

אחת מנופים נעלונע ארבע



Letter Head

Every morning, riding his bike, Yanek Iontef makes the 14-kilometer trip from his home to the studio where he works. His real journey, however – from his childhood in Beltsy, Moldova, to becoming one of Israel’s eminent typographers – cannot be measured in numbers. “Hebrew is tough to design,” says Iontef, an inventor of Hebrew fonts who doesn’t even like reading the language — LAHAV HALEVY

Spring in Beltsy is nothing like spring in Tel Aviv. At a time when impatient Israelis already make their way to the beach and city girls disappointedly store their winter boots, residents of the second largest city in Moldova still plod their way through the vast muddy expanses the city is built upon.

Eight months a year the residents of Beltsy tread in mud – a deep, murky mud of thick consistency. At morning time, one can spot thousands of children marching to schools and kindergartens in cumbersome galoshes, with slippers they will put on during school hours carried in their backpacks. Hundreds of pairs of galoshes line school entrances, washed by their owners prior to entering and neatly arranged by order of class and surname. The city’s residents are thankful for their good fortune in mid-winter, when the mud freezes and becomes, for a month or two, a hard and non-messy stretch.

In the spring of 1979, Heinrich Kogan, a 67-year-old Jew who was born in Beltsy and spent most of his life there, except for several years of Siberian exile, plodded his way through the mud to the Jewish cemetery, accompanied by his grandson. Kogan and his family were about to leave the USSR for Israel. The grandfather was well aware that he was departing from his city for good, and he took his grandson with him to the cemetery so that he, a high school art student, would pour pitch onto the chiseled inscriptions on his parents’ graves and faithfully copy them to the rear side of the gravestones. Kogen knew he would no longer be able to visit his parents’ graves; in case the graves were vandalized, he wanted to insure that his parents’ names would be copied onto the tombstones’ rear side (which the vandals

might inadvertently miss), so that his parents’ memory might be perpetuated for several more years.

It was then that Yanek Iontef, age 16, was first introduced to Hebrew characters. Thirty years later, Iontef looks from his studio window on the fourth floor of Rothschild and Allenby Streets – the very heart of secular, contemporary and up-to-date Israel – and wonders at what he sees, as if he was parachuted there only minutes ago. All things stir his curiosity; everything astounds him. Thirty years ago, shortly after immigrating with his parents, sister, grandmother and grandfather Heinrich, and studying Hebrew for a short period in an ulpan in Ashdod, Iontef settled at his aunt and uncle’s living room on Ha’aliya Street, near the Levinsky market – a mere 200 meters from where he now stands – and began studying at the Thelma Yellin art high school. “I was a strange bird there,” says Iontef, “and I loved every minute. Everyone was casual, very open and could do what was on their mind. I felt I’m in heaven.” Each day, after returning to his aunt and uncle’s, he would wander around nearby streets, wanderings he has never ceased to this day. Once every two weeks, he would board a bus and visit his parents, who settled in Haifa. The next year, his aunt and uncle had to move north, following their employment and so he, too, was forced to leave and transfer to a technical school in his parents’ city. Yanek is familiar with each and every business and shop that was or still is in the adjacent streets, chats with their proprietors, shows regard and absorbs their stories. He knows who was there before and what is about to be. He photographs every sign, new and old, and regrets the disappearance of some. Yanek asks questions and memorizes every answer. He uses his head like a computer

hard-disk. He “catalogues everything into drawers,” and sometimes, when pulling out the wrong information, he will detect this immediately: “Uh–oh, wrong info,” he will say, and promptly correct himself. We have been sharing a studio for four years now. Over the years, he has asked me myriad questions, the answer to each of which he still remembers. He knows my personal and familial history much better than I do. He revolves in circles, at times concentrating or expanding in scope, to slowly weave a detailed and accurate network of info. He refers to my grandparents as people he only yesterday sat with for tea. If I manage something particularly well, he will right away say – in a Hebrew entirely of their generation – “Well, well, you would have made your grandpa proud” and smile endearingly. Yanek feeds off the lives of others. When I want to tease him, I sometimes try and force him into confessing that he is actually a KGB agent, and that this whole graphic design thing is nothing but a cover.

