

ART

That tempting red thing

This volume of the complete images of Israel's leading graphic artist is nothing less than a comprehensive reference source to the many layers of Israeliness – the good, the bad, and the ugly

Tartakover

by David Tartakover and various authors
Am Oved (I-Hebrew), 494 pages, NIS 148

By Gilad Melzer

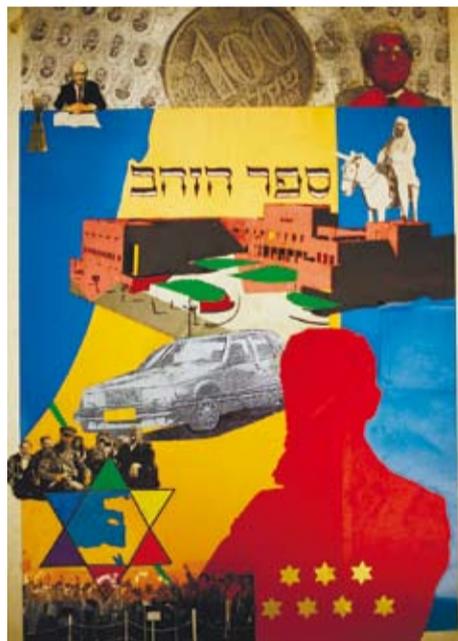
The first task of the graphic designer is to stop the observer in his tracks. To cause him or her to be amazed, and to wonder: What is that thing? Within the visual ocean in which we swim, that in itself is a very complicated task. And now, let's see you not noticing this volume in the bookstore. That tempting red thing, whose thick spine conveys only one word, in square white typography: the name of the book, which is the name of the author, which is the name of this thing.

Already on its jacket, this book, which includes the "complete catalog of images with additional expansions," cross-references the two pillars of activity of artist David Tartakover: text and image. Make no mistake, they only seem to be separated here: On the front cover is the text written by one of his outstanding students, talented designer Lahav Halevi, and on the back is a processed photograph, a close-up with almost no margins, of Tartakover's familiar face, in a black-reddish print that emphasizes what "correct" polished graphics try to conceal – the grainy print grid on which the image is imposed.

Here you will find graphics that are proud of the name. Here nobody is selling cars. So that even before we "enter" the contents of Tartakover's new book, we feel amazement as we encounter this two-kilogram pause, a kind of tightly packed carton which is first of all a beautiful object, one that says: Even if you don't buy me, you have to stop for a moment, to peek.

During the stage after they have trapped their prey, good graphics help sales. Great graphics engrave themselves on the eye, in our awareness, thanks to their ability to condense a quality or an idea into an image or a few words, and usually by bringing together the image and the words. But graphics, like any art, touch on genius when they create, improve and expand the language of the medium. It's not a painting, it's a Picasso. It's not a play, it's Beckett. It's not a short story, it's Kafka. It's not a film, it's Perlov. It's not graphics, it's Tartakover. This is language in the extreme sense of the word, which sometimes leads to parody, to attempts, usually unsuccessful, at imitation, but language nonetheless – that same wonderful thing that no child creates but that flows from him.

Such is the graphic creation of David Tartakover, a dictionary of Hebrew visual language. Maps and symbols of government. Simhat Torah flags, and flags of generals and of the heroes of Zionism. A sesame-patterned floor tile. Postcards. A guard on horseback. A camel. An Arab in a kefiyah. A roaring lion. A tank. The symbols of military units. An ashtray filled with cigarette butts. Yeshayahu Leibowitz separated from Meir Kahane (in a shirt with a yellowing collar) only by Michelangelo's statue of Moses. The flowers of the Land of Israel in aquarelle. A small round red

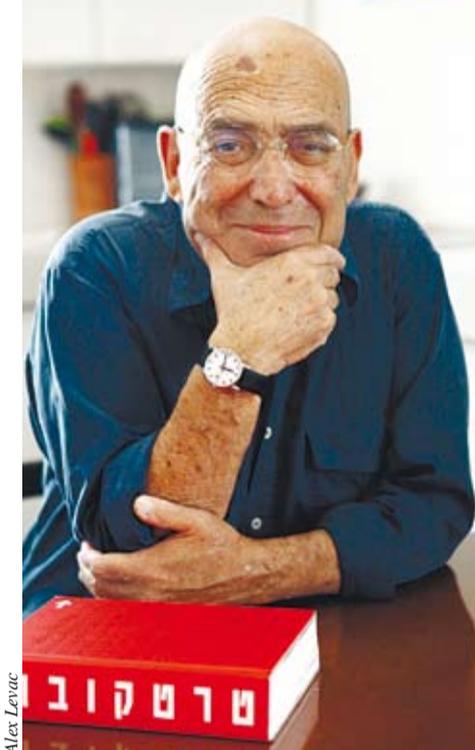


Tartakover's rescue activity turns archival images and press photographs into icons.

