



Double-Take: Haim Sabato's Books Make Waves on Israel's Cultural Scene

By Shira Leibowitz Schmidt and Jessica Setbon

Cultural critics in Israel have been startled by an interesting phenomenon—exceptional creativity by observant Jews in areas that were once the province of the secular. The granting of Israel's most prestigious literary prize to the novel *Adjusting Sights* by Haim Sabato rather than to other more well-known nominees, took the literary establishment by surprise and even caused some controversy.¹ While we should be wary of the danger of Orthodox triumphalism, we can note the fact that in three areas religious Israelis reached the pinnacle of their respective fields. Rabbi Sabato received the Sapir Award for the best book of 2000, and subsequently the Yitzhak Sadeh Prize for Military Literature in 2002, and the book was made into a

television movie.² Professor Robert J. Aumann received the Nobel Prize in economics.³ Shuli Rand, a Breslov Chassid, won the Best Actor award at the 2004 Israeli Film Academy (the Israeli equivalent of an Oscar) for the film *Ushipizin*.⁴

These works have all been warmly received by the Israeli public, yet unlike the usual Israeli cultural buffet that serves up the values and concerns of secular society, this new menu offers a message based on Torah values. To get their points across, these works employ “kosher” themes, language and dress.

But this *frum* cultural fare is far from pareve. While most *frum* literature on the market today contents itself with content but stints on style, Rabbi Sabato's novels have earned praise for

their luminous literary technique, compared by some to the writings of Nobel literature prizewinner S. Y. Agnon.⁵ Rabbi Sabato confronts the deepest questions of faith in a sophisticated language that appeals to the discerning modern reader.

Recently, his three novels have been translated into English. Full disclosure: his non-fiction work on *parashat hashavua*, entitled *Rest for the Dove*, is in the process of being translated by the authors of this book review.

Adjusting Sights

You are the gunner of an Israeli tank, taking heavy fire from Syrian enemy tanks surrounding you on all sides. You have to fire, but you can't see a thing. What do you do? “Gunner,

pray!” orders your tank commander.

And pray is exactly what Haim, the main character in *Adjusting Sights*, does with fervor in this fictionalized autobiographical novel. Haim, a young yeshivah student, rushes from the study hall to fight on the Golan Heights during the Yom Kippur War. He has neither the precious seconds nor the calipers needed to adjust the sights of his tank. But faith in God he has plenty of, and this is what enables him to adjust his sights on life while confronting the harsh realities of battle.

Tium kavanot, the Hebrew title of this book, is a double entendre: *tium* means adjusting, while *kavanot* can mean both gun sights and intentions in prayer and *mitzvot*. In the 1973 war, Haim serves in a tank battalion together with Dov, his childhood friend from an immigrant neighborhood in Jerusalem. Haim enters a field of battle that, like the title of this novel, proves to have more than one level of meaning. One month later, Haim returns to the old neighborhood on his first leave, alone. Where is Dov? His friend's absence triggers within Haim a battle to reconcile his spiritual world with the chaos and visceral fear of imminent death surrounding him.

This book is largely a journey within the mind. The plot winds back and forth like a shuttle on a loom, weaving an intricate tapestry of emotions and midrash, snatches of prayer amid bullets striking helmets, bewilderment alongside belief. Along the way, we meet the characters and relive the experiences of Haim's childhood.

Although the book is written from the point of view of an eighteen-year-old soldier, Haim's vocabulary is infused with material from traditional texts. A paragraph of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* colors his bus ride as he rejoins his battalion after a twenty-four-hour leave. Verses from Psalms pepper his tale as he recounts the height of the battle at Nafah quarry to a committee of army officers. He writes often of the dedication of the religious soldiers to performing even the smallest mitzvah despite

the hardships of war. One soldier insists on searching for hot water to bathe in to greet the Sabbath, and saves cans of sardines and stale chocolates for a *melaveh malkah* feast. Several tell of grabbing their tefillin along with rifles and ammunition as they abandon destroyed tanks. Rabbi Sabato's war story brings home the realization that without the dedication of these soldiers as well as that of their secular companions, the Syrians would have driven their tanks all the way to Tiberias, plac-

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ing Israel's future in serious jeopardy and redrawing its map.

