

# The Potent Imagist

*With fierce determination and dedication the eminent Israeli photographer Micha Bar-Am has, for six decades, captured the people and events of his country, those that have shaped its destiny, both in times of tranquility and conflict. The world that he has photographed is full of joy, passion, and pain.*

By Gil Goldfine

The recording and dissemination of historical events is, and has been, for the most part a literary convention. We read, and are inclined to believe, the writings, sometimes the rantings, of the guardians of quasi-personalized truths from Plutarch and Josephus to Edward Gibbon and Max Hastings. These celebrated historians, a few among the multitude, have provided their communities with a sense of a past that covers the glorious and mundane, the sanctified and the vilified, the courageous and cowardly. Occasion, place, footprint, and individual characters are often embedded deep in recollection, causing objectivity to get lost in the mayhem of time.

What does one say about the visual archiving of history? In modern times, from the Renaissance to the present, Western culture carved out for itself a perception of social and religious events via a pictorial record from, let's say, Rembrandt's drama-laden biblical epics to Grosz's biting acerbic commentary on German society. But with the emergence of the photography in the mid-19th century and the invention of the small, hand-held Leica 35mm camera in 1925, an innovative brand of interpretation was born—rapid documentation and archiving of a visual history.

Quite different from earlier photographic modes of expression, this new form of recording events with mobility and ease created an assembly of, for want of a better term, photojournalists who, for the past eight decades, have devoted their creative and moral energies

into providing their public with accurate, contextual, and newsworthy images. The eminent Israeli photographer Micha Bar-Am, although considered by his peers and his admirers a photojournalist, rejects this title and prefers to be called a chronicler,



Micha Bar-Am, *Grocery, Beirut*, 1982. ©2011 Micha Bar-Am/Magnum Photos.

someone who is able to move beyond the story line and develop a conscious awareness of his subject, and hopefully, pass it on to his viewers.

Micha Bar-Am was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1930. In 1936, with his parents

Max and Hanna Anguli, he emigrated to what was then Palestine under the British Mandate. With the United Nations declaration of the partition of Palestine in 1947, and the subsequent outbreak of hostilities between Jewish and Arab forces,

Bar-Am was called upon to serve in the Haganah (later to become the Israel Defense Forces), fought in Israel's War of Independence, and witnessed the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

For 60 years, Bar-Am and the State of Israel have been inexorably tied together. He began photographing life on Kibbutz Geshar Haziv with a borrowed camera and never stopped recording the country's major events from immigrant's tent camps in the 1950s to more recent dramatic events like confrontational episodes in Gaza during the second Intifada in the late 1980s. Traveling from the small farming village of Metulla on the northern border with Lebanon to the Red Sea port of Eilat, he has, during war and peace in the cities and the countryside, captured on film every possible human condition within the fabric of Israel's population. The secular, the religious, the Jew, Muslim, and Christian in the throes of pain, sorrow, redemption, happiness, hope, determination, rejection, wonderment, intrigue, concern, confusion, understanding, solitude, conflict, peace, birth, life, and death.

To mark this celebrated career, Bar-Am is being honored with two simultaneous exhibitions, one at the Willy Brandt-Haus, Berlin, and the second at the Open Museum of Photography in the Tel Hai

Industrial Park, Israel. The collaboration between these two institutions has created an incredibly exceptional overview of Bar-Am's work. Both displays and the accompanying encyclopedic book, entitled *Insight, Micha Bar-Am's Israel*, transport those who are familiar with his prints and those who have never encountered them into an interlaced voyage of visual delights assembled not chronologically but by themes: *Transitions, Negev, Sinai, Jerusalem, West Bank, Cityscapes, Lebanon, Gaza, Golan Heights, Galilee, Peki'in, and Family*.

**T**he realization of these exhibitions has been a near impossible task simply because the Bar-Am archive numbers some 500,000 images in negative, bromide, and digital formats. Nevertheless, after countless deliberations between Micha and his wife and professional partner Orna, followed by additional culling and supplementary filtering together with the exhibition curators, the Berlin exhibition was hung with pictures from most of Bar-Am's major assignments, while for the Israeli enterprise they chose an infrequently displayed, very personal portfolio of the Bar-Am's immediate family coupled with a cache of truly humanistic images captured over a 30-year period that give credence to the lives of the Sabbagh and Sachnini families, Christian Arabs residing in the Galilee hilltop village of Peki'in; and the Zinatis, a Jewish family, also from Peki'in, who, according to their historical records, have lived in the village since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Neither of these latter groupings is episodic nor do they intrude into the lives of others and do not have a narrative story line. Each black-and-white and color print is a statement of devotion in its broadest sense of the word. Far from the grit and cloud cover of a battlefield or the ranting perplexity of a political demonstration Bar-Am captures a second in time that touches one's own experiences with the uncontrolled playful acts of children, docile pets, and true friends. For him, these families are corners of solitude in a world of frenzy and uncertainties. Chosen to be the lead photograph on the exhibition invitation, *Orna* (1971) contains all the trappings of a modern-day Vermeer from her tilted head and face captured in natural illumination from an undisclosed source to the play of dappled light



**Micha Bar-Am, Artillery Barrage, Suez Canal, 1973.** © 2011 Micha Bar-Am/Magnum Photos.

from a bright exterior casting muted shadows in a darkened kitchen. Another picture, *Samir Sabbagh, his Son Hanna and his Uncle Rajik Najib Huri* (1977), is a dramatic triple portrait with similar trappings. Sidelight creeps into a darkened interior where eyes, especially those of the baby Hanna, both fearful and quizzical, search the room for an unseen and unknown persona.

