

**Losing Faith**

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

המחלקה לאנגלית

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## Introduction

In my novella, I will attempt to explore the frictional topic of modern-day matchmaking within the Haredi community in Israel, what happens to 'shidduch prospects' when a sibling chooses army service over Yeshiva, when the family is of Sephardic origin and when there are rumours of promiscuity. To what lengths would a mother, my protagonist Leah, go in these circumstances in order to secure good marriage matches for her daughters.

In my narrative I will try to reveal the truths behind the myths and sensationalism surrounding this community. I have read books and seen films that depict the Haredi Community, forever the morbid fascination of just about everybody else, as sexually repressed, modesty obsessed, state scroungers. Characters are often stereotyped; women are oppressed yet tragically reinforce this norm, men are pampered, fanatical patriarchs and children are neglected and exposed to early indoctrination, perpetuating the problems. In a wider sense, Israeli society is portrayed as regularly falling victim to the problems of this micro-society by having to cope with the financial burden, while the Haredim bite the hand that feeds them. This story is not an antidote but a call for honesty from both sides. I try to build realistic characters who represent only themselves, to highlight social issues without sensationalising, making moral judgements or demonising religious leaders.

Exploring these heavy topics is often rife with sadness, hopelessness and anxiety. I will try to bring humour and a lightness into the writing style because I want to impart to the readers that it is our approach to problems, not our lamenting them, that will lead to an improved situation.

### Aims and General Description

My thesis will be a novella whose theme is the Haredi / secular divide in Israeli society and the impact made when members from different factions mix. I am for realism. The style will be witty yet the overall tone will be serious.

The plot will start in Jerusalem with Leah, wife to Saadia Seban and mother to Rochel, Brachie, Shifra, Tehilla-Sarah and Ami-el Dovid Chaim. Both Leah and Saadia are in their 50s and are of Algerian descent but were born in Israel. Realising that their Sephardic background reduces her children's marriage prospects, Leah does everything in her power to raise the family's social status within the close-knit, Haredi community, including Ashkenazifying their name to, 'Sebanovsky'. However, her son has gone to the army, shortened his name to Ami and eventually has a relationship with a secular girl, Hila Gross, resulting in a pregnancy. Leah resorts to sabotaging the relationship and even pays for Hila's abortion; the baby's name would have been Emunah, after Hila's grandmother, hence the title, 'Losing Faith'.

### Conceptual Background

From a young age, I have been reading Jewish themed literature; if I recollect correctly, my first was 'Almonds and Raisins' by Maisie Mosco. I realised that the difference between Judaism and what Jews practise is a shared concern, not just my own observation. I was intrigued that this was a tale of religious Jewish families and their everyday concerns, their failures and how they had to reinvent Judaism to suit their new reality as immigrants. There is no overt, ethical message and Torah is not held as the ultimate healing power. I went in search of more but instead, found only two sorts of Jewish literature; narratives that serve to undermine Judaism and its misguided followers, and narratives which defend the Torah life, embellish the piety of

religious Jews, whitewash in order either persuade or as an act of worship. The problem is *purpose*. Even when Jews write about Jews, they are arguing with each other about Jews. I am certain that if I reread 'Almonds and Raisins' now, I could identify which side Mosco falls on; defence or offence. I used to think in black and white; religious Jews are all good because keeping Torah and mitzvot makes you a good person, absence of clear moral guidelines allows for subjective, ever-changing moral standards that could and have lead to disastrous consequences. Then I saw greater complexity and postulated that perhaps Jews can embrace difference of opinion and accept or at least respect each other. Now, I see unresolvable conflicts, blurring of the two twains. I want to write about them, no holes barred, no side taking, no judgement. My audience are those who are stuck in the black and white phase and those who want Jews to unite despite the conflicts. I want my readers to come to the realisation that there really is only one side, the spectrum looks more like a vert ramp at a skate park, that conflicts arise from ignorance and personal circumstance, not knowing how to skateboard or colliding with those who are falling. This is the consequence of God being hidden 'Hester Panim', a high but necessary price for free will.