Throughout the book, Rabbi Sabato uses the image of obstructed sight to recreate the tense confusion of the war. We see through the eyes of a tank gunner blinded by sunlight and ordered by his commander to fire on what he perceives to be enemy Syrian tanks, only later to discover that the tanks he spared were actually friendly forces. The image of obstructed vision symbolizes Haim's bewilderment, both literal and figurative: As a soldier, he often cannot see where he is going, and as a religious soldier to boot he has trouble seeing the why of going there. At one point, the periscope of the machine gun bashes his eye, and he can't figure out what is going on. He grabs a strapless Uzi and follows the commander's orders to abandon the tank. Then we find out that the commander himself is having trouble with his eyesight. How can he possibly lead

his troops to safety? Haim is similarly bewildered by the philosophical meaning of the war. Yet somehow he blunders through, recalling a snatch of prayer here, a story about a *tzaddik* there, finding God.

Rabbi Sabato tells the story of the turning point in the war on the Golan, the battle of Nafah quarry, within the framework of a post-war interview of battalion members by an army debriefing team. This device allows him to narrate freely, to take the reader on a tour inside his mind, where he is searching for Dov and for a way to make sense of the war. His vocabulary is simple, the sentences succinct and clear. But the picture the soldiers paint is one of the total confusion that characterized this war. Even the psychologist interviewing one of Haim's fellow soldiers stops taking notes while he narrates, as if he thinks the young soldier's story, which reveals how unprepared the army was, is too unbelievable or embarrassing to report. For example, the soldier reports his total ignorance about the Sagger, a new type of weapon the Syrians used. Another recounts attempting to advance across a field of battle in a tank whose gears are constantly jamming. And amidst the turmoil, moments of serendipity: a newlywed soldier picks up a phone in an abandoned army camp (this was decades before the invention of the cell phone) and manages to call his bride of just one month.

Through the soldiers' tales of their experiences, the story of the war gradually becomes coherent. And for Haim, the story of what happened to Dov becomes clear, along with the meaning of his faith. As Haim is sanctifying the new moon, he hears the gruesome tale of one shell-shocked soldier, who keeps to himself and refuses to speak after witnessing the slaughter of his entire tank crew. His story forces Haim to probe God's reasoning. Why was this soldier, and Haim himself, spared, but Dov taken? In Rabbi Sabato's eloquent metaphor, why does the Owner of the fig tree pick certain figs, leaving others to ripen? The faith of the naive yeshivah

boy is tempered by the realities of war, but not abandoned. At the beginning of the book, Haim sanctifies the new moon of the month of Tishrei with Dov, and intends to tell him that whoever sanctifies the moon in joy will come to no harm in the month ahead. By the end of the book, Haim sanctifies the moon in Cheshvan, a month later, with a much-altered temperament. He cannot be joyous, yet he is grateful that God has chosen to keep him alive.

This book is not for the casual reader. The narrative skips and jumps around within Haim's mind, taking the reader from the heat of battle to Haim's childhood and back again. This works well to recreate the sense of confusion in battle, but in order to follow the narrative, the reader must maintain a high degree of concentration.

Aleppo Tales

Much of modern fiction, secular as well as religious, is characterized by the "sledgehammer approach," i.e., a lack of subtlety and nuance. In contrast, Rabbi Sabato's works, especially the three novellas in the collection *Aleppo Tales*, delicately describe what transpires in traditional Jewish families and communities by lifting a veil on a *kehillah* the author knows intimately: that of the rabbis and Jewish merchants of Syria. With his nuanced writing, he practices what he preaches in the novel, for the Jews of Aleppo "converse only in hints, as if saying, if you have taken the hint you have taken it, and if you haven't taken it, you have no right to know."

The first tale revolves around the mystery of a banned book of hymns and *zemirot*, while the second follows the disappearance of a rare Chanukah menorah. Designed in accordance with Aleppo tradition, the special menorah had the usual auxiliary *shamash* plus nine branches for candles, rather than the customary eight. The mystery of the Aleppo menorah and why it resurfaces

in the Louvre drives the story.

Max felt drawn toward this menorah and he examined it closely. He saw it was engraved with worn Hebrew letters and the motif of a ship. He made an effort to read the script and fit the letters together, until he had it: Sapporta. Max's face turned pale, his heart pounded, and he thought he was losing his mind. How did this menorah come to be in Paris? And how did



he come to see it? Max took it upon himself to find out....

While the reader is finding out how this peripatetic menorah got to the Louvre, he is swept along with an even more engaging mystery that accompanies the menorah plot, and which resonates with American Jews today: Will the younger generation of Aleppo Jews remain a link in the chain of piety and scholarship? What will happen when Jacob, who had been the star student in Aleppo, changes his name to Jacques and goes to Paris with its intellectual, sensual and aesthetic enticements?

