

Lost and Found: *Tales of Exile and Homecoming*

Proposal for an M.A. Thesis in English Literature – Creative Nonfiction Writing

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אבידות ומציאות: סיפורי גלות ועליה לישראל

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Introduction

“Everyone must come out of his exile in his own way.” - Martin Buber

When I left New York six years ago, I imagined myself leaving exile. I had wandered a spiritual desert for twenty-two years in America: the land of department stores, super sized meals, and easy assimilation. The desert was familiar and comfortable. Nobody forced me to stay; nobody urged me to leave. I had acquired an elite public school education, an honors degree from Boston University, an abundance of friends, family, and comforts in those years of wandering. But it was still the desert, and I was still thirsty. The daughter of a Zionist *sabra*, I’d heard my mother’s early morning phone calls with my grandpa, *saba Uri*, a sixth generation Israeli who told dirty jokes in Hebrew—a combination of sacred and profane I found perplexing and intriguing. At night, I dreamt of the too-hot, too-small Middle Eastern country where I felt life deeper. It was the country I’d return to, year after year, to visit, explore, and peel back layers of myself. It was the place where I unearthed ancient artifacts and my own creativity; where I began seeing Judaism as something internal; where I found belonging on grocery store lines, on busses, and in strangers’ homes. Somehow, it was also the only place where I felt peace around my sister’s death.

My longing for Israel was both ancient and imminent; biblical and particular. It followed me from Jewish day school to my public high school to the university classroom. It would continue to gnaw at me until the poignant moment of decision in 2014, when the call became too strong and I decided to finally go. Needless to say, when I arrived at Ben Gurion airport in August 2014—Israeli passport in hand—I felt I had arrived. Homecoming was no longer a distant dream or a story at my family’s seder table. I was writing myself into the Israelites’ story, linking an epic history with my present.

Six years have passed. I’ve since learned that despite trading one type of life for another, I never actually “arrived.” I am constantly leaving exile and constantly returning home. These words have become concepts— no longer restricted to the physical space I inhabit— and have evolved as I navigate life as an immigrant in Israel; as a person who traded one kind of foreignness for another.

Aims and General Descriptions

Lost and Found: *Tales of Exile and Homecoming* will be a work of creative nonfiction that aims to unpack the concepts of exile and homecoming through a collection of interrelated personal essays. In said essays, I will explore exile as a place, as a state of mind, and as a form of mental and spiritual escape. I will examine exile as the process of leaving—of gaining distance from the familiar—often for the sake of return. I will similarly examine the concept of homecoming, seeing it as the continuous effort (and struggle) to return to some internal truth, whether it be spiritual, intellectual, or emotional.

I will primarily trace these concepts as they pertain to my ever-changing relationship with Israel, America, and Judaism over the course of my life, with a focus on the six-year post-*aliyah* time period. I do not plan to directly address these themes in my work; rather, I will use them as guiding lights when recalling and composing the stories of my thesis. Some of these stories will narrate major, life-changing events, such as the moment I decided to make *aliyah*, while other stories will illuminate small, telling events from my life that are equally revealing.

I aim to explore big questions in my work, such as: what does it look like to have a blended identity and what challenges/benefits does this pose? What does integrating look and feel like for an immigrant in Israel? Is Zionism relevant today? How has foreignness informed my sense of self? How do diaspora Jewry and Israeli Jewry influence one another? These questions have followed me since I began examining my Jewish identity and the events that have shaped it. And though I certainly won't find clear-cut answers to these questions, they have (and will) be significant influences in my storytelling.

My thesis aims to be both analytical and story-based, inspired by writers who have successfully blended several styles. Some essays will be strictly narrative—told as short stories that remain in one tense— while others will have clear segments of reflection.

With the above themes in mind, I will document the many losses, sacrifices, oddities, and discoveries I've encountered while in exile and while returning home.

Conceptual Background

The roots of my thesis go back to June 2010, a week before starting my gap year in Israel between high school and college. At the request of curious friends and nervous family members, I created a blog. I titled it “Leoraisraelife,” hoping that in addition to documenting my unique experience, the platform would be a useful tool for reflection. Life writing wasn’t entirely new to me at the time. I had excelled in my AP English class in high school, in which our teacher had us turn in periodic journal entries containing personal stories and reflections. It was the only homework I looked forward to each week. Throughout this class, the books I enjoyed reading most were memoirs. I was particularly struck by Jeanette Walls’ *The Glass Castle*. I remember appreciating her ability to animate her own story, telling it like a good work of fiction. I was also inspired by the way she illustrates her family generously and honestly despite the trauma they caused her.

During my year abroad, “LeoraIsraelife” became my sanctuary. What began as dry documentation of my experiences quickly turned into more insightful pieces in which I reflected on American and Israeli society. The blog accompanied me to university and onward, to my post-*aliyah*, permanent “Israelife.” My blog posts have formed a foundation for my thesis and will help me recall significant events from the past ten years. Before starting my studies at Bar Ilan, it was my main platform for zooming into specific life experiences in order to comment on bigger themes. This is one of my aims in writing this thesis. I hope that by sharing specific stories from my life in the form of creative nonfiction, I can dare to make larger claims about the world and succeed in reaching others. I hope to reach audiences that are interested in the stories of immigration, diaspora-Israeli Jewry, religious seeking, Israeli society, and exile/homecoming.

