. "Our work wasn't accepted," Ezer recalled, "it was too progressive. That was my first encounter with the Israeli market." Later he was in charge of designing the Globes magazine Firma, which at the time was considered revolutionary design.

When Ezer's period with the business newspaper ended, he did not want to return to the commercial market. "I knew that I wouldn't go far if I was a whore to the market. I realized I had to work without money. For me it was a revelation. I divided my day, half for supporting myself and half for living. I didn't want to lose my soul."

That soul is embodied in Ezer's



Idan Gil

A take off Milton Glaser's famous "I Love NY" logo.

experimental projects, such as those in his book. He says he sent 850 images to Gestalten, which selected those about 350 for publication. The works are accompanied by many texts. Two of the writers are typographer and design researcher Yehuda Hofshi and the Canadian typographer and illustrator Marian Bantjes. "I wasn't interested in doing a photo album," Ezer explains. "I work in Hebrew and I thought there was a need for explanation."

Ezer's connection with Antonelli began when the MoMA curator was preparing the "Design and the Elastic Mind" exhibition, which opened in early 2008. She came across "Typosperma," a project by Ezer in which Hebrew letters and human sperm are combined. "She sent me an e-mail and asked me to display at the exhibition, and it was like an incredible dream," he says. "I had never been there, and it turned out that the first time I was in New York was when I had the exhibit at MoMA."

In addition to Ezer's experimental works the book includes several of his commercial typefaces and other commercial work, such as the letters of the Bank Hapoalim logo

and CD covers.

*Will one of your typefaces be the next Frank Ruehl or Narkiss 50 years from now?*

"I have no desire to design a font that will replace Frank Ruehl. You don't recompose a work by Mozart. I hope to create a font for the 21st century, in the hope that it will be a classic of the 22nd century. But nobody has understood as yet how a font should look in the 21st century. My task and that of any intelligent designer is to understand this century, and not to deal with design that is post-20th century. Unfortunately, typographical design in Israel is in its 'post' stage."

Israeli design, Ezer argues, is static, and certainly lags behind high-tech. "Although everyone is doing their best, there is a disparity between graphic and typographic design in Israel on the one hand and what technology makes possible on the other," he says. "There is no methodology linking design to life. Even the teaching of design in Israel belongs to the 20th century. The question is whether there can be a typeface for Facebook, for example, that belongs to the 21st century. I don't have an answer yet."