

Breast Cancer Survivor Responds to NYT Photo Controversy

By [Beth Greenfield, Shine Staff](#) | [Healthy Living](#) – 14 hours ago



The front-page photo that touched off the brouhaha. Courtesy of The New York Times When the New York Times ran a powerful front-page photo illustrating a breast-cancer [gene](#) story on Wednesday, it touched off a major controversy. One missing voice in the din, though, was that of the 28-year-old woman in the photo—whose face was not in the frame but whose upper torso, including a lumpectomy scar, small Star of David tattoo, and partial left areola were there for all to see. But on Monday she spoke out, albeit anonymously, to [the New York Times](#).

“When I first saw the photo I did not find it either provocative or inappropriate,” begins her personal statement, published by the newspaper on Monday. “I thought it was powerful and told my story—I am a proud, young Jewish woman who had breast cancer, and I have a scar that proves it. I am not ashamed or embarrassed by the scar.... I didn’t expect such controversy around the photo—but I’m glad the photo caused an impact.”

The accompanying [article](#) examines the high rate of breast cancer in Israel and the financial roadblocks some women face when considering gene testing and preventive surgeries. And the picture, according to Michele McNally, assistant managing editor in charge of photography at the Times, was perfectly illustrative. “It’s directly on point to the story,” she

says in the New York Times [Public Editor's Journal](#) last Wednesday, in a subsequent story about the photo controversy. "It conveys a lot of information. It brings the reality to light. It's also very beautiful — the lighting, the composition, the tone."

Criticism was fierce, though, both in the newspaper's comments and letters section and elsewhere online, on blogs and in social media. People noted a variety of reasons for being shocked and offended, from the tattoo, which reminded some readers of the Holocaust, to the fact that the disembodied image did not include the woman's face or head. But the biggest problem seemed to be that of the nearly exposed nipple, which readers called "trashy," "inappropriate" and "risqué." The Drudge Report called the photo a "[Peep Show](#)" in a headline, while freaked-out tweets talked about "boobs" and warned, "Areola above the fold!" The shots continued: The Daily Caller criticized the paper for using "boob shots," while Bustle noted that "the New York Times has managed to titillate and enrage the always-prim-and-proper Internet."

On the other side, of course, have been those lambasting the critics. "There was discussion over this? Grow up," reads one tweet. Another comment included, "Really? All this fuss over an areola? Hoping one day we'll embrace human form instead of making it stupidly taboo?" and "As long as I live in America I will never get why nudity is so bad but violence is cool."

Slate featured essays from both points of view, with Amanda Marcotte [noting](#) that it's "grossly inappropriate to sexualize breast cancer" and Jessica Winter [writing](#), in response, "If a woman sees her breasts as part of her personal and sexual identity, that doesn't mean she's somehow the self-objectifying victim of patriarchal social conditioning."

The national nonprofit [Breast Cancer Action](#), meanwhile, an education and advocacy organization based in San Francisco, finds the whole back-and-forth depressing. "Our immediate response is, once again, we have something distracting us from the real issues," spokesperson Angela Wall tells Yahoo Shine. "It was an excellent article about genetic testing and counseling, which hit all the right points. But now that's lost in this mire of, 'Is it appropriate for a woman to show her breast when discussing breast cancer?' I find it incredibly sad."

But the organization, which runs a campaign called "[Think Before You Pink](#)" to challenge corporate profits and the "pinkwashing" of breast cancer, does not blame the photo choice. "It's a provocative photograph, and breast cancer is a provocative issue," Wall notes. "It's a nice, pink, cozy, safe thing to celebrate people surviving. But this is what women go through — this is what it looks like."

And now, the photographed woman's full statement to the [New York Times](#):

When I first saw the photo I did not find it either provocative or inappropriate. I thought it was powerful and told my story – I am a proud, young Jewish woman who had breast cancer, and I have a scar that proves it. I am not ashamed or embarrassed by the scar. Most of my breast was not exposed and the small part that was does not make the picture "cheap." I think it's very artistic.

I didn't expect such controversy around the photo – but I'm glad the photo caused an impact since I believe that there should be more awareness about breast cancer, genetic testing, the

conflict of “what to do” with a positive result, etc.

I agreed to publish the photo since I wanted to raise awareness, but I decided to leave my identity unknown because I didn’t want to become famous because I had cancer. The cancer I fought this past year is a part of me, but it’s not who I am. It’s not me. In addition, this photo was taken spontaneously and I didn’t consult my close family beforehand, so I preferred to stay unknown.

In response to some readers’ comment on the tattoo I have on my body, I come from a family of Holocaust survivors. When I was 17, I went with my high school on a trip to the concentration camps in Poland. It was a very emotional and difficult trip, and when I returned to Israel I was so proud that I am Jewish and Israeli that I wanted the whole world to know. I will never have to hide my religion or where I come from. That’s when I made the tattoo of the Star of David. It was 10 years before my diagnosis of breast cancer.