There are several writers who I believe successfully make larger claims in their works of creative nonfiction who have inspired my life writing. Some of these writers have influenced my writing style; others have influenced the content I wish to explore; a few have influenced both.

When I left for gap year in Israel, I was intrigued by adventure and travel memoirs—by people who chose to stray from the beaten path for the sake of self-discovery. I packed Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat Pray Love*, and Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* in my suitcase, all of which accompanied my ten-months of discovery and

exploration in Israel. These works enlightened me to the power of reflection from a distance. They revealed how leaving one's comfort zone—and one's physical home—can invite insight that cannot be gained by staying in one place. This is one of the major themes of my thesis, connecting directly to the exile-homecoming pendulum I wish to explore. Three years after my gap year, while already living Israel, I read memoirs with similar themes, such as Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, which inspired my writing after my 65-day thru-hike on the Israeli National Trail, and Tara Westover's *Educated*, which gave me confidence to look critically at my upbringing in America.

I was most recently inspired by Ayelet Tsabari's memoir *The Art of Leaving* and her fictional essay collection *The Best Place on Earth*. I found them to be closest to my writing both in style and in content. Her works center on the themes of escapism, longing, the complexity of Israeli society, prejudice, family heritage, and most significantly, the loss and beauty that comes with having a mixed identity (Canadian and Israeli). Most of these themes are relevant to my thesis. Similar to Tsabari, I will incorporate stories that go several generations back, rooting my connection to Israel in my family history.

Tsabari's major theme—leaving—influenced the way I chose to look at my coming to Israel, as well as many decisions I've made since living in Israel. Instead of “leaving,” I chose the lens “exile.” This word, for me, has connotations that link my very personal story to the story of the Jewish people. And since I am deeply committed to my faith and peoplehood, this word resonated with me more.

Tsabari successfully crafts herself into a round character in *The Art of Leaving*, revealing her imperfections without being self-deprecating. In doing so, her narration is incredibly self-aware; she weaves the theme of escapism into most of her pieces, reinforcing one of the driving questions of her memoir—namely, what drives her restlessness? Her question, though dissected and addressed, isn't neatly answered in her memoir. I believe that good memoir writing reveals not one answer to the driving question but many possibilities, insights, and often, more questions.

I appreciate Tsabari's ability to comment on Israeli society in a poetic, narrative way. She is not neutral about her views, yet she doesn't force her morals upon the reader. Since I tend to be didactic in my writing—spoon-feeding the takeaways to the reader—I strive to adopt Tsabari's

subtlety and use of surprising metaphors. Additionally, Tsabari successfully portrays those closest to her (mainly her partner and parents) by highlighting their major qualities, without reducing them to stereotypes. Her Yeminite mother, dead father, and Canadian partner seem to come alive in her short stories and are integral parts of her self-discovery. I hope to do the same when illustrating key characters in my thesis.

Shulem Deen's memoir *All Who Go Do Not Return* contains complex characters who struggle with Deen's gradual secularization and alienation from his Haredi community. His work reflects a deep level of empathy and compassion that comes after years of processing. Perhaps if he had written the memoir earlier, the prose would have come across as angry or condescending. However, he writes about the highly insular community of New Square with an impressive level of nuance. Though my upbringing in Westchester, NY has little in common with Deen's, I have recently begun noticing the parts of my American life that deterred me from it. Some of these "parts" involve close family members, who will be vulnerable subjects in my work. I hope to employ as much distance and compassion as Deen did while writing about these difficult experiences and characters.

Deen's memoir is a journey of homecoming. His homecoming is the process by which he unpeels layers of guilt and shame around his truest, innermost desires. Though he has questions about religion from an early age, his community doesn't let him ask; in fact, they scold him for asking. So he turns to writing, albeit anonymously at first, to let his voice be heard. Thus, I see his memoir as a kind of rebellion against the silence of conformity. His work speaks not only for himself, but also for others who are struggling as he struggled—for those in pursuit of their truth. His writing is deeply personal yet it stands for something bigger. I similarly see my writing as a form of rebellion. I write because I have a need to express my authentic, lived truth and experience.

Over the past few months, I have interviewed several family members about our family history in Israel. My aim was to get some "hard facts" along with some more juicy stories that relate to the themes of my thesis. I hope that by contextualizing my story within a family lineage, I will discover patterns and similarities. When I made *aliyah*, my mother said I was a "strong link" in a chain of Zionists, though she left Israel for America at age 19, along with both of her parents, who went back and forth between Israel and New York.

I believe it is impossible to isolate a person's story from the history that precedes it. The authors Yossi Klein HaLevi and Ari Shavit wrote their stories in the context of Jewish/Israeli history and familial history in their respective works: *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist* and *My Promised Land*. While HaLevi traces his family's influence on his radical political ideology, Shavit focuses on narrating Israel's history, which is enhanced and complicated by his family's personal story. I plan to revisit these texts before attempting to weave my story into its larger context, since the personal is also political—especially when talking about Israel.