bell. Ben-Gurion's mane. A bit of Russian Constructivism that immigrated to Israel and encountered Bauhaus design that joined the local bright yellow to the classic red Elite coffee, but bearing a sticker with the handwritten word "tea."

Signs of Israel's archaeology fever encounter Tartakover's private obsession with excavating the depths of visual treasures: from labels for products that haven't been on the shelves for years but with which he floods our awareness, not as a nostalgic index, but as a sign

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Tartakover. Excavates depths of visual treasures.

of a certain space, time, place, like capsules of awareness, up to contemporary objects (as of that moment, of course – 1974? 1982?). These objects illuminate an experience that goes beyond the borders of the poster and comments on it: From subjective archival photographs (which for the most part were created under the sponsorship of the Zionist institutions) to contemporary press photographs – which have been turned into icons by way of Tartakover's rescue activity.

And of course, the text. The words. The precise, non-ingratiating typography that demands: Read, there's not a lot of text here, but what there is must be read. In many cases what is written here is a call to us, the readers, to read. Because who has the strength to read so much, after we've leafed through the newspaper, for example the old Ha'ir, where in the late 1980s Tartakover had a page called "Weekly Reaction." Attached to the bottom of the page-poster with the picture of the soldier, who is photographed from behind with a loaded submachine gun crossing his back as he carries two bundles of cudgels, is the caption – with a slight slant – "This is how the planters walk."

That was the face of the Zionist enterprise in the late 1980s. The "joy in the heart and the spade in the hand" [from the popular song for Tu B'Shvat, the tree-planting holiday] was replaced by the bark of orders and the breaking of bones. The first intifada came and went, the second intifada is long over, the tree planters have been replaced by the uprooters of olive groves and the arsonists who torch mosques, and this poster, like many cre-

ated by Tartakover, has become a kind type of gloomy prophecy.

Hebrew visual dictionary

The book, promises, as mentioned, expansions on the corpus of images, into the Hebrew visual dictionary. After almost 400 pages of images come the explanations of the pictures. They mark ranges and possibilities. In the opening text, for example, poet Zali Gurevitch focuses on the first two images in the volume. A landscape painting of a Swiss lake, to which in his poster version Tartakover appended, in English (which is rare for him), the caption "A wonderful country." And on the other hand, a tourism poster for the Land of Israel, to which he added the caption, again in English, "Another country." Gurevitch writes that "the dual image says together what appears in two words in a later poster, 'From revival to catastrophe.' The country is neither."

But I think that it is both. It is both living hope and nostalgia (do you recall the voices this past summer reminiscing, "Once there used to be here...?"), it is both searing disappointment and penetrating criticism, it is both a longing for another place – whether it is here or there – and it is also an invitation, genuine or ironic, to come here, to be part of the promise. For Tartakover, Switzerland is no different from what London (or Switzerland) is for playwright Hanoach Levin. It is both real and an object of longing, but it is here too. If for Levin its place is on the Tel Aviv balcony, or between the breasts of the next-door neighbor, for Tartakover it lies in the call, in the (disintegrated, violated) promise of the Declaration of Independence, in the violent and cynical encounter between the reality and the slogans, the clichés, the proverbs – the soundtrack of an Israeliness that has gone crazy.

Were it not for the fact that much of its content is so depressing, I would recommend David Tartakover's book as the most fun book you'll purchase this year. Because of those troublesome images, I am changing my recommendation and claiming that it is a treasure: not exactly what we thought, but all in all we have profited in a big way. We have that stop-sign-red thing, the complete catalog of images served to us by Tartakover, as an ongoing and changing warning light, as a reference to the many layers of Israeliness, of identity, of memory, as the longing for the possibility of a varied existence, citizenship and culture in this place, Palestine – the Land of Israel.

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