

## Under falling Gaza rockets, Tel Aviv's prostitutes sew together a new life

A Tel Aviv group of women seeks to aid those seeking to break the cycle of prostitution through fashion design and the ability to dream of a way out of a much more everyday type of war.

By Ron Ben-Tovim | Jul. 14, 2014 | 1:25 PM | 2

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**Location:** Bezalel Gallery

**Time:** 7 P.M.

**In the neighborhood:** Soot-filled industrial warehouses stand silent as the sun slowly sets over Tel Aviv's south. The streets, deserted even on normal evenings in this commercial side of the city, are emptier than usual, just hours after a rocket launched by Gaza militants was intercepted a few blocks away.

**Venue:** A four-story, modernist building, one of several lining the street. A large handwritten sign posted next to the entry reads: "This is not a building protected against bombs! Responsibility is on the visitor alone!" Inside, a few flights up an International-style stairwell, there is an intimate gallery with walls, painted green and white, covered with artworks of various shapes and sizes.

**Simcha:** Opening of the Hofhot et Hayotzrot (Turning the Tables) exhibit

**Number of guests:** ~100

**A brief history of time:** Turning the Tables is an NGO and thriving fashion design studio, founded by Lilach Tzur Ben-Moshe around 2009, and geared to rehabilitating women who have been, or are, working as prostitutes in the Tel Aviv area. A one-time fashion writer spending much of her time in the city's seedier areas, Lilach felt the need to do something to help the women she passed by every night.

After making contact with the support organization and hostel for local prostitutes, Saleet, a group consisting of Lilach and some enlisted friends established a fashion design course nearby, meant to both provide the women with real tools with which to escape the vicious cycle in which they were trapped, as well as a safe space. Lilach: "We were a place they could dream in, which is something that is still very central to what we do."

**Arranging the show:** Hoping to take Turning the Tables to the next level – a bona fide design studio where the women involved could have a full-time job – Lilach set out to organize a benefit. She got in touch with her art-curator friend and former Haaretz writer Yam Hameiri, and the two contacted several leading Israeli artists who gladly donated works toward the worthy cause. Yam's one condition was, however, that the art displayed would deal with the broader theme of "a new beginning," as opposed to those dealing directly with prostitution because, he says, "The essence here isn't the political, it's the personal."

**Rites:** Men and women, a majority in their twenties and thirties, and all casually but elegantly dressed, trickle into the gallery space. Soft music is playing in the background, as visitors survey the artworks hanging on the walls.

On one side of the room sits "Anat," 47, a life-long prostitute and a participant in Lilach's project for the last year or so. Effectively thrown out of her house in Israel's north after coming out as transsexual at 19, Anat, then a male Israel Defense Forces soldier, arrived in Tel Aviv penniless and homeless. A rather worldly soldier friend introduced her to the world of prostitution. Says Anat: "For the first time in my life I had lots and lots of money."

Upon her discharge from the army, after beginning regular hormone treatments already toward the end of her service, Anat went ahead and completed her transformation into womanhood, just as she made her entry into prostitution "official": "On the day I was demobilized I bought myself a wig, high heels, clothes, and rented out a hotel room. It started there."

After almost 28 years in that world, dealing with addiction to both drugs and alcohol, as well as with the emotional strain of leading a life of prostitution, Anat heard from a friend about Lilach's project and thought she'd check it out. Anat: "I had this fantasy of being a fashion designer when I was a child. I used to sew, too. I had a machine, I'd cut, sew. I loved it. And then I got there, and it was all arranged. All you needed to do is just sit down and sew."

"The way Lilach accepted me was extraordinary. A lot of love and hugs. I still have breakdowns, today, too, and she's always there for us."

As Anat talks, in the background, a video-art installation begins its performance, sending pulsating, jarring rhythms into the gallery space, with a video projection of a man in a hooded jumper and a mask projected on the wall.

The deafening noise, bearable to some, who continue chatting and pointing at the artworks for sale, nevertheless prompts a few to take their cell-phone conversations and cigarettes out to a small, rickety terrace on the other side of the room.

Suddenly, a bright light appears over the darkened warehouses, rising up to the sky and culminating with a small explosion, an Iron Dome projectile intercepting a Gaza rocket launched at a town just south of Tel Aviv. Muffled explosions are heard, some shaking the windows. The mingling continues inside.

Two middle-aged men, now finished with their cigarettes, discuss the air show, as an elegantly dressed woman calmly wonders: "Those were interceptions?"

"What did you think they were?"

"I don't know, maybe fireworks."

**Music:** Pulsating video-art industrial music and the echo of distant explosions.

**Food:** Salted peas, peanuts, fava beans, and bunches of fresh green grapes.

**Drink:** Red and white wine, and water, served in plastic cups.

**Word in the ear:** Lilach: "We believe that prostitution, for a lot of people, is borne out of a lack of options, and this organization is working for more options. An option to dream, to dream of something good, of something else, of a new possibility – even if that doesn't seem like a very detailed plan yet."

**In my spiritual doggy bag:** That real-life conflict doesn't end in one fell swoop, but that the ability to dream of a better life is essential for any healing to take place.

**Random quote:** Two elegantly dressed women checking out the simple snacks: "What a *shkhuna!*" [a Hebrew slang expression, alluding to the low quality of life stereotypically associated with low-income neighborhoods].