Yanek is a typographer – a designer of letters. Each morning, he comes to the studio, switches on the computer, opens his sketchbook and contemplates the shape of the Hebrew letter. “The problem with the Hebrew letter is its formal meagerness,” says Iontef, with a hint of defeat in his voice, a kind of true and honest lament on the limited possibilities and ample difficulties entailed. “Look,” he says, “when the Greeks were out to shape their letters, they observed the world around them and said to themselves, ‘Some shapes are rectangular, some are round and some triangular. Let’s make us an alphabet that will include a variety of these shapes, so it would be formally interesting and visually pleasing.’ We Jews have decided to base our alphabet on one shape only, the rectangle.

Images
Typefaces Foodi, Colony, Murzilka, Soda and Pauza (above)
FF Cartonnage typeface, 2003 (right)
Previous page
Yanek Iontef
Photographs by Lahav Halevy



ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

אבגדהוזחטיכלמנסעפצקרשת

[Fig. 1]

As a result, we have ‘won’ ourselves a formalistically boring language, one that is harsh-looking and even harder to design and develop from the formal viewpoint. “Sometimes I think that there is nothing more to be done, only variations on the two or three types we already have,” he says, and sighs once more.

The Hebrew alphabet is a strange bird among the written languages. It is not related to any other written language, and has evolved in jumps over time and place. Its relatively small number of users also contributes to the difficulty in its formal evolution. Beyond the fact that it is written from right to left, the biggest and most crucial difference between the Hebrew and Latin writing systems is the diacritic, which in Hebrew is placed within the letters (as opposed to above them). Another difference is that, contrary to Hebrew, in the Latin characters verticals have greater stroke width than horizontals [Fig. 1]. Therefore, in a Hebrew text, the horizontality of the line is more emphasized and each line differentiated, whereas in a Latin text – where the lines construct a vertical structure and the diacritics a horizontal one – there is a balanced, interwoven block. The Hebrew alphabet comprises 22 letters, five of them with final-form variations. Some of the letters are ascenders or descenders. In addition, since there are no vowels in Hebrew, a diacritical system is there to indicate the right pronunciation. All these features make it hard to create a unified and homogenous text block. “To resort to the cliché, Hebrew is not only a tough language,” says Iontef. “As a graphic designer, I permit myself to say that Hebrew is mostly a tough language to design. As Israelis, we have distinguished ourselves by using a writing system reminiscent of no other in the

world. True, this characteristic is part of the charm and uniqueness of our culture, but the fact that the rest of the fonts are not available to us necessitates a unique and ongoing design exclusively made for our local alphabet.” And this is how Yanek came to design letters. He got to design letters through his thesis project at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem (“Oh, the best years of my life”). He set out to design a series of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn book covers, done three times – the first using typography alone, the second using a combination of imagery and typography and the third with an emphasis on image that also conveyed the text. In the first two sets of covers, he resorted to using only the Cyrillic alphabet. In the third, out of consideration for the targeted audiences, he also integrated Hebrew. But since he found no Hebrew font that he felt was right for the project, he preferred to draw the letters himself. Afterward, he was slowly drawn in further, as a result of commercial projects that required specific attention to the shape of the letters. Iontef acquired his artistic background in Beltsy, at a young age. His grandmother, who was convinced her grandson was endowed with great artistic talents, personally addressed the headmaster of the city’s fine arts school after Yanek, then 11-years-old, failed the entrance exams. “I remember her gestures as she sat by me and sharpened my pencils with old-style shaving blades.” She convinced the schoolmaster to accept him for a trial period of three months. Four years later, shortly before immigrating to Israel, Yanek graduated there with honors. “In the mornings I went to a regular school, and at 1 P.M., when school was out, I’d go to the art school. The daily and weekly schedules were set for us all during the four years. We studied composition, drawing,

aquarelle, sculpture and art history – all in an academic approach. The same things again and again.” This academic approach is the source of Yanek’s abilities even in his current work. Compared to how Israelis grasp time, the Russians among us operate as long-distance runners. Something about the Russian spirit and culture enables them to breathe deeply and slowly; while we, the sabras, hurry on to the next thing, they are immersed in some thorough and fundamental undertaking that it is hard not to admire and envy. Yanek is not the only one. David Polonsky for example, the illustrator in charge of the visual side of *Waltz with Bashir*, is also made of the same stuff. And they are not alone. “Already in high school I was a kind of attraction for the sabras,” says Iontef. “When they saw I could copy any Greek statue or renaissance painting more faithfully than anything they have previously seen, they took pride in me. I was a kind of pet newcomer.”

