

The Soul of the Biblical Sandal: On Anthropology and Style

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ABSTRACT This article is about the measurements and qualities of local style. Archeological, linguistic, and historical data are brought together to move deep into the cultural analysis of an object known as the biblical sandal. The relationship between the object and its meaning, which is at the core of much of the literature on material culture (Appadurai 1986; Henare et al. 2007), is analyzed via the notion of style. Style fuels and limits changes in material culture (Boas 1927; Wilk 1995; Wobst 1999), and the biography of the biblical sandal demonstrates that. New technologies, trends, and desires profoundly affect the story, but only to the limits of a certain style that retains a specific ethic and esthetic. This article focuses on one producer (Nimrod Ltd.) and is part of a larger project on material culture and production of style in Israel. [*sandals, style, material culture, simplicity*]

מחקר זה עוסק בטיבו וכוחו של סגנון מקומי. האתנוגרפיה שלו, מולכת כל ידי אובייקט הידוע בשם "סנדל תנ"כי", והיא מלכדת לתוכה נתונים ארכיאולוגיים, לשוניים, והיסטוריים המאפשרים להעמיק בניתוח התרבותי של החפץ. המתח בין חפץ ומשמעותו, עומד במרכז רבים מן המחקרים העוסקים בתרבות חומרית (אפאדוראי 1986, הנרה הולברד וסארי. עורכ. 2007). בעבודה זו מטופל המתח הנ"ל, באמצעות המושג סגנון. סגנון הוא מנגנון המאפשר ומגביל את השינויים החלים בעולם החומרי (בועז 1927, וילק 1995, וובסט 1999) והביוגרפיה של הסנדל התנ"כי על פרקיה השונים אכן מראה זאת. טכנולוגיות חדשות, אמצעי ייצור משתנים, תשוקות חדשות ואופנות מתחלפות משפיעים על חייו של החפץ, אולם משהו מדויק הכרוך במקרה זה בצמצום ופשטות, נותר בו כדי לשחזר אסתטיקה מקומית ואתיקה הכרוכה בה. מאמר זה מתמקד בחברה אחת (נימרוד) מתוך שלוש שנחקרו, והוא חלק ממחקר רחב יותר על תרבות חומרית וייצור סגנון בישראל

מילות מפתח: סנדלים, סגנון, תרבות חומרית, פשטות

THE LAND OF THE BIBLE AS THE LAND OF THE SANDAL

The female leopard, Bavta, a repeated trespasser on the grounds of Kibbutz Ein Gedi, on the western shore of the Dead Sea, was shot and injured by a member of the kibbutz in 1979. She was later caught by the Nature Reserves Authority and brought to the wildlife sanctuary near the city of Eilat, where she died in 1998. Bavta, daughter of Simon, after whom the leopard was named, lived in the same area 1850 years before the big cat. When she fled to the Judean Desert to escape persecution by the Romans, she took her personal archive with her. The archive, together with her personal belongings, was discovered around 1960

by Israeli archeologist Yigael Yadin, who named the site Cave of Letters after the well-preserved documents (Yadin 1963). Examination of them by scholars revealed the story of Bavta, a widow from the Judean Desert. Among her belongings was a leather sandal made of three layers of leather stitched together by a leather strap.

The findings from the excavations in the Judean Desert had an enormous impact on Israelis. The scientific buzz crossed over from the community of scholars to the general population. The academic discourse they generated and the polemics that took shape around them waxed and waned but never died. Professor Yadin's subsequent project at Masada (1963–65) injected new data, images, and objects into this

discourse, at the same time inspiring sociological critique (Ben-Yehuda 1995, 2002). The excavations in the desert were viewed as a national mission as the young state searched for its past. Bavta's sandal, an authentic object once worn by a real woman, found its way to a glass display case in the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and has frequently been on loan to exhibits around the world (Roitman 2001).

In 1965 a shoemaker from Tel Aviv, Josef Rosenblith, created a similar sandal. The cover of the summer catalogue of his company, Nimrod, carried a photo of Bavta's sandal with the story of its origin, together with a photo of the reproduced sandal featured in the catalogue



FIGURE 1. *Bavta's sandal*



FIGURE 2. *A replica of Bavta's sandal*

The promotional story ended with these words: "In any case, one must admit the resemblance between this ancient sandal and those worn by the style-conscious young Israeli sabra" (Nimrod Ltd, 1965 catalogue). In 1969 the company's catalogue bore the figure of Bar Kokhba, the Jewish hero of the third war against the Romans (132–36 C.E.),¹ tearing the mouth of a lion. Bar Kokhba is wearing the skirt of a

Roman soldier and caligae (Roman soldiers' sandals), and the title above the image reads "From the Land of the Sandal" (Nimrod Ltd, 1969 catalogue).

The following is an anthropological attempt to retell the story of the land of the Bible as the land of the sandal, as the two converged in an object known as the biblical sandal. A replica of a relic, now placed in a shrine, of a woman named Bavta will be the main informant of the symbolism suggested by the shoemaker Josef Rosenblith.² The temptation to adopt his symbolism is enormous. It echoes the narrative of Zionism and its linearity from the Biblical Era to exile and return. But this article does not intend to use the object to either affirm or critique this narrative. Rather, it will allow the sandal to tell a different story in the hope of some theoretical benefit. The story is that of an object, an artifact, a material entity, or, simply, a thing with a specific form and a specific social value.³ Orna Ben Meir's chapter on biblical sandals described them as "two horizontal straps made of coarse-cut brown leather, sometimes buckled, and with much exposure of the foot." As for their symbolic status, she states that "Biblical sandals are not merely footwear but have evolved into a cultural symbol" (Ben Meir 2008:77).

The biography of the thing sandal might teach us how a certain cultural style emerges in a young society of immigrants, how stable the style is, and the ethics of its esthetics. Thus, this article will start with the object, the sandal, and remain as close to it as possible as its meaning is probed. It will not treat it as an indication of sociohistorical events, but, rather, use style and its anthropological history to bridge between the sandal's form and its meaning. With the help of the "style-conscious young Israeli sabra" Rosenblith was talking about, I will place the sandal within parallel issues of style, art, and aesthetics and move from the thing to its value (rather than its symbolism).

