

# CHARACTER PARTS



Mordechai Beck talks to Israeli artist Avi Katz and finds an illustrator keen to champion stories and full of references to fine art traditions



**T**he apartment in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan that Avi Katz shares with his wife, a sculptor, is far from the glamorous villa you might expect from one of Israel's most prolific illustrators. It does not even have a studio; just a combined work space/salon. A small table crowded with the traditional tools of the trade – pens, pencils, brushes, inks and papers – sits opposite a computer table with two juxtaposed screens.

“This is the drawing table,” Katz says of one screen, “and this other is my toolbox and palette.”

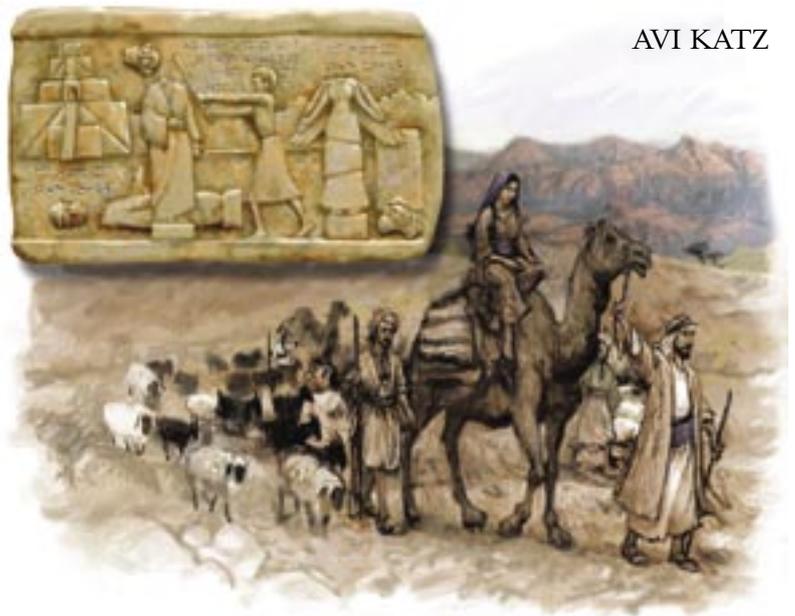
He picks up a stylus and scribbles on a small tablet; coloured squiggles appear on the left screen. “I can draw directly into the computer like this, but usually I like to start with a drawing on paper, in pencil, ink or watercolour. I then scan it in and continue the illustration digitally. I can e-mail the finished work to magazine offices in Jerusalem, or to a client anywhere in the world.”

It was not always this simple “I used to send every drawing by taxi to Jerusalem. On the last day I'd take a bus to the office and do the final couple of drawings on the spot as writers handed in their stories to meet deadline. Now I can turn a drawing around in minutes without leaving home”

The computers also help him to track the number of illustrations he has done. He calculates that he has created over 5,000 illustrations for his main work at *The Jerusalem Report*; an average of one a day.

Unusually for someone involved in caricature, lampoons and cartoons, much of Katz's work is rooted in fine art traditions. His work is studded with graphic references to western art history from mosaics and classical sculptures (for example, his version of Laocoon fighting the serpents shows Ariel Sharon and his sons struggling with financial and other scandals) to Modigliani (hinted at in a “naked” *Torah* scroll to show the





sensual relationship between the *Torah* and the Jewish people). He used Leonardo da Vinci's analytical drawings of the human brain to depict brain-damaged old people and transformed Grant Wood's famous "American Gothic" couple into a haredi Jewish couple mired in their own narrow world.

"Whether I define myself as an illustrator or a cartoonist, my schooling and skills come from the tradition of painting and fine art," he says. "But I hope the average reader will enjoy the work even if they don't connect it to the original sources," he adds.

His most avid audience – readers of the international bi-weekly *Jerusalem Report* – would agree, for he has been delighting them since the magazine started 17 years ago. Whatever his inspirations, all his work for the *Report* and other magazines is fresh and wholly his own.

Born and bred in Philadelphia in the US, Katz was introduced to art by his mother, who had attended art school. While still at school he enrolled at the Fleisher Art Memorial. "This was once a six-floor urban monastery," he explains, "You 'graduated' up through the floors till you got to the top."