Although he had prior field experience, notably in the mid-1950s with the archaeological expeditions searching for the Dead Sea scrolls in the Judean Desert, it wasn't until the autumn of 1956 that Bar-Am's talents as a chronicler of significant events, cataclysmic and passive alike, were recognized with his battlefield photographs of the Sinai Campaign, followed a few short years later by his coverage of the momentous Eichmann Trial in 1961.

Bar-Am's professionalism and engaging personality have brought him into contact with other renowned

photographers, writers, and artists, a dozen of whom have written short essays to accompany each chapter in the book and as enlarged panels in the exhibitions. Among them, in addition to the curators Alexandra Nocke and Naama Haikin, are the historian Simon Schama, *New York Times* journalist Thomas L. Friedman, author John le Carré, art critic and museum director Marc Scheeps, photographer Herlinde Koelbl, and Israeli novelist Yoram Kaniuk.

A year after becoming an independent photographer he met Cornell Capa (brother of combat photographer Robert Capa, a charter member of Magnum, who covered Israel's War of Independence in 1948 and was killed by a landmine in Indo China six years later) and together covered the 1967 Six Day War which, together with his coverage of the Yom Kippur War, resulted in a number of his most memorable images. *Artillery Barrage, Suez Canal, Yom Kippur War* (1973) is a picture of memorable proportions that reaches a



**Micha Bar-Am, Landmines, Northern Sinai, Yom Kippur War, 1973.** © 2011 Micha Bar-Am/Magnum Photos.

level of being one of the preeminent images of conflict ever photographed. In his concise essay John le Carré had this to say about *Artillery Barrage*:

"... they have come under ferocious fire by Egyptian artillery at a notorious bridgehead ... the man with the notebook is a military correspondent. Micha happened to be on the scene and was chatting in Arabic to the prisoners when all hell broke loose. As prisoners, captors, and reporters crouched together under murderous shellfire, the air became

filled with body parts. Intuitively, Micha went on shooting. The 'composition,' he says, 'took care of itself.' And so was delivered a classic photographic testament to the absurdity of war."

Call it intuition, coincidence, or just a twist of fate, the sort of paradoxical encounters that Bar-Am stumbles upon, during conditions of peace or times of hostilities, seem to come more often than one would imagine. And when they do, they are instantaneously captured by his ever-critical eye, snapped by his indefatigable Leica and etched in bromide—not to be easily forgotten. Reflecting on the past, Bar-Am acknowledged that to be a photographer is something of an ego trip. Alone in the field with little to guide you but your instincts and your self-image, one's temperament matures along unequivocal personal and ideological lines.

**I**n 1968, as his career formed within these boundaries, Bar-Am became the only Israeli photographer invited to join the prestigious Magnum collective and the same year was appointed Middle East photographic correspondent by the *New York Times*, a post he held until 1992. These two marks of respect were for a photographer who was entirely self-taught, an autodidact with no formal professional training but imbued with an unyielding need to document on film his country's endless domestic predicaments and foreign clashes. This fervent association between man and place, between persona and milieu was and remains Bar-Am's passion.

As a child Bar-Am admitted that he dreamed of being an explorer, an ocean



**Micha Bar-Am, Church in Peki'in, 1957.** © 2011 Micha Bar-Am/Magnum Photos.

traveler leaving from the Haifa Port where he worked as a teenager, determined to discover far-away, exotic lands as did the authors he read and admired like Jack London and Rudyard Kipling. Adventure would come, but in the different guise, one of a trekker through the asphalt highways of the urban-scapes, the dry desert *wadis*, and the northern greenery of the land of Israel. On a global scale Bar-Am, in 1974, became a charter member of the International Center for Photography in New York and a few years later established a department of photography at the Tel

Aviv Museum of Art.

Although it was a long-time coming, in today's art market, photography has established itself as a viable artistic medium. In major art centers worldwide galleries dedicated to photography have multiplied, collectors have matured, and major museums have all installed departments to deal with the art of photography. Under the title New Media, photography, still and motion on paper, video, and digital, is an integral part of art school curricula. But decades ago in provincial Israel, Bar-Am began to grapple with the idea that photography should be accepted into the pantheon of the fine arts. His initiative began to take hold only in the early 1970s and as curator of photography at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art until 1992 he was instrumental in promoting his agenda to the fullest for both local and international photographic exhibitions. And with it he became an inspirational figure for the next generation of Israeli photographers.