In response to the slew of media perpetuating negative stereotypes of Haredi society, Nora L. Rubel evaluates a range of literary works representing this community in, as she describes, an unfavourable light. Her conclusion suggests that these negative stereotypes arise because the authors are, what she terms, 'outsider insiders', or rather, writers who claim to be from the Orthodox Jewish community but are actually not. She explains that non-Orthodox Jews in America appear to be anxious about the 'foreign' behaviour of the Orthodox, damaging their own Jewish-American identities, hence the backlash.

One such example given of an 'outsider insider' is Naomi Ragen, who writes the novel,

'Sotah'. This is a classic example where the Haredi community is demonised. The author Belva Plain, comments on the inside cover, "...a strong young woman [the protagonist, Dina] caught in a conflict between her own willing obedience to ancient laws [aka an arranged marriage] and her longings for the gold of love freely chosen...". Dina is an innocent victim of the Haredi machine. Her inner desires smack of Western culture; she wants to wear trousers, wear makeup and go to the mixed beach. For her disobedience, she is banished, ironically to America, and works as an au pair for a non-Orthodox Jewish family who enlighten her and aid her reunion with her family. She is then emotionally available to fall in love with her husband 'freely', thus gaining the 'gold of love'. Only when Dina is cleansed of her Haredi upbringing and embraces other ideas, can she find happiness. The Orthodox community is presented as backwards, the women are repressed, forbidden to express their individuality with fashion or even earrings and men are either oblivious at best, for example, Dina's father who does not consider the dowry as relevant as good character traits, and manipulative and cruel at worst, for example Dina's neighbour who tries to get her to commit adultery with him and then arranges for her to be banished when she refuses him.

While I agree with Rubel about the bleak depiction of the Haredi community in 'Sotah', I cannot agree on the root of the problem. First, Naomi Ragen is an observant Jew and therefore cannot be labeled an 'outsider insider'. The cause of such negativity remains a mystery. Perhaps it was unintentional and Ragen fell into the trap of joining the discourse while trying to tell Dina's story. Maybe she feels resentment due to some bad experiences. Who knows, but she cannot be considered as one whose Jewish identity is coloured by the goings-on in Haredi society; it is well understood in Israel that the National Religious Jews and the Haredi Jews have different lifestyles and views.

Second, as Zeirler points out, the anti-Haredi excerpt Rubel chooses from another literary work, 'The Long Distance Client', by Allegra Goodman, is taken out of context in order to appear to be the view of the writer. The protagonist, Mel, is a secular, American Jew who detests the Ultra-Orthodox families moving into his neighbourhood. They make him feel quite ill. However, reviewing the story, I found that this character was purposely representative of the exact type of anxious, non-orthodox Jew, displaying the exact type of hysteria about Orthodox Jews, ironically supporting Rubel's reasoning. Goodman is not a paranoid, secular Jew; she is writing about one.

Simply writing ideas against a certain group of people, albeit from the warped perspective of a Jew with a chip on his shoulder, could stir anti sentiment. However, I believe that writers should hold readers in higher esteem as to be able to distinguish the voice of a character from the voice of an author.

One writer who makes sweeping statements about the Haredi community in Hendon, UK, is Naomi Alderman. She makes the voice of the narrator and that of Ronit distinguishable by using different fonts but in both, there are negative 'they' statements about how the community members are manufactured to fit a perfect mold and how hypocrisy reigns. To accompany the stereotyped characters, such as the greedy Hartog and gossipy ladies, the far-fetched ending of the novel reflects Alderman's frustration at the lack of empathy for Esti, heavily contrasted by the deep respect held for the Rav, a man painted as the biggest hypocrit there is - one who is consulted on every area of life whereas he could not raise his own daughter.

Other books attempt to remedy this phenomenon by over explaining how humane religious Jews are. The focus tends to be on family interactions. However, this often comes at the expense of a strong plot line. Both Miller and King use the structure of vignettes of individuals

and all their human struggles with Judaism and Israel but in order to give a taste of the culture, both authors drop 'Yinglish' and 'Hebrish', followed by jarring, didactic lexicon. All characters display flaws for a realistic touch but Yiddishkeit is left un-marred and unquestionable which may choke secular and non-Jewish readers. Even when Beth, in 'Seven Blessings', has religious doubts, she attributes it to her inability to ask questions which would be too revealing of her inner struggle and the narrator attributes it to her indecisiveness that is seen in other areas of her life.

