

# Celebrating the present



**YONIT SCHILLER**  
FROM BUFFALO TO  
JERUSALEM, 2006

• ESTHER POSNER

“Life is fleeting, everything is ephemeral,” says Yonit Schiller. “As a photographer, I strive to capture the essence of a second in a single frame. Photography is a loophole through time because it allows the moment to linger. I find that gratifying. For me the goal is to suspend that moment in time.”

She describes the image she took of a Bedouin girl. Years ago, Yonit and her friends were touring through the Sinai Desert when they stopped to have tea in a Bedouin tent. “From the corner of my eye I noticed a young girl walking toward us across the desert. As she came closer I could see that she was on a mission – that she was going to have to cross through barbed wire to reach where we were standing. And very casually, the girl lifted up the wire with one hand and continued walking. There she was, walking and lifting an obstacle and moving past it.”

Yonit was born in the city of Safed in 1982, and lived a happy childhood in Kibbutz Yiftah until the age of four, when her

family moved to Jerusalem. After two years, during the height of an economic recession, the family moved to Buffalo, New York.

Growing up in Buffalo as part of the Jewish minority was a change for Yonit. “I was proud of my roots and my heritage, and I knew I would return to Israel one day,” she says.

She moved to Toronto to study at York University and received a BA honors degree in history and religious studies. As a freshman, she was given a key to a small darkroom hidden away on campus where she would develop her negatives and black and white prints.

“Working in the darkroom for many hours to develop a handful of images was a form of meditation for me,” says Yonit. “I felt excited watching the paper in the developer come to life as an image would suddenly appear. Today, that process of waiting and anticipation has been replaced by instant gratification through digital media.”

Eventually, she would turn a hobby into a profession.

After graduating from university, Yonit spent a year in Israel learning in a seminary in Jerusalem. While walking through the Mahaneh Yehuda market one day, her camera as always



on-hand, she noticed a shop owner, seemingly resigned and exhausted, about to sit down. He folded his arms, laid his head down and rested, surrounded by his vegetables. Yonit took the photo. Almost a decade later, after moving to Israel, she returned to the market and found the same man in the same position, in the same moment: his arms folded, his head down, resting, surrounded by his vegetables. A reflection on life.

Following her year in Israel, Yonit accepted a teaching position in a Jewish day school in Boston and became immersed in the community. She explains, “That formative experience would ultimately serve as a catalyst for my pursuit of a career in education.”

At a crossroads in her life, Yonit considered her choices; how to synchronize her passion for photography, the Land of Israel, education and people. She envisioned her path. It was her time to return to Israel. She moved from Buffalo to Jerusalem in 2006, at the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War.

“I chose the 7th of Tamuz,” she says, “the same date my family and I had left Jerusalem when I was a young girl to move to Buffalo.”

In Jerusalem, she decided to continue studying and received a master’s degree in Jewish education from the Hebrew University. “After graduation, I felt that tour-guiding would be a way of harnessing my strengths and passions,” says Yonit. She enrolled in the guiding course and received a Ministry of Tourism tour guide license in 2013. In time, she established Lion of Zion Tours.

For Yonit, guiding means cultivating connections to the Land of Israel and, on a deeper level, using the country as a vehicle for introspection and self-discovery.

In March 2014, she joined a mass rally of more than 400,000 haredi protesters who had gathered from all over the country at the entrance to Jerusalem, to protest against a new bill that would have required mandatory army conscription for yeshiva students.

“I arrived on the scene, the only female photographer in a sea of black and white,” recalls Yonit. “As I made my way through the throngs of men, I came across a soldier standing in the middle of the crowd, a flash of green in a black-and-white scenario. As I snapped the photo, some yeshiva boys turned to look at him in astonishment.

“It was a study in contrast. A soldier amid the



haredim, an army uniform in a sea of black suits and white shirts. A story is never just black and white. There can be shades of green. There are nuances.”

The camera lens is a tool through which Yonit not only sees the world but engages with it. She brings her thoughts, emotions and instincts with her as she documents life experiences, rites of passage and landscapes.

Whether photographing or guiding, Yonit celebrates life. Her love for her work resonates with others. She strives to emphasize the power of contrast and connection, and portrays the essence of a single moment in a single frame.

Photography site: [www.yonitschiller.com](http://www.yonitschiller.com)  
Guiding site: [www.lionofziontours.com](http://www.lionofziontours.com)



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