

Like Dreamers – Book Review

Many books have been written about the Israeli experience but few if any captured the epic story of the modern State of Israel from 1967 to the present day, as well as “Like Dreamers” by Yossi Klein Halevi.

This sweeping narrative told through the personal and collective life stories of seven IDF paratroopers from the elite 55th Reserve Brigade that were first to reach the Western Wall during the Six Days War of 1967, affords the reader an intimate insight into the political, ideological and social tensions of the post-1967 era. It chronicles the ensuing wars and the tectonic economic and political shifts that shaped the Israel of today. The title of his book comes from the 126th Psalm: *“When the Lord returned the exiles of Zion, we were like dreamers.”* Indeed it almost prophetically describes the euphoric mood of Israel in the summer of 1967.

Halevi, a seasoned journalist and author, a contributing editor of the *New Republic* and a highly respected commentator on Middle Eastern affairs for such publications as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* is first and foremost a great story teller. His story in his own words is *“a story about the fate of Israel’s utopian dreams, the vast hopes imposed on this besieged, embattled strip of land crowded with traumatized Jewish refugees.”* Halevi spent the past 10 years following the lives of these seven paratroopers. He watched as these men individually and collectively shaped the Israeli political landscape – from those on the left who supported the Peace movement and the vision of the Oslo accords to those on the right who founded and supported the settlers’ movement beyond the 1967 lines to reclaim Israel’s ancestral land. In his factual, conversational and compassionate style Halevi chronicles their individual growth and evolution as social and political leaders and activists, artists and entrepreneurs and explores their tense inter-relationships as civilians and when called upon to fight in Israel’s wars, their bond as comrades in arms.

After the Yom Kipur war of 1973 and through the early 80's, the pioneering spirit seemed to have shifted from the secular socialist founders of the state and the Kibbutz movement to the "*knitted Kippot*" religious Zionist movement. Halevi chronicles this period of the late 70's and early 80's as both contentious on the political and ideological front including the first unpopular (Lebanon, 1982) war in the history of the state, but at the same time also as a renaissance period from an economic, ecological, agricultural, technological and cultural development.

Three of the paratroopers, Yoel Bin-Nun, Yisrael Harel, and Hanan Porat all religious Zionists, led the settlement movement in Judea and Samaria. At the other extreme Udi Aviv traveled to Damascus to help create an anti-Zionist terrorist underground for which he served 12 years in an Israeli prison. Arik Achmon was aligned with the peace movement. He became the first CEO of a private corporation (Arkia airline) that signalled the shift towards privatization and free market economy and that subsequently brought into power the first right wing conservative government of Menachem Begin in 1977. Avital Geva became an ecological steward and pioneered Israel's greenhouse technology and Meir Ariel emerged as the greatest Hebrew poet-singer of his generation famous for his song "Jerusalem of Iron" that became the anthem of the peace movement.

Halevi sensitizes the reader to the fundamental and at time irreconcilable divisions that erupted into the violence with the murder of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and that continue to plague Israel to this very day. Divisions between Left and Right, secular and religious Zionism, land for peace, settlement and unilateralism ideologies in the search for the elusive peaceful solution with the Palestinians and at home. At the same time Halevi builds up the reader's trust in the resiliency of the Israeli society and just as with the paratroopers the hope for a respectful dialog among the opposing factions in preference to the threat of radicalism and violent descent.

Non-Israeli readers, more so than through many other sources, get to understand and intellectualize the complexity and the sensitivity of the issues of the day and thus able to form an independent opinion on the future prospects of the state of Israel. For Israelis, especially those who lived through this period either in Israel or abroad, the book has all of this and more. Leafing through the pages brings back intense memories, visual flashbacks of the places and the events chronicled in the book and the scent of the beautiful land of Israel. It's a must read.