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RUNWAY POLITICS

Israel's Fashion Diplomacy in the Postwar Years



The Cold War years were marked by a struggle for cultural dominance between those who sided with Russia and those who allied with the US. Instead of taking arms, some governments invested in cultural ambassadorship to sway public opinion and market their values. At the time, Israel, a new Jewish state established in 1948 in Palestine, seized upon this diplomatic strategy, known as 'soft power,' in order to gain a foothold among its western allies. Fashion and textile manufacturing, alongside dance and decorative arts, played a key role in Israel's cultural diplomacy in the postwar years. While on one front it fought wars with its Arab neighbours, on the other, Israel legitimised what it saw as an ancestral right to the land, by marketing consumer goods to women in the west.

By the 1960s, Israel's diplomatic efforts reached a critical juncture in its effort to position itself as a strategic node in the Middle East. At the same moment, a profound shift in western fashion presented an opportunity to gain an unexpected cultural prominence. By the mid-1960s, an emerging youth culture, especially in the US, UK, and France, rejected Paris' dictation of fashionable taste and embraced a more individual mix of design elements from cultures around the world. A new interest in non-western dress and lifestyle made consumer products from the Middle East, alongside Asia, the Far East, and South America, seem especially attractive to American consumers. The Israeli government tapped into this cultural shift and used cultural exports to brand itself to its western allies as a modern, democratic nation with ancestral roots in Palestine.

Fashion became the centrepiece of Israel's soft power by aligning the country's political and diplomatic agenda with a strong visual message. Starting from the early 1950s, the government organisation, the Development Corporation of Israel (also known simply as the Bonds), staged annual fashion shows that travelled to Jewish communities all over the US. It featured Israeli fashion alongside French couture styles made from Israeli textiles. Entrance to the show was granted to women and families who purchased Israeli government bonds, marketed as direct investment in the new nation. In 1959 alone, a twenty-four-city tour in the US raised \$13 million. Throughout the 1960s, the annual fashion show tours raised a third of the organisation's annual budget and injected into Israel much-needed foreign currency that funded massive infrastructure and government projects.

The shows grew to become large-scale, glamorous events with admission requiring a minimum purchase of \$1,000 worth of government-issued bonds. To kick off the tour of 1960, a fashion show was staged at the Pierre Hotel in New York to an audience of six hundred women. Along with Israeli regulars such as Maskit, Lola Beer, and the furrier Stefan Braun, American designers showed collections made exclusively with Israeli fabrics, mainly woven on Maskit's artisanal looms. Among the Americans was Mollie Parnis who would go on to be Lady Bird Johnson's personal designer and confidant. In 1961, The Bonds facilitated the Dior-Israel collection — eleven styles designed by Marc ▶



Previous Page; "Fashion: New Fashion Manna from Israel," Vogue, July 1, 1969. John Cowan
Below; For the Bonds fashion shows tour of 1964 designers at Maskit replicated textile remnants found in archaeological excavations near the Dead Sea.



Bohan, using Israel-made cloth, shown with twenty additional styles by Israeli designers — launched in Paris under the sponsorship of Baron Edmond de Rothschild in front of a crowd of twelve hundred, including three hundred international fashion reporters, Israel's diplomatic elite, and representatives from Bonds chapters in the US and Canada. Following the show, a more select crowd including diplomatic staff and Parisian society gathered at the baron's private home for a cocktail party where at midnight the show ran once more. The following year, the baron hosted another Bonds collaboration with Bohan, this time to a sweeping crowd of three thousand guests.

Israel's fashion diplomacy offered an exoticized version of the Middle East for an international clientele. One fashion show, for example, featured Maskit designs worn with Arabic tarboosh — a felt hat also known as Fez — and chiffon harem pants by Gottex. It also included a style called 'the eternity suit' by Penina, an unknown emerging designer, in solidarity with the Israeli army's victory of the Six-Day War. An editorial tilted 'New Fashion Manna from Israel' in the July 1969 issue of Vogue featured twelve pages Israeli designs mixed with American designs in 'oriental' style. Shot in Israel's Negev Desert, it is consistent with the political framing of Israel as a place where new meets old and East meets West. One caption reads: Israel, 'A vigorous, pioneering people in a new-ancient land. Where cities being built now cast shadows over Biblical towns. Where deserts lead back from modern kibbutzes

to the camel-crossed sands of time. Where, like a windfall, great fashion looks come on strong ...smashing ...dashing ...now-and-then spicing [sic] of native flavour... the zinging vitality of a nation breaking into a new day'.

This version of Israel not only re-connected the new state to its geographical location, but it also appropriated elements from Bedouin and Arab traditions that reinforced Israel's claim on its ancestral land. To engender American monetary support for Israel's nation-making, the Bonds packaged the country's East-West duality as its greatest asset. In turn, Israeli designers responded to market demands by increasingly seeking inspiration in Israel's landscapes, its ancient history, as well as Arab and Bedouin crafts.

By the close of the 1970s, Israel's political leadership made a sharp turn right, with a devastating impact on the local fashion industry. As the new right-wing government focused on militarization, the sweeping investment of previous governments in fashion and textiles was retracted, leaving the local industry to fend for itself against the rise of global apparel manufacturing in the far East. The result was a complete collapse of a once-thriving industry and the closure of many companies, manufacturers, and mills that played a key role in Israel's fashion export. The eventual disappearance of the industry also erased from collective memory the history of how fashion shows funded a new nation.

••• Keren Ben-Horin

Photographs by Rashi Shatrina, models Ashi Bhanuil & Bhavya Doshi; The Neora Warskowsky Archive online, courtesy of the archive's owner and as part of a collaborative initiative between The Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage, The National Library of Israel, Shekatat-Engineering-Design. Art and the Judaica collection at the Harvard University Library.