

A Haifa life

Deborah Solomon

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Full Text:

Q: As one of Israel's most acclaimed novelists and public intellectuals, you happen to live in Haifa, which is close to the Lebanese border and among the towns in northern Israel struck this month by Hezbollah's rockets. What has it been like there? It's a bizarre combination. It's like Yom Kippur on the one hand, because the streets are empty and there are no cars. On the other hand, you can eat if you like.

Are you constantly heading into bomb shelters? Every modern house in Israel has its own safe room. The other day, a patient was insistent to come see my wife, a psychoanalyst. In the middle of the session, the sirens went off. The three of us rushed into the safe room. This was a really special session in which the psychoanalyst's husband is sitting with the patient. This is not done in New York.

As a so-called Israeli dove who has publicly expressed sympathy for the Palestinians, what do you think when the sirens go off and the rockets fall? This is so sad. How many fighters are in Hezbollah? A very tiny group. A few thousand? They are now putting disaster on millions of Lebanese who did not want this war and who now have to suffer.

As terrorist groups go, do you think Hezbollah is worse than Hamas? Hezbollah is far more extreme than Hamas. Hezbollah is an organization that denies the legitimacy of Israel.

But so does Hamas, whose charter calls for the destruction of Israel. Their official ideology is very anti-Israel, but Hamas is more reasonable because they have to live with the reality and provide food to the Palestinian people. Hezbollah is living in a vacuum. They're in Lebanon, but they're not responsible for the safety and welfare of Lebanon, having been founded as the messenger of Iran in a fanatic way.

Let's talk about your latest novel, "A Woman in Jerusalem," which comes out in this country in a few weeks. This is the most important thing! Meaning, I would like to speak not about the Hezbollah but my novel.

Isn't politics more important than your own career? Of course, but about my novel I can speak something more accurate, more intimate and more true than I can about Hezbollah.

The novel is surprisingly entertaining for a book about a bureaucrat employed by a bakery and an unclaimed female corpse at a morgue, the victim of a suicide bombing in Jerusalem. He is an alienated bureaucrat. From this alienation, from this indifference, little by little, he takes moral responsibility for the neglect of this woman and falls in love with her even though he never met her.

Or rather falls in love with the process of mourning her, as if to atone for his unfeeling past. I wrote the book during the second intifada, when the question was what to do with these constant deaths. Israeli society, I saw, was repressing these deaths. When a bus or restaurant was blown up, the bus was taken away, the streets were cleaned and normal life returned. This was a kind of a formula -- we have to keep normal life. We don't have to be affected by this, as we don't know how to mourn. The heart was becoming hard, very hard. And this was the place which I wanted as a writer to open.

Along with other Israeli novelists, you've been active in trying to broker a peace with the Palestinians, flying to Geneva in 2003 for the signing of the Geneva Accord. Who else was there? A great part of the Israeli intelligentsia, including Amos Oz and David Grossman. We are very close friends.

Is there competition among you? We are competitive, but in order not to suffer from competition, we sublimate our competition in friendship.

How would you compare your fiction with theirs? I was considered one of the most optimistic of the novelists. But now, I have to say, I have lost a great quantity of my optimism.

Which makes you a pessimist about the future of Israel? No. I have children and grandchildren. I can be a pessimist for myself, but I have to be optimistic for them. I have to keep the spirit. Deborah Solomon

CAPTION(S):

Photo (Photograph by Gillian Laub)

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