For the past three years I have been collecting the many strands of the sandals' biography. I studied the history of footwear in the ancient East, read canonic Jewish texts that discuss sandals, gathered data about the three main companies that produced a form of the biblical sandal from the late 1930s to the present, participated in a footwear-making course at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, and searched for academic works on shoes.

The ethnography described below is based on interviews with five members of the Rosenblith family and two designers from their company. The company has no official archive, but each family member was happy to share with me his or her private (and disorderly) collection of photos, newspaper clippings, personal documents and letters, catalogues, and so forth. I make only limited use of the material gleaned from my interviews with people from the other two companies and information from their archives. My field notes from the participant-observation in the shoe making workshop will not be used in this article.

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THINGS, AND THEIR RESEARCH

Out of the rich anthropological literature on material culture, this article will make use of two bodies of knowledge. The first one deals with the understanding of things and the ways to research them. Here I mainly follow George Simmel (1957, 1978), Arjun Appadurai (1986), Daniel Miller (1983, 1998, 2005), and Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (2007). The second body of knowledge deals with style and converses with Franz Boas (1955, reprinted from 1927); scholars of culture and art who relate to Boas including Ernst Gombrich (1988[1959], 2002), Seymour Howard (1990), and Rudolf Arenheim (1974); and contemporary anthropologists who work on style and contribute to my understating of its power, exclusivity and durability: Rick Wilk (1995), Martin Wobst (1999), Karen Tranberg Hansen (2004), and Margaret Conkey (2006).

It must be stressed that the following is not a straightforward study in material culture; it goes beyond the boundaries of that culture and moves toward works on style, arts, and archeology as it follows the thing. This breaking of boundaries appears to be a common anthropological tendency: both Boas and Appadurai, who have had a profound influence on the study of things, are not seen as (and not remembered for being) scholars of material culture.

The social life of the chosen object and its meaning begins with its biography.



FIGURE 3. Top: *Hugistics' sandal*. Bottom: *Biblical sandal*

The Creation of the Biblical Sandal

No one knows exactly when the biblical sandal was labeled as such. The two horizontal straps described above were produced in the mid-1930s in Palestine, mainly by kibbutz shoemakers for kibbutz members. It consisted of two hori-

zontal straps without buckles, and a third thinner strap that wrapped around the ankle and attached with a small buckle to the upper strap. This sandal was worn outside the kibbutzim as well, where it was referred to as *hugistic*, meaning “belonging to a group.” A Jewish socialist youth movement in Palestine called its age groups *hugim*; their dress codes were similar to those of the kibbutzim and at maturity they were expected to join one. Despite the widespread use of this sandal by kibbutz members, it seems the biblical sandal was actually born in the city of Tel Aviv, far from the cultivators of the land, by the people of the fast-growing metropolis of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine (Helman 2007a). My research strengthens the view that the Rosenblith brothers, owners of Nimrod Ltd, are the protagonists of the biblical sandal story.

The following history was taken from an interview with Sara Regev, Kalman Rosenblith’s daughter, conducted at her home on August 26, 2008. Zvi Rosenblith was a shoemaker in Eastern Poland (Galicia) at the beginning of the 20th century. His son Kalman fled Poland during World War I and found shelter (but not citizenship) in Holland near The Hague, where he married Feige and had four sons and two daughters. Kalman worked repairing shoes. In 1933 he immigrated to Palestine with his family and in 1935 settled in Tel Aviv, where he continued his shoe repair business. In 1937 the family rented a two-story building on Dizengoff Street and lived above the workshop. For a while, Kalman Rosenblith and his sons tried to produce shoes as well as repair them. When the oldest brother Yosef took over the business, he changed his last name from Rosenblith to Ben Artzi (son of my land)⁴ and soon became known as just Artzi (my land). In 1944, with one brother serving in the British Army’s Jewish Brigade and the other training with the local militias, Artzi registered a shoe company, Nimrod Ltd. Kalman’s granddaughter Tzafi related to the name Nimrod when I interviewed her on September 2, 2008: “In Holland there was a shoe company by the name of Robinson Crusoe. Artzi searched for a parallel figure, a cultural hero of nature. He chose Nimrod, the biblical hunter.”

Artzi may have chosen the name because Nimrod—the hero and the hunter (Genesis 10:8–13)—came as close as possible to Robinson Crusoe. But he may have also been inspired by a statue he saw in a Tel Aviv art show in April 1944, which prompted him to register his father’s old workshop, with its Polish and Dutch history, as an ancient-new company with a name resonating Canaanite history. Nimrod, the biblical counterpart of a mythological figure from ancient Mesopotamia, has a rich history starting in the second millennium B.C.E. Known in Mesopotamia as Ninib, Ninurta, and Nimurta, he was the god of agriculture, fertility, and war (Annus 2002). The Bible describes him as a heroic hunter and a king, but ancient hermeneutic Jewish texts are critical of his violence and rebelliousness (based on the translation of the name Nimrod in Hebrew—let us rebel). A Midrash (homiletic text) presents him as the ultimate pagan vis-à-vis Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation (Bereshit Raba; 38:13). Traditional and orthodox Jews did

not and do not name their sons Nimrod, but beginning in the 1940s it became a fashionable first name among nonorthodox Israelis.⁵ In his book on the sources of Israeli mythology, David Ohana (2008) places the “utopia of Nimrod” as central to the constitution of “Hebraic authenticity.”

The new rebels expressed youthful energies, self confidence and primitive vigor. They wished to implant in the first generation of natives (in the land of Israel) a spirit of a warrior and not of a scholar, to offer experience rather than knowledge, esthetics instead of ethics and myth rather than historical recognition. [Ohana 2008:99]

The statue of Nimrod by Y. Danziger made its first public appearance in 1944 at the annual exhibition of the artists of Eretz Israel,⁶ held at the Habima National Theater in Tel Aviv. Did Artzi visit that exhibition? Was he impressed by the powerful work? Did he understand that the statue of Nimrod would become a milestone in the history of Israeli art? We do not know, but according to the Registrar of Companies, we do know that two months after the exhibition Artzi founded the company and named it Nimrod. Later that year the art historian and critic Haim Gamzo wrote of the statue: “People who return to their land, return to a geographical environment” (Ohana 2008:102).