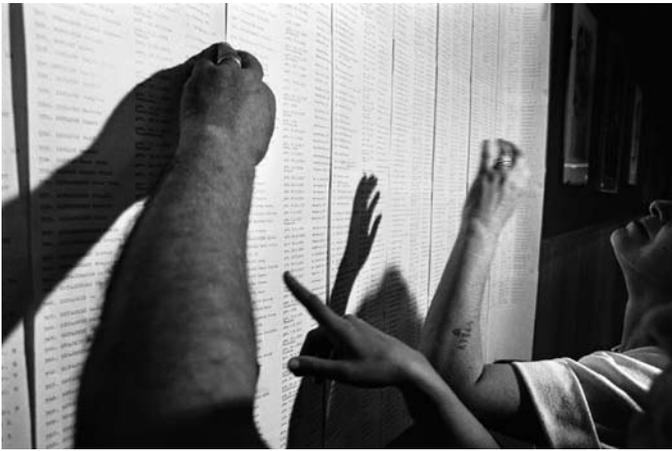
During a recent chat with Micha and Orna we tried to decipher the quandary of how a photographer approaches the recording of violent acts and large-scale conflicts when they are coupled with an intrinsic paradox of clashing antagonists and protagonists, with or without the machines of war, then captured in a "beautiful" photograph. How should a viewer react? How can one reconcile the two? The fact is reality is indefensible. Truth is embedded in the conglomerate images, but like any other art form the viewer must respond in their own way and extract from the work a personal legitimacy with all the psychological baggage that one brings to the picture.



**Micha Bar-Am, Orna, 1971.** © 2011 Micha Bar-Am/Magnum Photos.



**Micha Bar-Am, Children of the Sabbagh Family, Peki'in, 1967.** © 2011 Micha Bar-Am/Magnum Photos.



**Micha Bar-Am, Yad Vashem (Holocaust Memorial, Jerusalem), 1981.**  
© 2011 Micha Bar-Am/Magnum Photos.



**Micha Bar-Am, Self-Reflection with Mona Lisa, Paris, 1991.** © 2011  
Micha Bar-Am/Magnum Photos.

**A**dmittedly, Bar-Am "... does not get up in the morning to make art. During my daily activities I look for something that challenges me, something significant with a sense of purpose." Morality is not his partner when Bar-Am has his eye to the viewfinder. It is only the realm of facts on the ground and the validity of his photographic confirmation. He is, as Ruthi Ofek, director and chief curator of the Open Museum, says, "... an involved observer, regarding the events and places he records with love, and often with pain."

As a tribute to his professional standing the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard awarded Bar-Am with a Nieman Fellowship for the 1985-1986 academic year; an annual grant presented to a select group of accomplished professionals (including photographers) who have proven journalistic credentials. Upon receiving the prestigious Israel Prize for Visual Arts in 2000, the judges said, "... for his lifelong recording of the social and cultural scene in Israel and its ongoing conflicts with a critical eye and an indelible style."

Before he received these impressive prizes, Bar-Am spent several weeks with front-line soldiers during the 1982 Lebanon war. The fragile line drawn between life and death, staying together or being torn apart, is demonstrated in his photograph *Grocery, Beirut*, a set of images that relates to this dilemma. A few dozen eggs neatly positioned in a cardboard tray proclaiming their pedestrian yet precarious roll is the darkened foreground picture set before a shattered pane of glass through which the viewer is presented with a manned battle tank rolling by in the background

under a clear blue, optimistic, sky. Also from this series is *Gun Position, National Museum*, confirming the absurdity of war as Bar-Am, bivouacked in the museum, snaps an unassuming Israeli soldier ready for battle donning a helmet and protective vest, sitting casually on a sand bag with legs crossed before a terrifying mounted machine gun. The ludicrous scene plays out when one realizes this 20th century combatant is sitting in front of a classic, life-size, fully draped headless marble sculpture from the ancient

Roman period set on a pedestal directly above him.

To grasp the significance of Micha and Orna Bar-Am's visual chronicle of the State of Israel's first 60 years in one or two visits to an exhibition is an impossible task. Photographs of David Ben Gurion, the country's founding father, in his Kibbutz Sde Boker Negev retreat; immigrants, old and young, arriving from Romania, Yemen, the Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and Budapest; ultra-Orthodox Jews on the Via Dolorosa; checking the rolls at the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem; returning hostages from Entebbe; candid portraits of Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin, and Shimon Peres; a Picasso exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum; children in a bunker and in church; the domestic social conflicts and the wars in Sinai, Lebanon, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank, and the Bar-Am sons from birth till adulthood and countless more.

Unlike other great photographers of his times, Micha Bar-Am did not find it necessary to venture out into the world, to seek assignments in foreign lands. Israel was enough to handle. Through it all, he amassed in his revealing photographs bits and pieces of other eminent photographers we have talked about over the years, the likes of Lewis W. Hine, Alfred Eisenstaedt, W. Eugene Smith, Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Helen Levitt, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, and wrapped them all into one fascinating career. Δ



**Micha Bar-Am, Camel and Rider, Negev Desert, 1962.**  
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*Gil Goldfine is the Israel contributing editor for Asian Art News and World Sculpture News. He is based in Tel Aviv.*