Although many of the students stayed on the lower floors for years "drawing flowers, bottles and tins", the 12-year-old Katz decided to shortcut to the sixth floor. He arrived clutching his precious wooden box of oil paints, but the teacher, Filomena Dellaripa, who specialised in pastel portraiture, was adamant that he was too young – especially since there were nude models in the classes.

"I started crying, so she left me alone. After half an hour, she came across and said 'I see you know your business' and let me stay," Katz recalls.

He started illustrating as a teenager when he was baby sitting for money. "The kids' parents were reading *The Lord of the Rings* to them so I offered to illustrate the page they were on, on condition that they shut up," he explains.

Realising that he wanted to turn his art into a "real pro-

fession", Katz went to Berkeley in California. "In the 1960s Berkeley was famous for sex, drugs and treason," he says. "Besides these things, though, I wasn't sure what to study." He abandoned architecture, terrified at the prospect of constructing a building that people would actually have to live in, and started studying fine art. However, he was also worried that he might be drafted for the Vietnam War. One of his sisters had been studying for a year at the Bezalel Academy of Art in Jerusalem, so he decided to join her for his third year. "I had been to a Hebrew day school," he says, "so I already had some Hebrew and friends in Israel."

Ironically, although he avoided Vietnam, he did have to shorten military service in Israel and continued in the reserves afterwards. He also saw action in the First Lebanese war.

Meanwhile at Bezalel, while some of his teachers, including Joseph Hirsch, Avraham Ofek and John Byle, encouraged his efforts to produce traditional figurative work, many were unsympathetic. "One of my teachers, the late Rafie Lavie, was a leading exponent of abstract art. One day he said to me: 'Well if you insist on doing figurative work, you have to decide whether you are a post-Impressionist or a Cubist.' According to Lavie, what I was doing could no longer be considered art. His own solution was to scribble on a surface and call it art. In contemporary art shows I rarely find something that excites me. All the classic virtues – skill, sensitivity and draftsmanship – seem to have gone by the board."

Only when he took up illustration full time at 30 did Katz find an audience, clients and colleagues who shared his love of well-crafted pictures that unashamedly portrayed something and told a story – something fine arts critics sneered at. In 1990 *The Jerusalem Report* was founded as a weekly news magazine and Katz, who had been teaching, exhibiting paintings, illustrating children's books and drawing for various Israeli newspapers and magazines, was asked to do its black and

white illustrations. Today the magazine comes out fortnightly in full colour and Katz's illustrations accompany articles on every subject, from politics to books reviews.

"The *Report* never pressured me to develop a characteristic look," he says. "On the contrary, the editors encouraged me to play with style and technique according to the subject and tone of the article. This way I never bore myself (or, I hope, my audience)."

His drawings accompany articles by writers across the political spectrum. "It can be difficult to illustrate an opinion I disagree with," he admits. "Sometimes I have to find a way to relate to the issue without supporting, say, a fascist point of view. Only a few times over the year has my editor said 'I love your drawing, but you'll have to redo it because it says the opposite of what is written in the article.'"

He started drawing portraits at an early age, surreptitiously drawing teachers on a pad under his desk at school. Portraits, realistic and humorous, are now one of his key strengths, however, although the authors of books reviewed in the *Report* often ask for original prints of his paintings for their books, unlike many successful caricaturists, he rarely gets requests for his portraits.

"I was told that the octogenarian Shimon Peres was on the verge of tears about one drawing of himself in which I'd depicted him as an Energizer Bunny, but he didn't ask to buy it," Katz says.