There is something about Iontef that remains of the outside, something of an onlooker. Yanek resides in a Tel Aviv suburb, on the ninth floor of a quintessentially Israeli building. He is married to Israeli-born, Ayelet, and his two children, Matan and Naama, are sabras. His day-to-day life is clearly Israeli and all his dreams are related to the Israeli sphere. But at night, when all go to sleep, he watches the Russian channels. “I was uprooted from my home once, so I no longer care where I’ll be,” he says. He does not read in Hebrew – that is to say, he can, but chooses not to. “This might come in handy when designing, the fact that I perceive the letter as pure form, not the way you Israelis perceive it, through its verbal value.” Yanek designs his letters slowly. Over the

years, he has mostly been commissioned by big commercial clients – banks, cellular phone companies, newspapers. From time to time, when the mood is right, he designs a letter for no particular reason. “I do not consider type design a task,” he says. “Luckily for me, the field is poor and there is always room for new fonts. I set up a niche for myself in designing fonts, and I am in competition with no one. This is why I am not after high production levels. Most of all, this is a kind of therapy.” And still, his letters adorn the Israeli public space: *Haaretz* and *Calcalist* newspapers, Bank Hapoalim, the Strauss group. Fonts he initially designed for two cellular companies – for Pelephone (the first time that an Israeli commercial group adopted a font as part of its corporate identity; the font was co-designed with Eytan Bartal) and Cellcom (which has adopted one of his existing fonts called Erica Sans) – are now ubiquitous and used by many designers. Another letter, Meitar, he especially designed for artist Uri Tzaig, who used it for a large work he exposed at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum. All in all, Iontef has designed some 30 fonts. The rights to some of them are reserved by the clients that commissioned them, but most are available for general use. “It’s two very different things when someone commissions a work and I have to answer to specific needs, and when I work completely for my own sake.” The formal structure of a new type usually comes after scribbling a certain shape on a sheet of paper. But this scribbling is product of a thinking process, of trying to answer to a particular need. Thoughts of this particular need may pop up during a 14-kilometer morning bike ride from home to studio, or as a result of months-long staring at a TV series, broadcast over two years, about the siege of Stalingrad. Yanek definitely likes history. The



[Fig. 2]

Image Pauza typeface, 2002 (right)



[Fig. 1] A typical latin serif typeface, **Modern No. 20** shows the bold vertical lines, while the most famous Hebrew typeface, **Frank-Rühl**, is designed with its horizontal lines emphasized.

[Fig. 2] The 12-part **Foodi** font family varies from Black to Light, with six regulars and six condensed versions. Example text is from Genesis 1.

[Fig. 3] **Erica Sans** typeface (Light, Regular and Bold) with its curved tops, is named after British type designer **Eric Gill** (1882 – 1940), creator of Gill Sans. The Hebrew design correlates to the Latin one.

אבגדהוזחטיכלמנסעפצקרשת אבגדהוזחטיכלמנסעפצקרשת אבגדהוזחטיכלמנסעפצקרשת

[Fig. 3]



need for a new letter can arise intrinsically – it can emerge during preparative work on a catalogue or another such extensive project that “asks” to stand out even on the typeface level (which is a very common thing in other, more westernized cultures), or it can come from a general feeling that “we are in need of such a headline typeface.” Yanek relies on history and tradition; His respect and admiration for his predecessors – be it those living among us or some Jewish scribe from 17th-century Amsterdam – are admirable and striking. He likes to rely upon heritage. He relishes every piece of paper with letters printed on it – and it is there that he will often see the tip of an idea not wholly consummated. Work on a letter requires a broad understanding of its potential scope. Letters devised for small-size readability do not appear “beautiful” when

