



IN THE WORDS OF

YOSSI LEMEL

Born in 1957, Jerusalem, Israel

Resides in Tel Aviv, Israel

QUESTION: You were born in Jerusalem, so that makes you a *sabra*. And a *sabra* is also the name of a cactus native to Israel, (it resembles the nopal or prickly pear that we have in abundance in our own Southwestern desert.) You have used the *sabra* cactus in several of your posters. Can you explain its significance? A *sabra* is someone who is born in Israel, a native. It is also a cactus, you call it a prickly pear, it originated in Mexico. It was brought here from Spain, four hundred years ago. We have a saying about the *sabra*: tough on the outside, soft and sweet on the inside. So if you are a native of Israel, you are a *sabra*. Here, we use the *sabra* to mark the border between fields. But we are a country without a definite border, so in a way, the image of the *sabra* is ironic. Most of all, the *sabra* has thorns, it's not delicate, it lives in a very aggressive environment. In Israel, we import a lot of things, but we have exported three different religions. This little piece of land is very symbolic to maybe half the human population of the world.

I just returned from Tenerife. The whole island is a volcano; you can feel it. The people there are living on a volcano. Yet it is one of the most

peaceful places on earth. But (in Israel) we are living in a metaphorical volcano. Symbolically, we are dancing on a volcano. We are supposed to be a holy land. Extremists from all sides, Israelis and Palestinians, want to turn up the heat. There is a movement of extremism all over the world. Religious wars are the worst. It is very hard to find a solution without casualties. Extremists can cause an unbelievable eruption — extremists from all sides, absolutely.

QUESTION: Much of your work reflects a strong sense of outrage against injustice and persecution. Your father is a Holocaust survivor. Also, growing up in Israel, you must have known many survivors.

Both my mother and father are Holocaust survivors, and both are still alive and kicking. My father is eighty-two, he surfs the web, he is building sites, he is very active. Today he was reading the Torah at Synagogue. Each week you read a new part of the Torah, starting with Genesis, until you have read through to Deuteronomy. He was reading the part about the Devil and the big fire; this is very symbolic of the Holocaust. We have gone from the ashes to the Menorah. I also use the menorah as a symbol; I use a lot of Jewish and Israeli symbols.

My parents knew each other before the war, they lived on the same street, they were neighbors in Bedzin, Poland. When the Nazis came, my father's family was sent to Auschwitz. His father, mother, sister, and brother, his entire family perished. He was thirteen years old. He survived because he was chosen to be a guinea pig, for medical experiments, on the liver, kidneys. My mother was sent to forced labor camps, but she escaped.

She survived because she had blonde hair and blue eyes, so she was able to escape detection. But her six sisters all perished. After the war an aunt was trying to find survivors from the neighborhood. They were the only ones. So they rediscovered each other, and they got married.

QUESTION: Their experiences must have exerted a powerful influence on your work. Is there a connection? Of course. It was like an underwater mine; it was submerged for many years and then exploded. I had to become a father to realize its impact. Even now it's impossible to understand. The impact of this knowledge was like a train, a locomotive, very powerful. I learned how to direct it to achieve creative results. But it was not until I became a father, with a family of my own, did it really hit.

QUESTION: In fact, doesn't some of your recent work reflect on your family's experiences during or before the war? I took my mother and my daughter on a journey back to Bedzin, to find out what it was like seventy years ago, just a minute before the Holocaust. I wanted to understand Jewish life in Bedzin before the war. We learned the whole atmosphere, the spirit of the place. I tried to recreate, to rediscover, this spirit. We created a series of photographs, with my daughter playing the roles of my mother and her sisters. There were seven girls in the Garfinkel family. In Polish the project is called "Serce Moje." It means "My Sweetheart." (The posters were exhibited at the National Museum of Poznan, Poland, in 2008)

QUESTION: One of your posters shows a woman walking along a huge wall. She looks tiny. In the West, we recently celebrated the 25th anniversary of the destruction of the Berlin Wall. Does this strike you as ironic? The poster is titled the *United Colors of Beton*. This word doesn't work in English; it means "cement." Unlike the United Colors of Bennetton, it is ironic. It is not united, it is gray, no colors. It's also depressing.

Walls are meant to be destroyed. We had a wall in Jerusalem before the '57 war. Now they are building a new wall. They don't last. In Berlin they have a fragment of the old wall, as a monument. Even the Great Wall in China, now it is a tourist attraction. Now America is building a wall. You have to realize that walls can't stop people. Such a big wave — you cannot stop it. Once, Texas was Spanish. Now it is changing again.

Throughout history there are changes. Rome wasn't built in a day; it took a thousand years. But the Barbarians destroyed Rome — they couldn't be stopped. Today, there is a growing Islamic movement in Europe, and they don't want to adopt the culture of the host country. It is getting more and more extreme and we don't know how to deal with it.

Once, in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Islam was a civilizing movement. In the middle ages Islam ruled Spain. They were tolerant of other religions, including Christianity and Judaism. But after the re-conquest, (in the 15th century), Jews and Muslims were expelled from Spain. We moved to Italy, Greece, Turkey. Even in New Mexico, the Marranos (Jews who converted to Christianity) are part of this exile.