My relationship with Israel and my personal growth have always been inextricably linked. People used to call me a chameleon for my ability to blend in easily to my surroundings, for better and for worse. It makes sense, then, that living in Israel has influenced my character tremendously—also, for better and for worse. Vivian Gornick and Etgar Keret illustrate the effects a place has on a person in their unconventional memoirs *The Odd Woman in the City* and *The Seven Good Years*. Gornick immerses the reader in New York City with her illustrations of everyday encounters—with strangers on the bus, doormen, and grocers. The reader gets a feel for the city she lives in and loves, and an understanding that the city is not only the setting but also a main character in itself. My writing is influenced by Gornick's witty, direct prose, and her ability to capture a place by implementing a corresponding style. For instance, her style in *The Odd Woman in the City* is fast-paced and unapologetic, not unlike New York City. I aspire to do the same in my descriptions of my hometown in America and the many places I've called home in Israel.

Etgar Keret is an expert at taking a “slice of life”—often a peculiar, unexpected slice—and using it to tell a larger story. The witty essays that comprise *The Seven Good Years* portray the intersection of his personal parenting narrative and the quirks of Israeli society. He manages to weave telemarketers, taxi drivers, and terror attacks into one story, taking the reader from laughter to tears in a few pages—a true microcosm for the intensity of life in Israel. I am influenced by the way Keret conveys deep content with lean, simple prose. I find it reminiscent of the Israeli psyche: don't overthink, just feel, and do. Anne Lamott, similarly, writes about her coming to faith in her compilation of hilariously self-conscious stories *Traveling Mercies*. Taking myself too seriously is a

challenge I face when sitting down to write. The above writers have taught me that one can talk about serious subject matter in a lighthearted way.

Shape of the Project

My thesis will consist of ten (or more) stand-alone essays that will be connected by the general theme. As with many memoirs, the work will have two beginnings, since I believe a non-chronological beginning will make for a more compelling format for my work. The first essay will bring the reader into a scene from my post-*aliyah* world. Afterward, I will go back in time (pre-*aliyah*) to give the narrative its proper context. Then, I will go back further to several generations ago, including several primary sources: a letter from my grandmother in Manhattan to her “brave” cousins in Palestine (circa 1947); a newspaper article detailing why my great-great-great-grandfather, a well-known philanthropist, punched Meir Dizengoff in the face; a story about my mother’s move from Brooklyn to rural Israel—how they placed an order for a landline phone in 1959 and why it arrived in 1965. These are a few snapshots from the stories that will enrich, contextualize, and perhaps help me make sense of my own journey to (and within) Israel.

The bulk of my essays will be from the last six years in Israel. Some of these stories will have rather serious content, others will be quirky and whimsical, some will be both. My aim is to convey a wide range of emotions—and therefore span multiple genres—which in itself is indicative of life in Israel. I do not plan to “trace” my entire history with Israel and Judaism; rather, I will choose anecdotes that can stand alone and have value as individual pieces. Below I have listed the general categories for each part of my thesis and short synopses of their content. (The family history section has already been mentioned above.)

Pre-*aliyah*

Speaking Hebrew Around the Kids: The Clash - American father meets Israeli mother; Israel through a five-year-old’s eyes: counting cats and *malawach*; things I learned (and wish I didn’t) at Jewish Day School; having an Israeli name; my fifth-grade romance with Itamar, the Israeli dance teacher’s son.

Nesiya: making peace with my sister's death in Israel; finding creativity in the desert; a chance encounter with a bedouin girl; planting seeds for *aliyah*.

Public School Exile: trying bacon for the first time; Christmas with my “goy-friend” of four years; being asked if I “speak Jewish” and other moments of ignorance; the price of assimilation.

Battle of the Brains: being a soldier for Israel on campus; crying to my left-wing Israeli professor; a microcosm of the Middle East on campus.

Post-*aliyah*

“Lonely Soldier”: learning the word *fadicha* (in context) on my first day in the army; memorable scenes from kitchen duty; life on the haunted base in Ramat Hagolan; ripped pants at a checkpoint (the army day from hell); zen and the art of surviving basic training.

Hippies and Hasids: losing boundaries at festivals in the desert and finding them again in Tzfat, Jerusalem, and Bat Ayin (then repeating the cycle again and again); choosing between cleaning the floors with my fellow soldiers on base and praying *shacharit*; refusing to bow to a golden calf atop a mountain in India; visiting my childhood best friend in Spain on my post-army trip, crying under a ceiling of dry-cured pig legs.

A Walk to Remember (stories from *shvil yisrael*): hiking 1,000 kilometers across all of Israel—running from scorpions and men; meeting my (now) husband on the trail, who talked to me despite the huge crack in my lip; the trail as a mirror for me - testing physical and emotional limits.

A Marriage of Cultures: marrying into a secular Israeli family; life in our 6x2 meter home on wheels; an awkward meet-the-parents in New York City; What’s in a name? From Kaufman to Peretz; living with the in-laws; expecting a baby *sabra*.

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