I would, by Rubel's definition, label myself as an outsider. I do not pretend to be from a Haredi background although I am Torah observant. My identity is not determined by others' views of the Haredi community since I am not in a minority here in Israel. In fact, others' views on Anglo immigrants and 'settlers' probably makes me more anxious about how I am perceived and treated rather than the ultra-orthodox community. Therefore, I cannot be accused of mudslinging because the Haredim are threatening my perceived identity. In fact, I am not mudslinging at all. My protagonist is a Jewish, Orthodox mother, encouraging her wayward son's pregnant girlfriend to abort in order to ensure good marriage prospects for her four daughters. Rubel might say that her actions will reflect badly on the Orthodox community. However, I will endeavour to create Leah's character in a way that she solely represents herself. I will also fully describe her unusual circumstances and present her unique perspective, not unsimilar to that of Mrs. Bennet in Austen's, 'Pride and Prejudice'.

When Lydia runs away with Wickham, panic stirs in the family because the rumour of an improper relationship out of wedlock, will ruin the marriage prospects of the remaining daughters. So grave is this threat that Mrs. Bennet takes to her bed in despair. In the 1800s, an unmarried woman had to rely on the charity of more fortunate family members. She was

forbidden to earn a living (in a respectable manner) and was unable to inherit anything. Only marriage could secure finances. The better the reputation of the family, the wealthier the catch! In the Ultra-Orthodox community, it is similar. While the goal of marriage is not to gain financially—indeed, women not only work but are expected to facilitate their husbands' Torah learning, though their earning potential is limited by the fact that it is seen as immodest for a woman to study at university, still, marriage provides social and religious security. The better the reputation (and dowry) of the daughter's family, the greater the chances of finding a good Torah scholar. Therefore, I will show, Leah has a judgment call to make and, either way, one or more of her children will be hurt. The decision she makes will not be out of malice for non-Orthodox Jews, nor forced by a megalomaniac Rabbi nor because she attaches no value to a grandchild conceived out of wedlock or potentially raised with contradictory values to hers.

This then raises the question of what my intentions are in writing this story so I will clarify. I will not condone Leah's actions to the reader, nor will I support them. I will simply present this unusual scenario in order for non Haredi readers to understand that Haredim are not sub-human; they face very real challenges with unclear solutions, they love their children, their lives are complex. I want to break the notion that men come and go from Kollel every day, women have so many children they cannot look after them and that they face tough challenges, not just if the chicken is kosher just like in the Hassidic tales. I know that some view the Haredim as uneducated, simplistic and even sub-human – not caring about their children, not having fulfilling marriages etc. However, I will serve to show that many interpretations of Torah are purely opinion dressed as law, desperate attempts to preserve and protect the community which sometimes does the opposite. My hope is that the nature of this familial conflict will cross the boundaries of culture and faith and highlight the shared humanity we all have with members

of this misunderstood community, while telling a compelling story.

### Shape of project

The novella will be in three sections: Leah, Ami, Leah and Ami.

I. Leah. In the first section, the reader will become familiar with Leah's world, her life, her perspective. This is so the full impact of Ami's behavior will be immediately understood and the reader will have empathy for Leah, rather than disgust.

The reader will see how Leah fits in to her society and how she views her role as her children's protector.

II. Ami. The second part will show Ami's life in the army and his discovery of the outside world. I will show how his religious upbringing colours his views on the secular world, how he may have abandoned some Torah traditions but has kept some and has a strong relationship with God, connecting with Him daily through formal, Jewish prayer. I will also show how Ami meets Hila and how they get themselves into a complex situation involving a young, immature relationship and the rude awakening of a pregnancy.

III. Leah and Ami. The third part will show the two worlds colliding and Leah's resulting decision to aid Hila's abortion.

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