QUESTION: Many of your posters must be quite controversial in Israel. You also own an advertising agency in Tel Aviv. Have you experienced any repercussions, either personally or in your business? It is hard to tell. I have problems getting government projects, because of my opinions. Some people think advertising is really mercenary, that people won't tell you what they really think. There is the risk that people will choose not to work with you.

I did lose a client in the 1990s. It was a shopping mall. They objected to a poster I created for Independence Day; it used the colors of the Palestinian flag. Personally, I do get telephone calls. People express themselves, which I like. My dream is to get reactions. Even when people walk out of my presentations because they oppose my ideas — for me that is an achievement. When people react you have a success, even when people react negatively — then perhaps you can change their opinions.

QUESTION: How do you choose which causes you support? Usually I work with clients that I identify with. There are clients that pay and clients that don't. I am more attached to the pro-bono clients; they're easier somehow. Currently I am working with Yiddish Theater in Israel, as part of a rescue plan. Yiddish Theater has a lot of good values. It's a lot of fun. Many writers, artists, playwrights, are participating. I did the branding, graphics, etc. I like it, and it is also a mission. I also do projects that are totally personal. (I have) a need to express myself, to move towards making totally personal projects.

QUESTION: Please tell us about the process of creating your images. Some of the work is clearly studio photography, while others rely on location shots. Do you take your own photography, or do you supervise others? Sometimes I work with photographers; sometimes I take my own photographs. It depends on the circumstances. For the *United Colors of Beton*, a friend, a photographer, provided the image. For the Bedzin photos, there were three photographers, including me. That was a difficult shoot because my daughter had seven poses in each location, to make one photo. We shot on location, and I placed her using Photoshop. Software makes images like this easier to assemble, unlike the old days.

Previously it was very different. Look at the work of John Heartfield, a collage artist that fought against Hitler. Even today his work looks fresh and unbelievable.

QUESTION: From the outside, the conflict between Israel and Palestinian Arabs has been agonizing to watch. Do you see any hope for reconciliation, or some other resolution to the conflict? For the moment I am very confused. Fifteen years ago I was hopeful, but now things are more and more extreme. It seems much worse than before. I am also curious, worried, puzzled, and helpless for the moment. Earlier, I wanted to get out of the West Bank, and of Gaza. I know we should get out of the West Bank. But Hamas is very extreme in Gaza. And when people start firing rockets at innocent people, what can you do? But on the other hand I believe we must be two countries, side by side. Of that I am sure.

QUESTION: How strong is the movement for reconciliation in Israel? Is there a similar movement on the other side? If so, is there any cooperation between the two? Is there a Palestinian version of Yossi Lemel? Dialog is dying, unlike fifteen years ago. You need a partner to make reconciliation; it cannot be one-sided. I no longer have any contact with Palestinian designers; it is a very hard situation. Palestinians are becoming more extreme. Most people want to solve this, but the governments stand in the way. Fifteen years ago was very different. But then Rabin was murdered, assassinated by an extremist. His death was a decisive moment. Peace was murdered. Peace was buried there.

QUESTION: Your work addresses several issues, apart from the Israel/Palestine conflict. Recently, for example, you created a poster protesting the suppression of the Iranian election. Do you think graphic designers can have an impact in resolving social issues, or calling attention to social concerns? We are not changing the world, but we are helping people to be aware, and sometimes a change comes. So we help form a change. For example, in Iran, designers are reacting, they care so much, so they are attempting to create a change, to be involved, to bring a new spirit and new ideas. It is hopeful that Iranian designers are taking an active part in trying to change things. It is a keyboard revolution, and it has already made a difference, the people are exerting their power. I believe it might be like the swallow, the “Twitter”, the first bird that announces the coming of spring.

QUESTION: What advice do you have for students of graphic design? Would you encourage them to express their own individual concerns about contemporary issues? Absolutely. This is why I’m making these tours around the world, presenting my work. Young people are naïve enough to try to make change. It starts when you are young. I was 25 when I started expressing my ideas, in order to make an impact. Also, travel is important. In my case this shaped who I am today. I recommend designers be engaged: discovering, encountering language, people, cultures, opinions, thoughts. Any beliefs on all issues: identity, religion, history, politics.

QUESTION: What’s next for Yossi Lemel? (And do you have any comments you would like to express?) My next project is about my whole family — quite a shocking project. My wife is German, her parents and grandparents were Nazis. But there is a good lesson, a way of coexistence with the past, a way to catch the entire family, to see that (in a family), everything is all cultures. There is one commandment that is not a prohibition: honor your mother and father. When you respect your parents you will live longer — you get more years from the past. I get more years from my ancestors. It’s a kind of immortality.

Communication is very important. I learned a lot from Shigeo Fukuda, (Japanese sculptor, graphic artist, and poster designer). I met him a lot of times, and despite the language barrier we were able to communicate. The last time we met was in Mexico. He learned English at this time so he could communicate with me. He died in January 11, 2009. The point is that art and design are a universal language; they transcend language barriers.