[At the start of World War I] Jacob found that all kinds of spiritual challenges were placed before him, and he passed them all. The story is told of the examination paper [for an international French award] he even refused to write on a day of Hol Hamo'ed. [Nevertheless], when he concluded his studies, scoring outstanding success, he was sent a medal from Paris

and awarded a scholarship for the Sorbonne.

His wife was also deeply rooted in the two worlds.

Rachel was well schooled in Bible, and was an intellectual and an avid reader. [Fleeing to Paris on the eve of the war] they expected to feel at home in France. Yet on their arrival they saw that the mountains of France in Aleppo were not the same as the mountains of France in France, and the things that imagination shows to man are not the same things that his eyes show him.

Exposed to the magnet of modernity, how long would the couple remain steadfast to Shabbat, holidays, regular study and kosher cuisine? The most enticing temptations were intellectual rather than material.

Never had he heard such ideas before. These ideas ... were destined to shake the world to its foundations, and captivate the hearts of the young. Little did Jacques know then that this out-

look on the world would one day hold his own son's heart in thrall.

This theme resonates with the struggle of Modern Orthodoxy today—the struggle to incorporate the best of the outside world while remaining deeply committed to tradition.

As the two subplots work themselves out, the denouement unfortunately appears somewhat contrived and treacly. This is not so surprising as Rabbi Sabato readily admits, "I'm less interested in plot than in melody, rhythm, atmosphere, choosing the right word."

And choose the right word he does, on every page. While those unfamiliar with Jewish sources have no problem reading the novels (a glossary is provided), the hints and echoes from tradition will delight those well versed in Torah sources.



Rabbi Sabato's Other Works

English readers can now enter the enchanted world of old Jerusalem neighborhoods in Rabbi Sabato's latest novel, which was just translated. *The Dawning of the Day* (in Hebrew, *Ke'afapei Shachar*) is a mystery, but not in the usual sense. On the surface, the hero, Ezra Siman Tov, is a pious and poetic laundry presser who rises at dawn and leads a life of prayer, work, study, family and *chesed*. But there is a streak of shame and tragedy hinted at throughout the novel. We are kept puzzling until the end about the secret suffering that never leaves him free and overshadows his wonderful family life. There is beauty and even gentle humor in Ezra's daily routine. In Rabbi Sabato's words, this protagonist "has been through so much that his soul has grown serene."

Rabbi Sabato's non-fiction works include *Ahavat Torah*, essays on each of the weekly Torah readings, and published by Toby Press as *Rest for the Dove*.⁶ This book on *parashat hashavua* is unlike any other on the topic because each essay is accompanied by a *piyyut*, or traditional poem, related to the theme of the particular Torah portion. While most of us are familiar with the *piyyutim* for the holidays, few realize that over the centuries *piyyutim* were composed for each weekly reading! This book marks the first time these *piyyutim* will be available in English.⁷

Whether he is writing about forgotten memories, secret worlds or the weekly Torah reading, Rabbi Sabato has introduced a new and different voice into the world of Israeli fiction and non-fiction. **IA**

Notes

1. A. Becker, "Out of Sight," *Haaretz Magazine*, 24 October 2003.
2. The movie *Adjusting Sights* is in Hebrew and has been shown on Israeli television and in schools, *yeshivot* and community centers in Israel. It is available through United King Productions in Israel; the movie is in Hebrew, but English subtitles can be provided. For information, contact Lilach Adler at 972-3-517-7101 or at lilach@metrocom.co.il.
3. Shira Leibowitz Schmidt, "Memorable Moments of the Nobel Prize Ceremony," *Jewish Action* (spring 2006): 12-14.
4. See "A Conversation with Shuli and Michal Rand" in this issue of *Jewish Action*. Information about *Ushpizin* is available at www.ushpizin.com.
5. D. Elbaum, "*Ma'aseh Beshnei Agnonim Shehayu Be'reinu*," *Haaretz* book supplement, 6 April 2005. Elbaum criticizes Rabbi Sabato for his Agnonesque style.
6. From the Shabbat *zemirah* "*Yona Matza Manoah*."
7. Rabbi Haim Sabato also has a book of *derashot* on the High Holidays, *Ani Ledodi*, and a collection of essays on Talmudic topics, *Be'or Panaiyich*, both of which are available only in Hebrew. Visit birkatmoshe.org.il to listen to his *shivrim* in Hebrew.

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