Artzi, a shoemaker, a Zionist, and a businessman, conveyed the symbolism of Nimrod in the styles produced in his family workshop. He chose the name Nimrod to signify his vision and turned it into an object that would embody and enlarge the esthetics of the biblical/mythological character. Between the early 1960s and mid-1970s, Nimrod was synonymous with Israeli sandals, which were synonymous with biblical sandals, which were an Israeli thing.

The relationship between an object and the meaning and value a society gives to it is dynamic and requires studying it as a process over time. This is pointed out in Appadurai’s work on “the social life of things,” which invites anthropologists to learn the full history of the objects under study and to “follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories” (1986:5).⁷ The value of these meanings is constantly changing, calling for a study of “the genesis of value” (1986:56). His understanding of “tournaments of commodities’ values” will guide part of the data reading below.

Twenty-five years after the publication of the “the social life of things,” a group of British anthropologists push Appadurai’s methodology further: “Meanings are not ‘carried’ by things but just *are identical* to them” (Henare et al. 2007:3–4). Instead of treating “things as analytic,” these authors approach them “as heuristic.” Things have the potential to take us to different worlds rather than serve as evidence or realizations of existing metanarratives.

They describe their epistemology for “thinking through things” as an invitation to be “radically essentialist” (Henare et al. 2007:2–3). This invitation is fruitful theoretically, but my attempts to adopt it brought me closer to Miller. Inspired by the works of Appadurai (1986), Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Alfred Gell (1998), and Bruno

Latour (1993), Miller, certainly the most prolific writer in the field of anthropology and material culture, acknowledges the binary swing between the object and its transcendent meaning. Miller resolves it by going back to what anthropologists need to do: “In short, we need to show how the things that people make, make people” (2005:38).

Based on Appadurai’s call to “follow the things themselves” and Miller’s methodological resolution, I follow the thing’s makers and users.⁸ The makers of the modern sandal labeled it “biblical” and tied its current life to certain pasts. Before we turn to their stylistic choices and the social meaning of the thing, it will be useful to look at the assumed past of the sandal.

DID ABRAHAM WEAR NIMRODS?

Abraham and Moses are the most famous male protagonists of the Bible. One (so the story goes) came from Mesopotamia, the other from Egypt. These were two geopolitical and cultural centers and as such two important sites of fashion production. Did they wear “two horizontal straps made of coarse-cut brown leather, sometimes buckled”? Unfortunately, no. They wore thongs (what we today would call flip flops), if they wore any footwear at all. The people of ancient Mesopotamia and Pharaonic Egypt wore similar thong sandals with minor differences: some were made of leather, some of straw, some were heeled, most were flat. Sandals (or any other kind of footwear) were already then a thing with symbolic meaning. They were a luxury, a sign of wealth; gods, rulers, rich people, and warriors had them.⁹ But fairly early, sandals gained abstract meanings, detaching them from the solid ground on which they were intended to walk. The famous Egyptian sign of life, the Ankh, is regarded by scholars as a variation of a sandal strap. I first saw the similarity between the sandal and the ankh in the 1966 edition of *Egyptian Grammar* by Sir Allan Gardiner (first published in 1927 and known as the ultimate introduction to the study of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing); there, on the bottom of page 507, sign 33 is a picture of a sandal (read *tbt* and usually pronounced as *chebet*), and right after it at the top of page 508 comes the famous sign 34—the ankh.¹⁰ The ankh is easily recognized thanks to its widespread use in contemporary reproductions and souvenirs. Pendants, rings, mirrors, and the like formed in its shape are sold to tourists in Egypt and elsewhere. Richard Wilkinson mentions the humble sandal strap as one of the most probable sources for the ankh form and affirms that “its meaning as a symbol for ‘life’ is clear enough, and it is with this basic significance that the sign appears as an emblem carried in the hands of many Egyptian deities” (Wilkinson 1994:177). So, the sandal, a very down-to-earth object, serves as a symbol for life, a very general abstraction. But the ankh form sandal was also used for specific human activities, such as commemoration, a blessing, and even as a road sign or a signpost. Medallions stamped with a pair of sandals are found on the thresholds of 6th century churches in Israel and Jordan, to be read as a sign of gratitude to the donors of the building,

blessing them with good luck and wealth (Habas 2009). Private homes from the same period bore these signs as well, as did mosaics blessing those entering and leaving public and private bath houses. Habas (2009) cites previous publications that describe sandal imprints on rocks along pilgrimage routes, also regarded as a blessing to those who set out on the journey.

In all of these signs the sandal is a thong, indicating that the thong became an icon for footwear. But fashion went beyond this minimalist design, and sandals changed dramatically during the Roman Period (Stiebel 1989). Simplicity was overtaken by dandyism as more straps rose above the ankle and wrapped the calf. Sometimes the richness of the material turned the sandal into a sort of shoe or boot (*caligae*). Vertical straps took over, and sandals with no strap between the toes appeared. The Romans may have created a new fashion, but something of the sound of the original object snuck into their lexicon. As mentioned above, on Hieroglyph sign 33 the sandal is written as *tbt* and pronounced *chebet*. The phonetics of this word for sandal persists in several Latin languages. The dictionary tells us that the word *ciabatta* (sole in English, *suole* in Italian) comes from the Arabic. In Provence we find *sabata*, in French *savate* or *sabot* for clogs, in Spanish *zapata*, *zapato*, and in Portuguese *sapata*. Maybe the Ptolemaic dynasty exported a number of Egyptian words to Rome.

From this point on the biography of sandals in the Western world moves farther and farther away from the ancient Near East. The Rosenbliths decided to reconnect them again, to reevaluate the meaning of sandals and to reform their look. These 20th century entrepreneurs were, as I understand it, major movers in the reproduction of the object and its contemporary value in Israel. Although they did produce several variations of the thong, the form that became known as the biblical sandal was not a thong. It did, however, retain a minimalistic style.