blown up to 10cm size. The rules that apply here are altogether different and pertain to print and vision engineering. Such things should be accounted for as the level of spotting on the page, the paper clarity and the strain on the reader’s eye after continued reading. Yanek specializes in crafting fonts usable in seven or eight points – very small sizes. He also produces some of his fonts in varying emphases, thus opening up different possibilities for the designer. Foodi, for example, is a typeface designed in 2004 for the texts and headlines in the gastronomic magazine, *Al Hashulchan* (“On the Table”). It comes in 12 emphases, an unprecedented number in Hebrew. In addition, Yanek “equips” his letters with all the symbols and punctuation marks – also something not locally learned [Fig. 2]. Work on such a typeface takes about four months. “The only thing I

came up with that hasn’t been done before – and that was long before the Foodi, as early as the Erica Sans, a very popular letter of mine – is the curve of the upper horizontal,” he says. “I drew it from Latin. By doing so, I gained a more dynamic shape, an appeal for the eye. None of my predecessors looked at this possibility, and I still don’t see how.” [Fig. 3] Incidentally, it should be noted that typeface monikers are, of course, not prosaic. Yanek’s best known letter, Erica Sans, “converses” with a well-known typeface by the British Designer Eric Gill, called Gill Sans. Another typeface is named Murzilka after a children’s magazine he read as a child; Foodi is, as mentioned before, a typeface created for a gastronomic magazine. Yanek recently finished working on a typeface supported by a scholarship he was awarded from the Art Fund of Mifal Hapais (the Israel

Images
Three variations of a book cover for Aleksander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* / Graduation project at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, 1989.

עיצוב הפונט ינק יונטפ	www.fontef.com	
סידור טקסט		פונט תפארת מפרט אותיות

רגיל
אני בן 42 ואמי בת 67. אלמלא הלכה לעולמה, היתה סבתי כיום בת 105. בקיץ של שנת 74 נפטר אבי אמי, וסימן אנב לכתו את סימונה של תקופת ילדות בעלת גוון מסויים. בכל השנים שקודם למותו היינו, אחותי ואני, מבלים את חלקו הגדול של הקיץ בבית סבי וסבתי שבחיפה. בבוקר היינו יורדים באוטובוס קו 3 מהמרכז לחוף הכרמל. שם הייתי נכנס למלתחות הנשים עם סבתי, דודתי, בנות דודתי האורחות מנרגמניה ואחותי הגדולה. גופותיהן העצומים והשבעים מלחם-במרגרינה של זקנת חיפה זכורים לי היטב ומשולבים בטעמים המתוק-מלח של ענבי סולטנינה שנאלצתי לאכול בידיים שנשטפו זה עתה בכי חים. בקיץ בו מת סבי הייתי בן תשע. במוחו נראה לי זקן מאוד וכך נראתה לי גם סבתי. אלא שהיא המשיכה לחיות עשרים ושתיים שנים מאוחר יותר. כמעט רבע משנות חייה בסך הכל. שנים שהיו עשירות, פוריות ומלאות חיים. לקראת סוף חייה נפרדה סבתי אס אס מתחומי עניין והתנסקות שליוו אותה במשך השנים, אס משום שחשה שלא חוכל להם יותר או שהיו מיותרים לטעמה. גופותיהן העצומים והשבעים מלחם-במרגרינה של זקנת חיפה זכורים לי היטב ומשולבים בטעמים המתוק-מלח של ענבי סולטנינה שנאלצתי לאכול בידיים שנשטפו זה עתה בכי חים. בקיץ בו מת סבי הייתי בן תשע. במוחו נראה לי זקן מאוד וכך נראתה לי גם סבתי. אלא שהיא המשיכה לחיות עשרים ושתיים שנים מאוחר יותר. כמעט רבע משנות חייה בסך הכל. שנים שהיו עשירות, פוריות ומלאות חיים. לקראת סוף חייה נפרדה סבתי אס אס מתחומי עניין והתנסקות שליוו אותה במשך השנים, אס משום שחשה שלא חוכל להם יותר או שהיו מיותרים לטעמה.

