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TOUGH TIMES IN THE BIG APPLE





Young Israeli artists
find the success
they experienced at
home has failed to
meaningfully translate
in the United States

By Michael Wilner *New York*
Photos by Anna Hiatt

Arlene Gould had chutzpa when she decided to move to New York. Motivated in part by the allure of larger audiences the 28-year-old singer sold everything in her apartment for a jolt of quick cash. And, on what little money she raised, Gould flew to America and hoped for the best.

The risk she took was compounded by all that she left behind. This is a singer with the vocal talent to have made the top 12 on the Israeli equivalent of American Idol, and for years after, found no problems booking performances across her country. But the musical options in Israel are limited, she tells *The Jerusalem Report*. And that was a problem.

"I'm more connected to my black side here, and that's really transforming my music," Gould says. Born in Kibbutz Kabri in the north, her estranged father is British Caribbean. "I can finally do Afropop here. That's what I've always wanted to do."

Some 18 months and seven apartments later, things are beginning to fall into place. But Gould can only work in the United States on an artist's visa, and thus finds herself booking small gigs at Jewish cultural centers in New Jersey to make a living. She knew she was leaving a fishbowl, but didn't realize she would be entering an Olympic-sized pool; the competition is tremendous here, and her past

Art

successes in Israel have failed to translate as she had originally hoped.

Gould's story is not uncommon among Israeli artists trying to make it big on a larger stage – indeed, the largest stage of all. She is part of a community of creative artists in New York who were all successful in Israel, but are now struggling to parlay those successes in an environment where the odds against them are immeasurably greater.

Living in an alienated environment really challenges you, but what better material can an artist ask for?

“Ultimately, it's just about a bunch of talented people trying to break into a much larger field,” says Tal Goldberg, an aspiring director who is finishing his first full-length feature film. “And retaining our culture in our work is a task. It's a really important and difficult task.”

Painter Ronit Levin Delgado may have had an easier path than her colleagues, winning herself a Fulbright scholarship to work in the US after showing in Tel Aviv's Gutman Art Museum, operating her own studio in Tel Aviv and being featured in several private collections. But the only feasible way she can stay in the US another two years, after the completion of her Fulbright, is as an intern.

“I WOULD certainly like to be home, but the Israeli arts community isn't exactly blooming,” Delgado tells The Report. “Here you have to survive. You have to fight. In Tel Aviv, you really know everybody and you take it for granted.” She, like the others, has struggled over just how aggressive to be in the American environment, where *chutzpa* is often read as rudeness. Yet it is just that aggression, she claims, that has given her opportunities to work with more established artists.

“The ones who have achieved success here have done it effectively on their own,” says Rivka Saker, who established a Sotheby's presence in Israel three decades ago and has since founded Artis, a New York-based non-profit organization devoted to spreading Israeli visual arts

globally. “To take the academic path is probably easiest, but it's difficult for artists to make these connections or pay for that path by themselves. So that's something that we try and help with,” she tells The Report.

Artis is one of a few organizations trying to facilitate the expansion of the Israeli visual arts community beyond the country's borders. Growing rapidly since its inception a decade ago, the non-profit has put 50 students through a professional development program, offers internships, and sponsors two to four students a year with grants to complete Columbia University's MFA program in the discipline. “Those grants can often make all the difference in an artist's career,” says Yael Reinharz, executive director of Artis, who says the demand for Israeli art is increasing.

Saker estimates that roughly 40 Israeli artists are in true demand internationally, receiving requests from museums in all major capitals. But not all of those 40 are established in the marketplace – and that figure is likely an all-time high.

“People are really interested in Israel and the Middle East to begin with, so the interest in the subject matter, and how artists are relating to where they come from, makes the work particularly compelling for a lot of people. And the abstractions from Israel are often read as a political statements in and of themselves,” Reinharz tells The Report.

Delgado's most recent work is far from abstract. Inspired by a visit to Jerusalem last summer, she felt a distinct pinch of loneliness – aggravated by her father's death shortly after the trip – that motivated her to bring a piece of her culture to New York. She found herself struggling to adequately grieve so far away from home. She didn't sit *shiva* properly, she says. So she got creative: she began creating her own rituals through her art.

