

# Up close and personal

'So much work goes into a photo that it makes no sense for it to be used the next day to wrap up fish,' says photographer Vardi Kahana, who has just published an eye-opening collection of her work

By Ruta Kupfer

"If it were up to me, I would photograph everyone in the nude. Clothes bother me. They are a form of filth," says photographer Vardi Kahana, trying to explain why the first picture in her book, "Portrait yisraeli" ("Israeli Portrait"), recently published by Am Oved-Kargol, is a nude photograph. In this photo, we can see Aviv Geffen almost totally nude – down to the line of his pubic hair. The editor of the book's photographs, France Lebe-Nadav, believes that this photo has become an icon.

"Showing Aviv in the nude was an attempt to make a statement," explains Kahana. "I took that picture in 1993, when his career was beginning to blossom. The androgynous look was the central issue. I wanted to undress him in order to put that issue out there. There are some things in the human body that I find charming. He has a serious scoliosis and that causes one hip to be higher. I am wild about it."

For his part, Geffen was happy to cooperate. "I show my subjects Polaroid photos, even while I am working," the photographer continues. "I believe that this is the way things should be done. It makes no sense to manipulate the subject."

Kahana photographed Geffen for the now-defunct newspaper *Hadashot*. Ten years later she again photographed him, this time for the daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*, where she has been working (freelance) ever since *Hadashot* closed in 1994. She characteristically juxtaposed the old and new photos. "Naturally, Yedioth cropped the picture so as not to display any public hair. My pictures have not been cropped in years, but here the newspaper wanted to restrict me. This is not a crude photo, but perhaps it is not beneficial economically to print it. It's all a question of what the advertisers might say. That is the difference between *Hadashot* and *Yedioth*. Perhaps that is why *Hadashot* folded."

## Three days per picture

Vardi Kahana, 47, looks boyish, with loose-fitting denim overalls and short-cropped, light-brown hair. In the preface to her book, she writes: "Sometimes, despite all the good intentions and all the preliminary preparations, the wall is not breached. No window to the subject is opened. The subject refuses to cooperate and rejects all your proposals and ideas for a picture. In this case, the direct portrait, in a crowded frame, perhaps serves the newspaper's immediate need for illustration, but it does not stand the test of time. And that is why, in the final analysis, it did not find a place in the book before you."

If you were taking your own picture, would you be one of those subjects who would demand an extreme close-up?

Kahana: "Absolutely. I am very boring. It is also hard to photograph me because I am a control freak."

To dispel any doubt on this issue, she sharpens the focus: "Sometimes, an extreme close-up portrait is all you need – for example, the portrait of David Grossman. It is so full of sadness."

Kahana spends as much as three days on every photo published in the newspaper. "Since I come from the world of painting, I make many preparations. Sometimes I meet my subjects in advance, rummaging through their clothes closed to see what would be suitable. Sometimes I work several days beforehand, even though the photography itself might take only 10 minutes."

Three days on one photo is certainly not the average amount of time that a photojournalist would invest in a photograph. "I regard my photography as art, not a source of livelihood," she explains. "At times, so much work goes into a photo that it makes no sense for it to be used the next day to wrap up fish. But I

always say that ultimately there will be a book or an exhibition. For me, my newspaper is a platform. This is a package deal in which the newspaper also benefits. I always think about the longevity of a photograph."

In a documentary film on Annie Leibovitz, one of Kahana's chief sources of inspiration, superstar singer Mick Jagger says she tortures her subjects. "I do not try to wear the subject down," Kahana says. "I believe in collaboration. When subjects reach the studio, they know what they are about to go through."

Nevertheless, she admits that she prefers taking her subjects out of the studio "to extract more potential from the four walls. For Grossman's picture, I went to Jerusalem to speak with him and to see his neighborhood. Grossman refused outdoor photos; he came to my studio and looked straight into the camera. In my opinion, that is one of my best pictures. If you look at photography as a kind of struggle between photographer and subject, you could say that Grossman defeated me. But what a fantastic picture emerged from all that!"

The pictures on the book's jacket are close-ups. The front cover has a photo of actress Milla Jovovich. "When you choose who will be on the dust jacket, you must



be careful that it won't be someone who is identified with a book of his or her own – so that people won't think that this is book about Arik Einstein or Rita. People recognize Milla only on the second glance. She is beautiful and there is no manipulation done here so that she will come out looking beautiful. She has an immediate kind of beauty."

The back cover is a photo of Avraham Burg's back. This is not a mere coincidence. Kahana: "Everyone immediately knows it's him. The knitted skullcap fits in with the idea of Israeli portraits."

## 'From Savion to Hebron'

Kahana's Web site ([vardikahana.com](http://vardikahana.com)) includes a photography project that she and her husband, Eitan Ben-Eliyahu, call "The members of her family's pictures." These pictures will appear in an exhibition at the Israel Museum in June, under the rubric "One Family." Featured are Kahana's mother and two aunts – Holocaust survivors, daughters of a Hungarian-Czech family that was sent to Auschwitz, with numbers tattooed on their forearms. Additional relatives who appear are residents of Ramat Hasharon, settlers from Hebron, ultra-Orthodox Jews from Bnei Brak and kibbutzniks from Kfar Masaryk.