What was the power of the simple form and how durable was and is the minimalistic style in the Israeli material culture? Research on culture and style can help us answer these questions.

Anthropology and Style—Cicero’s Law

Style comes from “stylus,” the writing tool of the Romans. It is connected to forms of writing and speaking. Rhetoric skills were judged according to their “stylus power” (Gombrich 1988[1959]:21). Cicero borrowed terms from visual arts to describe speech, preferring always the clean and sublime over the shiny and pompous. Gombrich called this “Cicero’s law” (2002:2), the law that elevates the aesthetic and ethic of simplicity, an issue to which we will return.

The anthropologist Margaret Conkey’s review on style, design, and function (Conkey 2006) runs through the history of the relationships between anthropology and things, pointing to its ups and downs. “Anthropology has had an erratic history, an on-again–off-again, often distancing relationship with ‘things’” (Conkey 2006:356). The study

of style in anthropology after the classic era (Boas 1955; Kroeber 1919, 1957) appears mainly in archeology. Looking for a leading theory or methodology for the study of style, she says: “there is no one comprehensive theory of style, nor a call for one; neither is there a specific analytic tool kit that one can just pick up and apply to a set of things” (Conkey 2006:360). But Conkey does not give up. She presents (among others) inspirational works by Wobst (1977, 1999) and Wilk (2004) that, together with the works of Boas (1927) and Bourdieu (1984), pointed me to a theoretical underpinning for the study of style. Reading these works highlights the paradox in anthropology’s treatment of style: style is both unifying and individualizing, both inspirational and limiting; it supports traditional forms and allows novelties.

Boas attempted to stay as close as possible to the things before moving to their sociological interpretations. On the first page of his analysis of style he wonders “how far the historical and psychological conditions under which art styles grow up and flourish may be understood” (Boas 1927:144). He relates to these issues via the stability of forms and styles over time, the reasons for conservatism and for change. According to him, stability could be understood as a characteristic of primitive art, but change, creativity, cultural influences, and the like are also part of the history of that art. Eventually the forms of objects change, as do style and technologies, yet many objects retain elements of the old style. A good example is a plastic bread bowl with a straw pattern that we refer to as a basket. Hence, style is a sort of limitation on creativity or a free use of different forms and materials, as well as a method for forming novelties: “style has the power of limiting the inventiveness of the productive artist . . . novelty consists generally in the combination of old pattern elements in new ways” (Boas 1927:156–157). “The principles of symbolic selection and method of composition help to individualize representative art forms . . . and give it its most specific character” (Boas 1927:144). Style then is a sort of an aesthetic and ethic guideline for selection.

Boas’s work on primitive art is referred to by scholars seeking to understand the connections among style, perception, abilities (technologies), and culture. Gombrich, the most influential art historian of the 20th century, read Boas. He was troubled by the longing for the primitive form he witnessed evolving in Western art beginning in the 1930s. The attraction of the primitive is the main subject of his last book, *The Preference for the Primitive*, published posthumously in 2002. Gombrich juxtaposes the development of art from “hard” (simple, clumsy, angular) to “soft” (complicated, polished, sophisticated) with the development of taste, the latter going in the opposite direction. Tastewise, “hard” is associated with nobility, innocence, and sincerity, while “soft” is identified with vulgarity and corruption (Gombrich 2002:8).

The attraction of the primitive ancient forms and the use of past styles are explained by another art historian:

“Revering Antiquity involves regression to a sanctified model that matches and complements a self image. As such, it is a romantic enterprise . . . [one whose] design and purported ancestry give meaning and dignity to one’s life . . . (it) can be seen, then, as essentially self fulfilling[,] reflecting desire to return to, to know, to control, and to transcend a preferred image of ancestry” (Howard 1990:27).

According to Zerubavel (2007:331), the preferred past (or golden age) of the Zionist movement is the biblical one. The imagery of the Biblical Era was based on archeology, but no less on imagination and creativity. Expressing this style in art, architecture, literature, and so forth was, in a sense, doing culture and doing Zionism. Within this kind of social enterprise, style can play a dual role, as Wobst (1999) and Wilk (1995) show. “Style is what reifies hegemony. But style also reifies resistance” (Wobst 1999:122). Wobst sees style as material interferences or material interventions, which “talks loudly about individuals” (Wobst 1999:120–121). Wilk coins the term *common difference*—“a system that narrows (and domesticates) differences into a common set of dimensions, standardizing and translating them so they are widely intelligible” (Wilk 1995:92), at the same time allowing localities, individualizations, and differences. Style “intervenes” between the form and the message, and “commons the different” to create intelligible dimensions.

The measurements, characteristics, and changing values of the style under study reveal its endurance.

TOURNAMENTS OF VALUE

I want a pair of Nimrod sandals, an original pair from the classic era. On EBay I find someone in New Jersey with a pair for \$50. I buy it. I am now the owner of that thing, not the one I actually wanted, not the two vertical straps, another model, a man’s style, which I never liked. But I have it.

What makes something a commodity, an item to be put on EBay almost 40 years after it was produced in a remote Middle Eastern country? Why did its owner think he could sell it or assume that someone would want it? Trading, exchangeability, barter, gifting are all connected to the making of value (Appadurai 1986:21). But what prompted what, what came first? the need? the desire to possess? the value? Or was it simply the technology, the ability to produce? Appadurai accords primacy to the desire to possess the thing. Culture, politics, or the social create the concept of a thing, but the desire to have something reigns uppermost. In what follows I will attempt to show that the biography of the biblical sandal combines needs, technologies, and economic conditions with ethics, aesthetics, and desires.¹¹ The weaving of all of them together created a certain local style. The story of this style has two chapters: the production of less and the production of more. Each brings a different view of the actual production of the thing as well as the social production of its value (its devaluation or revaluation). This story might inform us as to how a thing becomes a commod-

ity, how it gains its value, and how the value changes. The ability to produce will be countered by the role of “rulers and traders” (Appadurai 1986:33), the desire to have other peoples’ stuff, and the longing for authenticity (Lindholm 2008). The subject at hand is the formation of a local style that becomes part of the material world within a specific new cultural sphere. The popularity of such a form might surge at times and decline at others, new technologies will alter its fabrics and structures, but the form will always be there, recognized by members of social circles as a sign of the right style.

