

Book Notes - *Rabbi Steven Rubenstein*

The Mizrahi Experience and The State of Israel

It can be all too easy to tell ourselves that we never really believed the long-standing canonical story. We always really knew that it was more complicated. I've been thinking about this as I've read a few books about the experience of Mizrahi Jews and the State of Israel. When I think about early Zionists and the building of Jewish settlement during the first half of the 20th century, I think about Theodore Herzl, Ahad Ha'am, David ben Gurion, Golda Meir, Chaim Nahman Bialik, and Menachem Begin—all Ashkenazim. And even though I've been in Israel a number of times (and sometimes for many months at a time), I confess that my mind is only now recognizing some of the facts of the early years of Israel and the contemporary nation. Helping me along have been several books that I recommend to you.

It was a great opportunity to hear Ayelet Tsabari a few weeks ago when she appeared at Literati Bookstore in Ann Arbor. In the past six months I've read her award-winning short story collection **The Best Place on Earth** and her memoir **The Art of Leaving**. Tsabari is Israeli-born from a family of Yemeni-origin. Her changing relationship with her various identities—Yemeni, Israeli, Jewish, family of origin, world-traveler are felt throughout both books. There is a self-conscious desire to claim the place of Yemeni Jews in the story of Israel which I really appreciated. Quite a bit of this literary reclamation comes out of the pain and alienation that Tsabari has felt at the exclusion of her Yemeni (and broader Mizrahi) background within the context of her upbringing in Israeli society and attitudes she experienced within the army and beyond. I would recommend starting with **The Best Place on Earth** for those who are interested in hearing Tsabari's voice. However, this might reflect my bias as a bigger reader of fiction than memoir. *Please note that we will be reading and reviewing this book for an upcoming meeting of our Israeli Book Club---the evening of Tuesday, June 30th.

I heard the journalist Matti Friedman on a podcast not long ago. He is a Canadian Jew who made Aliyah a few decades ago and has written several books of non-fiction. Some of you may have read his book **The Aleppo Codex** which focused on this medieval manuscript of the Tanakh. One piece of the podcast that has stuck with me relates to the changing place of Mizrahi culture in contemporary Israel. He mentions that in the 1980's a customer walking into a record store in Jerusalem would find that there would be a section titled "Israeli Music" and a separate one titled "Mizrahi Music." That is, Mizrahi culture was seen as different from (and outside of) standard (that is, Ashkenazi) Israeli culture. While you won't find many music stores around anymore, Friedman notes that Israeli music is dominated by Mizrahi artists today and the boundaries that separated out Mizrahi culture have changed quite a bit in recent years.

Friedman has continued his focus on the Mizrahi community with the publication of **Spies of No Country** which explores the creation of a fledgling spy service prior to the State of Israel and leading into the War of Independence in 1948. This spy service was the precursor to the Mossad. Friedman focuses on what was sometimes called The Arab Sector of the Haganah and on a few individuals who worked to create The State of Israel from outside the country. By using Jews from Arab countries and North Africa, the Arab Sector was able to take advantage of the fact that these individuals knew Arabic as the first language and could blend into communities like Beirut and Damascus. The level of sophistication of these early attempts at espionage was low and often focused more on general information about the attitudes towards Israel and the War of Independence as it was happening. Still, their contribution to the founding of the state was important and interesting to learn even as Israel will celebrate its 72nd Independence Day in 2020. As one reviewer points out, this is a book about spies, not a spy book. It is a book with tension but also with a lot of empathy. Friedman has done a service by bringing us this lesser-known story of Israel.