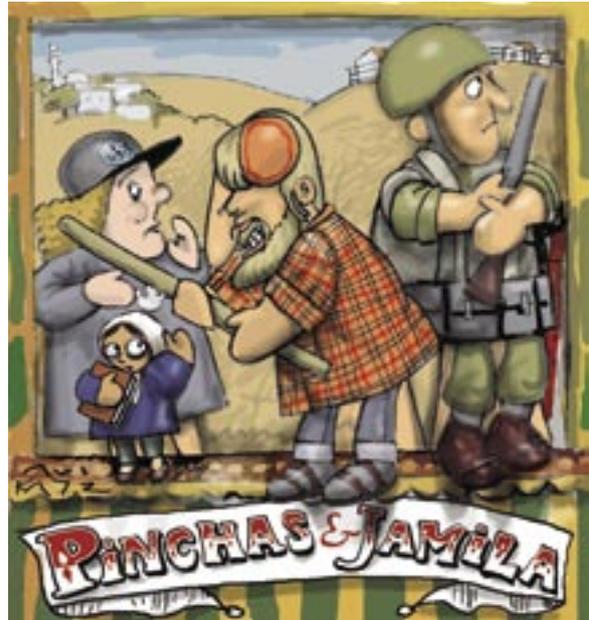
Apart from his newspaper work, Katz has also illustrated over 100 books for children. "Once I get a project, I do my homework to ensure that I get the period costume right, or, if there's a duel going on, that I get the right weapon, or if there's travelling, the right ship," he says. "I don't want to get caught out by some critical teenager."

Sometimes he is surprised by the freedom he is allowed. "I was approached by the Yad Ben Zvi Institute for a Biblical book for secular schools. I thought I wouldn't be able to put in muscular men and treacherous beautiful women, but they agreed that I could."

The *Bible* is the source of a lot of his work. Here, too, he aims for precise details and authenticity. But today much of his research can be done on computer. "You don't have to go to a library any more," he comments. "There's lots of stuff online. I found ancient Egyptian paintings, for example, showing Syrian travellers who were clearly Semites. The 'Canaanite haircut' depicted in ancient paintings shows the way they trimmed their beards, with a goatee, a long beard on the chin and long lock at the back. Similarly, my ancient Israelite soldiers invariably have a helmet wrapped in a turban, because 'putting on a hat' in Hebrew is *lachbosh kova*; literally 'wrapping your hat' and is connected to *tachboshet*, a bandage. That's how they strapped their hats on."

A recent project from a German non-governmental organisation deals with the demilitarisation of Southern Sudan's militias. "They are trying to encourage people to hand in weapons and, since most of the people there are illiterate, we're putting together a comic book explaining why it's necessary," Katz explains. "I was invited to go to Sudan to see for myself, but I decided not to. Sudan has no relations with Israel – and, besides, it's a very dangerous place."

Of course computers are not always available for research. "I was asked to illustrate a book about Beduin and the author, Shabo [Shabtai Levi], travelled across the Sinai while it was still under Israeli control and talked to the locals. They told him: 'We're not the real Beduin; they live in the hills, and you can't get there by jeep.' So he took a camel and found the 'real Beduin'," he says. Shabo collected two volumes of stories they told around the camp fire, one of Beduin love stories and one of tales of the supernatural.



Shabo showed Katz slides of the nomads he visited. "I made a special effort to get the details of embroidery and costume right for each tribe," Katz recalls. "Later, Shabo revisited the tribes and they were amazed that he had found a 'Bedouin illustrator' who had drawn the people so accurately."

At the other extreme, when he illustrates science fiction (a favourite commission), he can let his imagination run riot, but he admits that he finds it a challenge to invent a costume that has never existed.

Katz has also tried his hand at animation, another area that has been aided by technology. "What once needed hundreds of artists working on each frame now requires a few people with computers," he marvels. His work in this field brought him to the notice of Disney Studios, yet this interest has been confined to side projects, while he remains largely a classical illustrator.

"A few years ago I went to Saint-Just-le-Martel in France for an international festival of cartoonists. When I told them how much I was producing, they assumed I must be ordering a new yacht each year," he laughs. "I know people who supplement their income with advertising, but that's not for me. I prefer working on journalism and literature because these are things I like."

And he does these brilliantly. As one of his former colleagues, journalist Gershom Gorenberg, recalls: "I was stuck with a really difficult assignment. When I at last finished it, I asked Avi to illustrate it. He did it so well, I gave him the ultimate compliment – 'Avi, you've made my article redundant.'"



**Mordechai Beck** is a Jerusalem-based print artist, writer and teacher.