The Production of Less—or Gaining Value

When sandals were first produced in Palestine in the kibbutzim in the early 1930s, the local shoe industry (like the entire industrial sector) was small and most goods were imported. Kibbutzim used their own labor to provide for as many of their needs as possible, including shoes.¹² The Mediterranean sunshine, limited resources, and the reigning socialist ideology reduced those shoes to sandals. Thongs, which could have represented the ultimate reduction of footwear (as they were in ancient times), were not suitable for labor and not comfortable to wear over socks on cooler days. The two vertical straps became the dominant style of the sandal thing, but it carried no extra value. It was just what it was: footwear the kibbutz shoemaker produced and the members wore in the absence of alternatives. As Henare et al. (2007) state, “meanings are not ‘carried’ by things but just *are identical* to them,” yet both things and meanings have a certain history.

When Zvi Rosenblith (Artzi) fled Holland and settled in Tel Aviv with his family, he gave a different value to the sandals than they had in the kibbutz. The kibbutzim may have had a need for them, but Tel Avivians developed a desire for them. Anat Helman, who wrote about Tel Aviv under the British Mandate (1920–45), situates this and other desires within the context of the “Luxury Debate.”

The collision between the pioneering ideology and consumer culture was particularly fierce in Tel Aviv. The myth of the *hah-lutz* (pioneer) was shaped to suit the workers of the land, their hardships and limited resources. The urban scene and its typical consumer culture stood in opposition to the ethos of simplicity [*histapkut bemu’at*—literally making do with little. T. E.]. Soon enough, Tel Aviv epitomized urbanism in the Land of Israel, a symbol of non-pioneering materialism. [Helman 2007a:119]

The contrast between the city and the kibbutz was not without its ragged edges. The dominant ideology belonged to the socialist pioneers and was accepted as superior by the majority that did not live off the land and were not necessarily socialist in political orientation (Helman 2007b:117). The sandal, then, became an object of the admired “them”—the minority who led the right kind of life, the just way of life. The esthetic of the two brown straps stood for the ethics of the worthy locals. A simplicity was transferred from the field to the sidewalk and became the desired object of Tel Aviv wannabees. It allowed the wearer to remain in Tel Aviv

and look like a kibbutznik, to signal via his or her style an affiliation with others—in this case the admired, right kind of others. Adding the connections made by Rosenblith to antiquity, these others could include biblical figures as well.

My interviews with his daughter and four grandchildren indicate that Artzi was the designer of this fine simplicity, the public relations man, the sales manager, the driving force behind it all. He designed this local simplicity from different sources. His sister-in-law Stella, who came to Israel from India, would receive packages from her family there that included sandals, which she brought to Artzi who adapted them to local designs. I remember the silver and gold female dancers printed on the black sandals. I was sure these were our Israeli folk dancers, but it turns out they were traditional Indian dancers.

Zohar Rosenblith, Sammy's son, told me in a telephone interview (September 8, 2008) about other sources of inspiration: "Remember that *Encyclopedia Tarbut* (Culture) we all used to own? . . . From the time I was a child I drew sandals, inspired by those I saw in *Tarbut*: from Egypt, Mexico, Rome. I would give the drawings to my father and he would hand them to Artzi, and sometimes alongside the stuff from India they would be used."

Images and objects from the Land of Israel, India, Egypt, Rome, and Mexico inspired the looks, and the kibbutz sandal marked the technological starting point, but the Rosenbliths kept looking for improvements. Zohar recounts: "Somehow my father and Mickey managed to cut the leather straps in a way that did not require a lining. Sewing the upper leather to the lining created a bottleneck. Indeed, at first the straps were rough but later on they softened and lasted a long time. That, coupled with the Neolith sole, was the form of the classic sandal until the late 1970s. This was Nimrod: quite heavy, but solid, and lasting forever. You would get a new pair only because you grew out of your old ones."

According to catalogues from 1960 and early 1970,¹³ color wise there was a choice of brown, black, and white. Later on a natural hue, a deep red, and a simple red (for girls) were added. From the early to the late 1970s, what is known as Nimrod's classic era, metal ornaments were introduced on some of the models. The catalogue offered new looks every season, but most retained the pure designs that were the core of Nimrod's style. The production of less was the production of skimpy footwear. All models (beyond the biblical two strips) exposed most of the foot and the toes. The few models that ignored the code of simplicity did not make it to the next year's catalogue. The code obeyed two principles—orderliness and parsimony (Arnheim 1974:59–60)—ensuring that the manufacturer will not go beyond what is needed for his or her purpose and will design the structure in the purest possible way.

The sandals were not cheap, in fact they were expensive. During these years, the Nimrod shop had no branches and did not sell its products to other stores. There were only two ways to acquire a pair: by standing in line at the then upscale

Dizengoff Street store or buying them from the catalogue. The latter was a novelty in the local market. The catalogue had a chart for taking foot measurements and was produced in both Hebrew and English. Artzi knew that "the thing" was desired not only by locals but also by tourists who wished to go home with a local thing.

Local industry at that time was protected from competition. Imports were limited, labor was organized in an extremely powerful union, and family businesses like Nimrod reaped the benefits. Only those who could go other places had access to goods from abroad—wealthy people, functionaries, and the like. But even they, and mainly their children, adhered to the local style and wore Nimrods. Conspicuous consumption was verboten. The "less" code was the good code (Almog 2000). But to produce less, a thing of minimum volume, it was necessary to become someone, to belong to those who could manage with as little as possible and reap the value of wholeness. For 25 years the young urban dwellers endowed Artzi's creation with its value. Everyone wore sandals. The majority, who could not afford Nimrod, wore imitations. Nimrod Ltd. invented and reinvented the prototype from one summer to the next, and the urban middle class endowed it with and reaffirmed its value.

