

Necessary reading

Haim Watzman's new book comprises a true cross section of Israeli society **By Janice Weizman**

IMAGINE THAT you've been given complete freedom to write a column in an international news magazine about any subject you like. That was the luck, or the predicament, of *The Jerusalem Report* writer Haim Watzman, when he was asked by his editor to fill two pages once every four weeks with whatever he wanted. Watzman, an experienced journalist and translator, and the author of two works of nonfiction, one of which, "A Crack in the Earth: A Journey up Israel's Rift Valley," was a finalist for the Sammy Rohr Prize in 2008, first took up the challenge by writing personal essays and political satire, but soon found this unsatisfying. And in spite of his editor's initial reluctance, he began to write fiction pieces instead. His collection, "Necessary Stories," is a compilation of the best of these.

"I realized that I didn't want to just write about myself, or about real people and events," Watzman explains in the introduction. "I wanted to make people up and imagine what they did." Not every journalist has the artistry, not to mention the creativity, to make such a switch, but Watzman has stood up to the challenge admirably.

The authorial consciousness at work here is that of an observant Jew, born in Ohio, raised in Silver Spring, Maryland, and living in Israel since 1978. His perspective on his characters' lives and values are rooted in this viewpoint, and while the stories portray a varied panorama of people and settings, they



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are all filtered through this particular lens.

For example, the story "Sin Offering," begins with the phrase, "After Baba Batra, 10b," as if it were a reference or a dedication, and opens with the line, "'Please confine yourself to discussing your own sister's anatomy,' Yohanan said as he smeared iodine paste on the gash in Josh's shin."

The story depicts a group of religious soldiers confronted with the ethical dilemma of what to do when a Sudanese woman trying to sneak into Israel from the Sinai tosses

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her baby through a hole in a wire fence and then turns and walks back into the desert. As the soldiers explain the incident to their commander, they call up passages from the Talmud in an effort to make sense of what happened. The story takes up one passage in particular from Proverbs 14:34, "Righteousness exalts a nation; benevolence for

a people is a sin,” a saying discussed in the Talmudic tractate of the opening phrase.

“Is it my sin?” Josh asks at the end of the story, “Or is it hers?”

“When they get to the holy mountain,” Yohanan said, sitting down again, searching for a rock to toss, “God will tell them. And who else to offer up on the altar.”

Though the woman has been through harrowing experiences, which are outlined in the story, Watzman’s focus is on the soldiers, who remain relatively untroubled by the human tragedy and worry instead about whether they’ve done right by army regulations, the Talmud, and their own group morality.

One of the strong points of this collection is Watzman’s ability to set his stories in a wide range of historical time frames. “Rescue,” for example, takes place in the aftermath of the Arab riots in Jerusalem in 1929. It’s a riveting tale, told in the voice of a religious woman who hides an Arab from an angry Jewish mob, risking the ire of her brother. Throughout the story the woman muses on why she did it, and what punishment she may expect, yet ultimately, she feels a certain, private pride in her actions.

The story concludes, “The three reasons Levi will not kill me are these: Because women think with their hearts and not their minds. Because they see only the here and now and not history. Because they trust too much.”

“Let me add a fourth reason, my Creator. Of course, you know it already. You, after all, made me what I am. Some women laugh in the dark.”

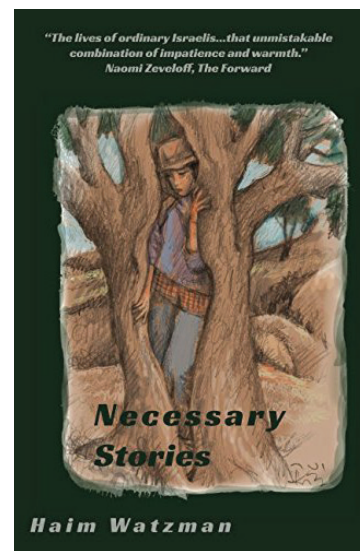
Reading through the collection, one can find a true cross-section of Israeli society, a collage of Jewish and Arab Israelis, Sephardim, Ashkenazim, Americans, historical figures, such as Herzl and Felix Mendelssohn, and regular people going about their lives, all partaking in the drama of human existence. Yet few of the stories match the lyrical poignancy of “Fireflies.” Written after the death of Watzman’s son Niot in a diving accident, the story describes that uncanny sense that the deceased is near, still present, somewhere between dream and reality.

“Fireflies, forgotten for many years, appear one summer evening. Shabbat, Riverdale Park along the Hudson. Under the shelter of tall trees, runners race by. Couples stroll, families, with small children sprawl on the grass. The first flashes, as the sun drops low over New Jersey, catch me by surprise. Then the tears begin.”

“How could light make me cry?” Watzman writes. “How could a creature showing itself to the world make me feel that world as empty?... I am caught at the door, Niot is right here before me... he is nearby, always nearby, but more than an arm’s reach away.”

All but one of these stories are relatively short, as befit the limitation of two pages in a Jewish international news magazine. Yet

anyone who sits down with this collection will come away with a sense of something much larger – a multifaceted impression of what it’s like to make a life in a place where the prosaic mixes with the fantastic; history, politics and philosophy are around every corner; and each encounter with a stranger holds the potential to show you the world from a fresh angle. ■



Necessary Stories
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