"This is a profound, emotional project that I have been working on since 1992. This was not a commercial project," she explains.

This is perhaps more of an Israeli portrait than what you have in your new book.

"The family project goes beyond Israel's borders. There are relatives that I have photographed in Copenhagen and the Netherlands. True, this is also an Israeli portrait, but the deeper I delved into my family, the more I realized that, while there are many like it, it is not a typical Israeli family. The families of

most Israelis are more homogeneous. The exhibition's subtitle could easily be 'From Savion to Hebron.'

"I called my book 'Israeli Portrait' because it contains photos commissioned for the Israeli press and because it features many Israelis. This is not the Israeli portrait. It does not represent Israeli society; it only depicts the people who are part of our cultural discourse."

In effect, Kahana comes from a different world. She grew up in a religious Jewish family. However, at 16, she abandoned her religious lifestyle, like her two brothers. She attended the Zeilstein state-religious school in Tel Aviv. "I was a typical member of Bnei Akiva (religious Zionist youth movement)," she says, and then qualifies that remark: "But don't forget I grew up in Tel Aviv. My parents supported the National Religious Party, and always voted for Avrum's father, Yosef Burg. When the Gush Emunim gang took over the party, they had a problem. My parents owned a grocery store; my mother was a Holocaust survivor; my father a refugee. They were working-class people and it was not easy for them to accept the idea that I wanted to become a painter. However, like a good yiddische mamme, my mother said I had talent and she nurtured it."

Kahana never completed her studies at the Midrasa art school at Beit Berl ("I was not accepted to Bezalel"). She was photographer Micha Kirshner's first assistant. "Sometimes practical work is more important than academic studies. Often, knowing how to make subjects open up and make them move is more important than knowing the difference between a boxlight and an umbrella."

Married to TV producer Dani Vesely ("Yatzpan"), Kahana is the mother of Gil and Roni, aged 17 and 12 respectively, who serve at times as models when she is making preparations for a shoot in the studio. Their Polaroid photographs open and close the book. "When I first became pregnant, I made two decisions: I would return the motor scooter to the editorial offices and I would stop crossing the Green Line."

## Eyes wide shut

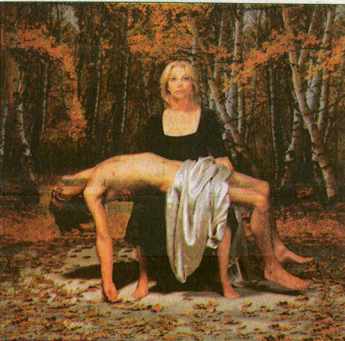
On one wall in Kahana's spacious studio, in her home in Ramat Hasharon, are Polaroid pictures of her subjects taped together ("This is my wallpaper"). At the end of the wall hangs the famous photograph of Emil Grunzweig, the peace activist, taken at the demonstration just before he was murdered. The decisions she made during her pregnancy are part of her response to the question of whether she misses photojournalism. "During the tsunami, I wanted to climb the walls because I wasn't there. It was such an unusual event from the photographic standpoint. But do I miss traveling around in the territories, being a bit like Miki (Kratsman) and Alex (Levac), colleagues with whom I started out on my professional journey? No. I always saw myself sitting in a studio, opposite a canvas or between flash units and studio lights."

The influence of classic works of art is recognizable in her photographs. Her photo of Rita recalls an image from Botticelli's "Allegory of Spring" and her picture of Aviv Geffen and his mother Nurit is a modern-day Pieta.

Is this an ironic photo?

"The Pieta is the very height of mortal suffering in the Christian world," she replies. "In an article, Nurit Geffen confessed that it was Aviv who 'raised' her. I said to myself, 'This family is constantly lamenting how horrible life is for it. Yet the lives of its members are wonderful. I wanted to tell Nurit, 'You want to know what you sound like?' Here, take this photo.' It seemed to me very appropriate to come with this bombshell on a small tombstack."

In the end, the subjects loved the photo. "I don't think that, in order to 'win' in pho-



Vardi Kahana in a self-portrait (top), and photos from her new book of David Grossman (far left), Aviv Geffen with his mother, and Eitan Ben-Eliyahu. "I choose kitsch and sweet fantasy because this is diametrically opposed to life."

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ography, you have to make the subject feel defeated. That is perhaps why some people think that I make my subjects more beautiful than they really are."

"This comment is a reaction to the argument that, notwithstanding her anti-establishment nature, Kahana's photographs are classic. They strengthen the subject's self-image and she is not above infusing them with a little kitsch (i.e., eyes

closed in total pathos). For example, her photo of the late singer Shoshana Damari as a saint whose head is encircled by a halo, with one of her hands on her breast.