Artzi connected the sandal to the past, or to a number of specific pasts. The texts he wrote for the catalogues speak of the Land of Israel as the land of the sandal. He drew a direct line from Bavta of the Judean Desert across 2,000 years to the feet of his urban customers. He used India as a source of inspiration, with a pinch of ancient Egypt, Rome, and Mexico thrown in by his nephew. No designer was ever employed at Nimrod. Ben Artzi (lit., "a son of my land" [Hebrew]) was indeed a son of his land: an immigrant from Holland, the son of Polish immigrants, who like many others around him, reinvented himself in Tel Aviv. Nimrod—the Mesopotamian god, biblical hunter, and neo-Canaanite statue—was as relevant to him as kibbutz socialism and Indian simplicity. Artzi was producing a thing that acquired value, and he reinvested this value to produce more of the same thing. He was running a business of products and culture, producing stuff as well as meanings. His nephews describe him and their fathers as hard workers of leathers, buckles, soles, and glue, which were transformed into sandals producing style. Liora Messer, Mickey's daughter, recounts: "I can still see them bending over the machines, smoking like chimneys though both of them were not healthy, working all day side by side while Artzi runs around to manage the business" (August 10, 2008).

A reader of the foregoing account might have noticed that one source of inspiration is absent from this mosaic: Arabs and Bedouin. Suffice it to say here that the Arab was missing from the sources of inspiration for sandals because he was not wearing them and was not connected to their origin, although contemporary Israeli male Palestinians and Bedouin are great users of them.¹⁴



FIGURE 4. *The Indian dancer's sandal*

The Production of More—or Losing Value

The sandal—a commodity that seemed to eschew the morality of consumerism and capital value—was a good business, but it didn't last long. In 1977, the socialist Labor-led government was supplanted by the centrist right-wing Likud Party, which initiated a profound change in the economy: local markets were thrown open to the world, competition was encouraged, the limitations on imports were reduced, and the desire for Western products so long denied was gradually indulged. And, those products were no longer scorned as immoral by the cultural etiquette. A new generation of businessmen came on the scene. Tzafi and Liora, Zohar and Oren, the four cousins and heirs of Nimrod Ltd., tried to run the business the way their fathers did and for a while managed to stay afloat. But soon a new technology of sole injecting (polyurethane) was introduced into the manufacturing process, the factory had to move to larger quarters, and competition arose. The old technology used to produce the rough leather and heavy sole became outmoded and had to be replaced. The thing, the classic object, lost some of its luster. People preferred the lighter thing, the anatomic thing, and many didn't want the thing at all. The most reliable of Nimrod's customers, the youngsters, wanted sneakers. Gali, another family-owned company, created designs like the old Nimrods but with newer technologies, and produced local versions of the U.S. sneaker. Now, both the masses and the upper-middle class had alternatives. But, because only the minority could afford the real Reeboks, Adidas, and later Nike/Converse and Keds, most bought the imitations from Gali and other companies.

Nimrod Ltd. had to make some serious decisions if they were going to survive. From an interview with Oren Rosenblith and Adi, a veteran worker and now the chief designer, I learned that after a bitter struggle, Oren, who had studied economics and management, bought out his cousins and took the lead (June 25–27, 2008). In 1991, at the age of 33, Oren gave his first newspaper interview as the company's CEO. The title of that interview was "Not walking on sandals," which is a double entendre in Hebrew: the phrase "not walking on sandals" also translates as "not going for sandals," intimating that this had become an undesirable direction in which to invest. Oren was quoted as saying that "at a certain point I realized that we had

lost the youngsters, they were looking for sneakers and brand names" (Ma'ariv Business 1991:7). Gradually Nimrod began specializing in baby shoes and children's footwear, and eventually signed a contract with Elefanten, a well-known German children's footwear company, both producing for them and buying from them. Riding the global waves of industry, they tried to lower production costs by moving from Tel Aviv to the periphery, the West Bank (Hebron—*al-Halil*), and eventually ended up, like most others, in China. The original store on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street now has 13 branches, and over 30 other stores carry their merchandise, mainly in malls and smaller shopping centers.

Comparing Nimrod's catalogue from its classic era to the current one turns up very little in common. The new catalogue has four adult sandals including the biblical model, "as a service to our loyal male customers who cannot do without them," says Adi. The rest is a plethora of colors, beads, patches, embroidery, flowers, etc., and all use Velcro to fasten the sandal/shoe instead of the old buckles. "The more [stuff] I put on the shoe the more they like it," sums up Adi. "That clean simplicity you are talking about is history."

Appadurai (1986) asks how a thing gains the status of commodity; we have just seen how it loses that status. The thing was devalued when the source of inspiration shifted from an imagined past to a tempting present, from desiring that of the other, to desiring that of a different other. Instead of Nimrod—Abraham—the Native—the Kibbutznik, the Tel Avivians' other became the American youngster in sneakers and jeans. Discarding the sandals was a way to distance oneself from the place, from the tyranny of locality. The removal of taxes on imports transformed the local market from "an authentic" one to just one more market at the periphery of the global commercial system where people yearn to put their hands on authentic U.S. goods. The transformation eroded perceptions of originality, authenticity, and singularity, and celebrated a sense of participation in a wider circle of owners of other things, in other places.

And yet, can deep- and wide-seated forms really disappear? Are they no more than a periodic style? a trend? There is no question that the era of the biblical sandal in its classic form is over, but at the same time other companies besides Nimrod with its four classic models are producing contemporary and quite popular variations of the two

vertical strips. *Source Vagabond* produces rubber soles with upper cloth strips, while *Naot* produces an anatomic version of the biblical model.¹⁵ The answer to what keeps that old once-preferred form alive can be found in its cultural residues and their cultural inscriptions on the style, and its wider characteristics such as durability.