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[Fig. 4]

Lottery). A few years ago, he had far-reaching plans for it: “I would like to design a letter that could replace FrankRühl as the basic Hebrew font,” he explains. “But more and more I feel this to be impossible.” FrankRühl is the very image of the Hebrew language. It was designed in Leipzig at the beginning of the 20th century and carries the names of its two creators. It has become so deeply rooted in the look of the Hebrew language that one cannot conceive of Hebrew without readily imagining the type. It is a phenomenon unique to Hebrew. The Latin type we all know as Times New Roman is actually a group of many fonts, in which the variations are readily perceivable; no two publishing houses use the same kind. In Israel, however, nearly all the books and newspapers are printed in FrankRühl alone, except for a few poetry books. Any attempts previously made at replacing it have ended in failure. “I regret to see that one typeface rules so dominantly an entire language,” says Iontef. “But it is a long-term mission that can take several years, and I think I no longer have the nerve it takes to complete it.” Throughout this past July, at the very time he claimed he wasn’t qualified for the mission, Yanek arrived in the studio every morning at around 4:30 A.M. Quietly working his way through the dark, I would find him at 7:30 A.M. – our usual morning coffee time

– growing more relaxed from day to day. “I’m in a good shape,” he would say, not referring to the bike ride. By August 1, he had it almost done. The next morning, I received a phone call from Michal Sahar, a gifted typographer in her own right. “Have you seen Yanek’s new font?” she asked. “I opened the mail last night to find it there. It made me shiver. You understand it’s history in the making, don’t you?” What is history in terms of a new font? The example above [Fig. 4] shows the new Tiferet typeface in 6- and 9-point size. The text you are reading now is 10. It is not about aesthetics; it has more to do with the engineering of the eye. It is light and clear, letters don’t get “bloated” due to the limits of the printing. It is truly a happy moment for Hebrew type design. “Nu,” he asks. “Professional?” “Nu?” means “So?” in Hebrew. He asks this of each and every customer whenever he finishes a job. Most of them, of course, are not qualified to give a serious answer. Contrary to the above-mentioned evidence, Iontef generally has less of the nerve it takes to sit and work. He would rather be busy with his bike or cook. In both areas, he is enthusiastic to the point of being obsessive. If he plans to cook dinner, for example, he will leave for the market early in the morning. Until guests have arrived at the appointed time, he will be busy in preparations, which could even take

[Fig. 4] The most recent typeface, **Tiferet**, was commissioned by the national lottery company. Font size is 6- and 9-point.

Images
Soda typeface (Right)



12 hours. When he is not busy cooking, he is often riding his bike. And when he not riding his bike, he is searching for spare bike parts in shops in downtown Tel Aviv or taking an old chassis to be repainted or reconstructing the logo of a 1950s Italian bike, “because it has to be done properly.” When he finds an item he considers valuable, a large smile spreads on his face, like that of a kid who just discovered a treasure. Something about it takes him back to bygone times and places. After finishing his share in the process of digitizing letters derived from Armenian ceramic tiles from the old city of Jerusalem, Iontef is now involved in a project to restore and renovate the old cemetery on Tel Aviv’s Trumpeldor Street. All of the city’s founding fathers are buried in the cemetery, located at the heart of the city, and the place is about to become a national site. Yanek knows the place from well before he was asked to join the project. He likes to hang around there. In his view, the gravestones there hold “a treasure of Hebrew letters.” In the years when he taught, he used to start the semester by meeting his students in the cemetery. With a genuine and honest enthusiasm, he would infuse them with a bit of history and then ask them to copy, by rubbing black graphite against paper, those inscriptions that they found visually interesting. Just as he himself copied letters that he no longer actually remembers, back in Beltsy, in 1979. “I always look back on it – a 16-year-old boy who emigrated from Beltsy to Israel, and now you can look at letters he designed in newspapers or museums or on yogurt cups in a grocery store. I am a local success story. It isn’t that I can’t do more, but why should I? I am happy with what I’ve got,” says Yanek, as a big smile of shyness – or rather, of knowing he just did something naughty and is about to be scolded – spreads on his face. →