"My language," declares Kahana, "is solid. It is important for me to get myself into the photograph, but I am not the most important figure – the subject is. I try to photograph myths as myths and try to exaggerate my subjects' image, which sometimes has no basis in reality whatsoever. I have photographed Mook E as Jesus. I have no problem with kitsch: I get into it with a total awareness of what I am doing. Many subjects live according to totally unreal images. Their lives consist of going to the grocery store and buying a roll and cheese. They don't lead lives of caviar and Champagne. Nor do they lead lives of 'sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll.' I choose kitsch and sweet fantasy because this is diametrically opposed to life. The photo of Shoshana Damari is an excellent example of the gap between fantasy and life, because if people had not donated the money, she would never

have received a decent gravestone. Eyes tightly closed, like nudity, create an aesthetic perfection. You don't always need the penetrating look."

"Pathos is my business. Even a stage-managed photograph has its 'moment of truth.' It becomes a document the moment the subject leaves the studio. I photographed Gili Pattir (a friend who was stricken with cancer; Kahana documented her until her death, in a series that was presented at the Museum of Israeli Art in Ramat Gan) with the understanding that every photograph could be the last. I photographed my parents one minute before my father was taken into surgery (after which he died). This is the most basic understanding of the essence of photography: commemoration."

Regarding the claim that she makes her subjects look more beautiful than they are in real life, she recalls the Andy Warhol quote she heard at a lecture given by the provocative photographer, David LaChapelle: "If you make them look beautiful, they will do anything."

## Uncertain terms

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as professionals attuned to the suffering of others, refrain from taking a clear stand on political and social developments that lead to human injustice. They remain bystanders.

Against the backdrop of the troubles brewing in Europe, Rolnik describes the decision of Max Eitingon (the founder of the first psychoanalytic institute in Berlin and inventor of a training approach that bears his name until today) to pack his bags and immigrate to Palestine. It was a move to which Freud and his daughter Anna strongly objected. Albert Einstein also expressed dismay. Once in Jerusalem, Eitingon settled in very quickly and launched into the establishment of a psychoanalytic society and institute in Palestine. He was the one who formulated the society's double mission: teaching and treating the needy.

In 1991, however, the Israeli Psychoanalytic Society deleted the clause about treating the needy from its charter – an unfortunate move, in my opinion, that has negatively affected its role in Israeli society. Once an influential component in the mental health system, the organization is now huddled up in its ivory tower, a kind of study house for psychoanalysts, each subscribing to his own beliefs and methods of operation, and mostly working for the private market.

The third part of the book, "Home-Grown Psychoanalysis," is about the Hebrew University's rejection of psychoanalysis. That the university consistently shied away from welcoming psychoanalysis and its luminaries into the academic world is strange, indeed. Freud's books were translated into Hebrew and were quite popular in intellectual circles, but not in academia. Only 45 years after Eitingon and Freud's negotiations

with Hebrew University chancellor Judah Magnes was the Sigmund Freud Center for Study and Research in Psychoanalysis and the Sigmund Freud chair of psychoanalysis established with the enthusiastic support and financial assistance of Anna Freud, both at the Hebrew University.

In contrast to the rejection of psychoanalysis by the Jerusalem academic world, its theoretical principles, and especially its clinical applications, were swiftly adopted by the kibbutz movement and various pedagogic frameworks. This clearly left its mark on the development of psychoanalysis in Israel, which evolved, over the years, into a discipline that was more clinical than theoretical.

With its handful of photographs and abundant stories, this book made me nostalgic for days gone by, when great enterprises were undertaken with collective enthusiasm and personal modesty. Psychoanalysis came into the world this way, as did Zionism and the Jewish state. Despite the obstacles, and contrary to most countries in the world (including the psychoanalytic superpowers of the past, like England and Germany), psychoanalysis in Israel is flourishing. The growing number of professionals applying for training at the institutes in this country that have been established by different schools of psychoanalysis can attest to that.

Rolnik has written an important chronicle of psychoanalysis that combines fascinating detective work, scholarship and painstaking historical research. Great care has also been invested in publishing this work, which is no mean feat with a text so rich in footnotes and references.

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## Sudoku

The game board is divided into 81 squares, with nine horizontal rows and nine vertical columns. A few numbers already appear in some of the squares. The aim is to fill in the numerals 1 to 9 in each of the empty squares, so that every row and column and every box (a group of nine squares outlined in boldface) contains all of the numerals from 1 to 9. None of the numerals may recur in the same row, column or box.

Solution to the previous puzzle:

9	1	3	4	8	2	5	6	7
4	5	2	6	3	7	8	9	1
7	6	8	1	9	5	4	3	2
1	3	4	2	5	8	9	7	6
8	9	6	3	7	4	1	2	5
5	2	7	9	1	6	3	8	4
2	7	9	8	4	1	6	5	3
6	8	1	5	2	3	7	4	9
3	4	5	7	6	9	2	1	8

su do ku  
© Puzzles by Pappocorn

	6			5			2	
4			6		9	3		
2					1			
	5			8			3	
	3					2		
9			4				7	
	9						8	
	8	6		2			1	
5			9				6	

Difficulty: medium

Tips and a computerized version of Sudoku can be found at [www.sudoku.com](http://www.sudoku.com)