THE MEASUREMENTS OF STYLE

Depth

Exploring the deep style embedded in a thing requires delving into its deep history—going beyond the specific biography of the thing and looking at the “larger-scale dynamics that transcend the biographies of particular members of that class or type of things” (Appadurai, 1986:34). The larger history of the thing or the class of things might reveal their roles as relics in the cultural tool kit of their society over time. In his discussion of Kopytoff (1986:64), Appadurai (1986) assumes that the *role* of a thing as a relic transcends time, but the *significance* of the thing changes. Zerubavel (2007) relates to the relations between relics and significance in her work on the Zionist renewal paradigm: renewal ideology as opposed to revolutionary ideology allows selective dialogue with a certain past and creative re-presentations of it in the present. Zerubavel moves from the indexical to the iconic to the symbolic. Relics (indexical) are used as props in the Zionist renewal practice to arouse both concrete and emotional connections to the golden age of antiquity (e.g., the sandal of Bavta). Their replicas (iconic) are generic representations that transmit the past into the present (the Bavta sandal created by Nimrod in Tel Aviv in 1969). The name of the creator-maker of the sandal, as well as the name of the company that produced the replica, were Hebraized (a typical symbolic practice in the renewal work according to Zerubavel), creating renewed meanings and symbols anchored in selected or invented pasts.

The relic is preserved now at the Israel Museum in the Shrine of the Book. Roitman, the curator of the shrine says: “Once the decision was made to present the scrolls in a shrine—the materials exhibited within that shrine serve as relics or religious icons” (Roitman 2001:57). Thus, as Appadurai noted, the role of the relic transcends time. Replicas do indeed change because of new technologies, trends and desires, and their social value changes in the course of history. I suggest, however, that, contrary to Appadurai’s view, something in its style retains much of its significance. Style, which I call the in-between element, molds, by selection, the limits and nature of the change. The replica will change only to the extent that the revised form still evokes similar meaning, familiarity, and recognizability. The limits of these changes define the scope of the style that transcends time.

Scope

The style will appear and reappear as the thing or variations of the thing, as noted by Boas (1927). Its form will surface again and again in different things, in different materials, in different disciplines, to offer its ontology. It will manifest in works of art, literature, cinema, design, fashion, and

so forth. Sara Breitberg-Semel, an Israeli curator and art historian, labeled this style “the want of the matter” (*dalut ha-homer*, literally the poverty of the material). An exhibition she curated at the Tel Aviv Art Museum with that title (1986:cat. 2/86) became a point of departure for many discussions of Israeli Art.

I intuitively came to the conclusion that a segment of our art—a fascinating one at that—had an inner code significantly different from that of European or American Art . . . privately I called this “poor quality” in a positive sense . . . the use of such “meager” materials as plywood and the like, and/or the intentionally “poor” look of the works surface—have been so intensively treated as to have become our sensibility, the Israeli way of depicting the world. [Breitberg-Semel 1986:186]

Breitberg-Semel attributes these characteristics mainly to the Tel Avivi Artists, a group of artists whose aesthetic credo evolved during the 1960s and 1970s, and who appear to represent more than any others the use of meager materials, the want of the matter. Breitberg-Semel singled out three artists as the carriers of the Tel Avivian esthetics: Rafi Lavie (plastic arts), Uri Zohar (cinema), and Yaakov Shabtai (literature). Each of these men in his own unique way, and the three as kindred spirits (incidentally, all of them devoted sandal wearers), contributed to the formation of the Tel Aviv code: “The grand old Zionist experience, replete with pathos and values, is ultimately diminished to a physical love for the city. For the ‘Tel Aviv child’ there is no religion, no nation, no land, there is only the concrete city. There is no ideology, but true vitality” (Breitberg-Semel 1986:182). The “dispossessed sabra” Breitberg-Semel spoke of was at the very core of his being (always male) a secular individual; his works of art demystified grand narratives via the “want of the matter.” In 1991 Breitberg-Semel and others who addressed her seminal work and critiqued it treated this nonideological phase as ideological, as a commitment to sheer vitality that could not be sustained after the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the neverending Israeli occupation. Most of the Tel Aviv artists became political activists through or beyond their works of art. Uri Zohar discovered religion and became ultraorthodox. Their earlier artistic creations were engraved in the history of local art, literature, and cinema; codifying sloppiness, meagerness, and want of matter as deep form or style and as a sign of enhanced quality.

In the summer of 2010 the Israel Museum in Jerusalem reopened its doors after two years of extensive renovations. Among other changes and novelties, the museum now offers a permanent exhibition of Israeli contemporary art, establishing the canon of the contemporary. Itzhak Danziger’s Nimrod (Danziger was one of the artists in Breitberg-Semel’s exhibition) stands in the main corridor leading from the antiquities to the contemporary collections. The figure of Nimrod stands alone on a pedestal, celebrating the recognition it has received in its 70 years of existence. From a spurned object not Jewish enough to mark the entrance to the archeological institute at the Hebrew University in the late 1930s, it has become a point of departure for any journey in Israeli Art. Guided tours of the Museum start at the statue

of Nimrod. Visitors pass by the doors to the archeology and Judaic sections to reach the pedestal. Behind the statue they can see some of the Israeli contemporary art exhibition and in front of it the rich display of ritual masks from around the world. Nimrod both stands apart from and resides together with contemporary Israeli art and traditional ritual art from around the world. Using Wobst's (1999) understanding of style as "common difference," one can see how Nimrod relates to ritual pagan aesthetics, to the emerging Israeli art, to the masks (relics), and to itself as different and unique as well as an inspiration for future works of art.

Art historian and curator Gideon Ofrat traces a line of new works of art beginning in 2000 that continues the dialogue of local artists with Danziger's statue.¹⁶ Nimrod reads like a neverending chapter in the local canon of mythology and arts, and is still analyzed via the binary grid of Jews versus Canaanites, wanderers versus locals, and hunters versus hunted. Ofrat ends his journey through the new Nimrods by addressing form and lamenting the loss of simplicity:

In 2007, huge ads were hung on bus stations promoting Nimrod shoes. In the center stood a well-groomed Israeli youth, dressed in fashionable brands and wearing Nimrod shoes, of course. This spoiled, urban, up-to-date, well-off child of the 2000s is the great-grandchild of the mythical Nimrod (the statue). Between him and his great-grandfather nothing in common remains. [Ofrat 2010:8]

I disagree. In the final section of this work I claim that even this young brand lover has something in common with his mythical great grandfather.