“I spent some time observing the rituals at the Western Wall – the kissing, the touching, the notes – and that's what triggered me to bring a wall here,” she says. “I'm basically kissing it into existence.” Thus, a wall was erected entirely of lipstick. She expects it will be more accessible to women than the Western Wall itself, which separates the sexes from praying with one another (she'll allow intermingling at hers).

Delgado's sense of longing – and the

boldness she felt was required of her to be successful in New York – is an experience shared with her peers in this unsympathetic town. “We were all successful in Israel, but here we are nobodies,” Alizarin Weissberg, a multimedia artist relates to The Report. “Nobody knows who we are. And one of the challenges, mentally, is dealing with the feeling of being really small and insignificant.”

Weissberg was able to profit in Israel off of her quirkiness, as she puts it, with her perfectly combed, aggressively unnatural pink hair, and a style to match. With a wildly successful lifestyle blog in Israel, she found herself on the first series of “Connected,” a hit Israeli reality television series that prompted international spinoffs. She was on the cover of magazines. She was in commercials. And much to her enjoyment, she hosted events in Tel Aviv's biggest clubs.

EVEN IN film, an industry experiencing a small renaissance in Israel, there is great difficulty in translating talents across cultures. Director Tal Goldberg came to New York after being accepted to participate in the New York Television Festival, and continues to commute back and forth from Tel Aviv.

When he first came to New York, he thought if he stayed long enough, he would meet the right people. “It was certainly easier for me to make a feature film in Israel than it would have been to produce it here,” he says. “Even the A-list actors there are more accessible, the budgets are lower, and really everything is smaller. And I think that's an advantage.”

The mission of Israel's Office of Cultural Affairs in New York is to prop up and promote artists such as Gould, Delgado, Weissberg and Goldberg. With teams devoted to performing arts and music, visual arts and literature, and film and media, the office supports tours and residency programs, facilitates artistic collaboration and works to provide publicity to its artists.

“There's not a day in New York that goes by without an Israeli cultural event,” says Anat Gilead, consul for cultural affairs. “We're here to help, even if we can't help with direct financial assistance. Just knowing the artist is here is beneficial for everybody,” she tells The Report. The Israeli government presence does help



foster collaboration. While artists can't get direct funding, the aid they receive for specific projects – a dance performance that requires travel and housing, a photography exhibition, and the like – can go a long way.

Perhaps the fastest growing arts discipline in New York for Israelis is jazz,

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where the scene has come to appreciate its imports as some of the most impressive new players to enter the stage in recent years. Last year, "Jazzrael," which debuted at the Guggenheim, celebrated the trend

as a true Israeli musical phenomenon. The consulate sponsored the event. "Sometimes, for these artists, coming here is about exposure," Gilead says. "But sometimes it's about enriching the work."

Sitting in the studio that doubles as her bedroom – when her mattress folds up, it doubles as studio foam to catch the sound of her music – Gould struggles through the lyrics of "Seasons of Love" from the Broadway play "Rent," as she plays the piano, less comfortable as she sings in a second tongue. "It's so much harder for me in English, because you have to think differently," she says.

She'll keep two songs in Hebrew in her repertoire and will create the rest from scratch. Her current project has a social message. She's vegan, and she wants to address the costs of sticking to a dietetic principle in her next song. The garden of vegetables she maintains outside her

(Above) Singer Arlene Gould has soundproofed her Queens, New York, bedroom so she can use it as a studio; (preceding pages) painter Ronit Levin-Delgado tours New York's Chelsea art galleries in March

adopted home in Long Island City has withered. Gould is not accustomed to snowstorms. "I'm not thinking about my music in terms of what sells – it'll always be more in the indie area," she adds. "But I do want to succeed. I'm hoping if you're authentic about it, people will connect."

Being in America, she says, has reminded her of what it historically means to be Jewish. "Living in an alienated environment really challenges you. You have to search inside yourself for heritage," she says. "But what better material can an artist ask for?" ■