

News Stories

World This Week

Editorial

Opinion

Directory

Home » World This Week

A meeting of the minds, and hearts – in a New York neighbourhood

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Yael Ben-Zion is an Israeli photographer based in New York City. Her book “Intermarried” looks at mixed couples – partners from different racial or religious backgrounds. Ben-Zion is herself one half of an intermarried couple: her partner is French. Golda Arthur talked to Yael Ben-Zion about the book and its premise.



"Papers" - Yael Ben-Zion

What triggered this project was an advertising campaign of the state of Israel that targeted Jews who were “lost” to intermarriage. It was a video and TV campaign and it caused a lot of outrage. It featured pictures of missing people on electricity poles and a voice in Hebrew that said, “Have you seen these people?” and that 50 per of young Jewish people outside Israel were “assimilated” and so we were losing them. The notion was to bring Jewish people back to regain their connection. As an Israeli, I was not surprised by the sentiment behind the campaign but I happen to be married to someone non-Jewish. It made me think of not just interfaith marriages but why people from different social groups marry other people.

Q Many of your photos reflect the way people live – and in very ordinary surroundings. Was this deliberate?

This is my style of photography. These are not snapshots but they are very subtle. I didn’t know the vast majority of people I was photographing. I would come to their homes and we had a conversation, with me asking very personal questions. They would just do their thing I didn’t ask them to pose. What I wanted to do is allude to their experiences.

Q You are intermarried yourself – to a Frenchman – your kids are half Israeli and half French, and you all live in New York. Where does that leave your kids' sense of identity? What do you do about the kids' sense of identity?

This is one of the main things people think about. The vast majority of people I photographed had young children, so they put some thought into the issues that would come up. Both my husband and I are secular so religion wasn't a big thing for us. In Israel, religion and nationality go together so I am giving my kids a sense of Israeli holidays. Many of the families chose to live in this particular neighbourhood of New York (Washington Heights) because it is so diverse they thought their kids would be comfortable there.

Q What has the feedback been so far?

The responses to the book and accompanied exhibition have been very positive and encouraging. People seemed to relate to the images and texts on various levels and the work enticed conversations about the subject, which was my goal in creating it. However, in a few rare cases, articles about the work encountered some racist and antisemitic comments aimed against the notion of featuring a project about intermarriage.



"Sketches" - Yael Ben-Zion

Q Does it make a difference where you live, as an intermarried couple? New York city is vastly multicultural and very accepting for the most part.

Yes, neither of us is American, so we found common ground. Having a third country made things easier for us, we don't have much social pressure around us. If we lived in Israel or France the tensions would have been much more noticeable. New York is a special place, and being intermarried is not the exception here, but maybe it's optimistic to think the rest of the world will follow. We have a long way to go before we are one global society. Statistics might show that these marriages are least stable, but the people who approached me, these people have a good connection with each other. When you enter into an intermarriage, you have to think hard, and this is what makes the connection stronger. Call this an alternative wedding album.

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