CONCLUSIONS

An individual looping his or her desire through an object and back is not only likely to learn something about the object in the process. He or she is also likely to develop a shared life world with these objects, a larger context of practices and things within which the relationship is enacted. [Knorr 2001:532]

Appadurai sought "methodological fetishism," Hanere et al. (2008) searched for a shift "from epistemological angst to the ontological turn," and Miller simply wanted anthropologists to show how people create things that create the people. I have tried to retain the space between the form and the message, between the ontology and the epistemology, to insert style between them to use it as the grammar of the local lexicon of aesthetics; to measure the dimensions of that style and its characteristics, and, in Knorr's (2011) terms, to learn about the "shared life world" it creates.

It does not stand for Zionism, nor does it symbolize the return to the Promised Land, or the invented tradition of that return. It does not turn its wearer into a native, a sabra, a humble person who is more closely connected to the Land of the Bible. It is a sandal, an object. The form itself is the message; the meaning is inscribed in those two straps. The value may change, the manufacturers may change, but there is something in the form that stays, and Israelis, or certain Israelis (inc. Arabs and Bedouins), will look for that form—two horizontal straps and much exposure of the foot.

Wearing these straps will be viewed as right locality and precise sharing in the same life world. Every addition to them in form or quantity will constitute a deviation from the true look.¹⁷ Although both males and females once wore biblical sandals, the style of the two straps is perpetuated mainly by males. Females who wear them make an additional statement about their locality and gender.¹⁸ Two straps and much exposure of the toes, buckled or velcroed around your feet, offer a certain grip yet always allow looseness: never too tight, the fit allows one to shake the foot in the sandal and let out a stone or some sand. But they are not thongs; they do not fall off your feet. You can wear them for walking long distances, for trekking, running, and even for work.

Some will go to great lengths to find those lost sandals that no one wants to produce anymore. Their desire will take them to *shanti* stores (what are called head stores in the United States) in Tel Aviv where Indian clothes and footwear are sold, along with leather sandals made in Hebron (*al-Halil*), Palestine. Young people might trade the flat rough sole for a rubber one with good grip and buy sandals from the firm Source, and older people might choose a comfort sole made by Naot, but all of them will look down at their feet and see two straps and much exposure of the foot.

Ohana places the "utopia of Nimrod" as central to the constitution of "Hebraic authenticity." As mentioned above, he describes a cultural project of creating the first generation of natives in the land of Israel in the shape of "a warrior and not of a scholar, to offer experience rather than knowledge, aesthetics instead of ethics and myth rather than historical recognition" (Ohana 2008:99). The utopia of Nimrod is only one of the seven sources of the Israeli mythology according to Ohana. Historians will assess how influential this utopia was compared to the other six. The anthropologist can say at this point that it certainly left clear footprints in the local style.

In concluding his chapter on style, Boas states that among the Native Americans, "mat weaving and basketry have been particularly influential in developing new forms and powerful in imposing them upon other fields" (Boas 1927:182). In every society one can ask what field of art (or art craft) is most influential in what time and what kind of forms it exports to these other fields. It could be that biblical forms from ancient times—either imaginary ones or archeological ones—were influential in the formation of Israeli style. The changes in that style were obvious but the stability of parts of it is no less interesting. That stability could lead to the understanding of "an emotional resistance to change that may be variously expressed as a feeling of impropriety of certain forms, of a particular social or religious value, or of superstitious fear of change" (Boas 1927:149–150). Following their durability (stability and change) over time might teach us more about the formation of local styles and their cultures.

The dominance of simplicity, looseness, and conscientious carelessness in urban Israeli style was quickly realized by Trinny and Susannah after a day in Tel Aviv. In an episode

of this British television reality series, Susannah looked at Hila, whom she picked for a remake, and said, “I think I got it, you Israeli women, especially in Tel Aviv, think it’s not cool to dress up, that if you try to look nice it means that you are not cool, right? Is that it?” (Israel Broadcasting Authority 2011).

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NOTES

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1. On the lore of Bar Kokhba and the lion as an invented tradition, see Zerubavel (1995).
2. On relics, replicas, and symbols as part of a cultural renewal paradigm, see Zerubavel (2007).
3. On the differences among things, objects, artifacts, and goods, see Woodward (2007:15). Following Appadurai, this text uses the term *thing*.
4. Hebraizing European names was a common practice. Some like Y. Rosenblith “killed” the child of the Diaspora and reincarnated as “the son of the (new) land.”
5. On the social history of first-name giving in Israel, see Sasha Weitman (1985).
6. Land of Israel, the way Jewish inhabitants referred to the Jewish homeland before it was a state. Today the use of this term instead of “the state of Israel” is a political act of preference for a biblical legitimacy to its existence rather than a civil one.
7. On following things, see Cook (2004).
8. “Sandalists,” devoted wearers of the thing, are part of a larger project, and are not covered in this article.
9. On sandals in ancient Egypt, see Miriam Lichtheim, 1973, Vol. 1, p. 151 and <http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/articles/article/Egypt/Ancient-Egyptian-Sandals-/3167>
10. I thank Dr. Dafna Ben Tor, the curator of Egyptian Art at the Israel Museum, for her help.
11. The erotic desire for shoes, or foot and footwear fetishism, is not part of this discussion.
12. The kibbutz is a widely researched society. On aspects of production and technology, see Rosner (1999).
13. The catalogues are not dated. Their dates were estimated by comparing the recollections of the interviewees.
14. I develop this issue in my larger project, connecting it also to culture and exposure of body parts.
15. My larger research relates to these two companies and compares them with Nimrod.
16. In the winter of 2011, Ofrat curated an exhibition at Jerusalem Artists’ House titled Nimrod’s Descendants. He presented 33 artists who related to the statue of Nimrod from the early 1950s (Ofrat 2011).
17. Israelis will be able to recognize each other around the world by looking at their sandals.
18. This issue falls outside the scope of this article.

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