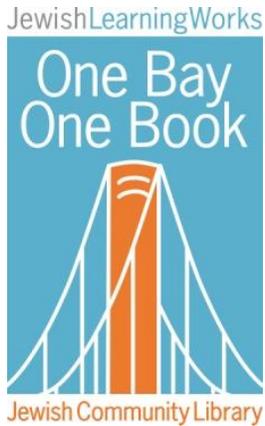
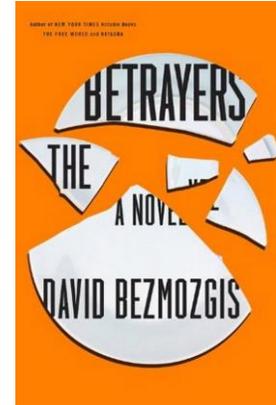


Jewish Community Library



The Jewish Community Library's Guide to Jewish Themes in *The Betrayers* by David Bezmozgis



This guide (which includes spoilers) is meant to supplement Little, Brown and Company's guide to David Bezmozgis's *The Betrayers* by highlighting Jewish references that may enhance the experience of reading the novel.

I. The Russian/Ukrainian Setting

The Refuseniks

The defining experience of Baruch Kotler's life is his ordeal as a prominent Soviet refusenik. For many years, most Jews were permitted neither to practice Judaism nor to leave the Soviet Union. The refusenik movement began in the 1960s, when a small number of Soviet Jews begin actively studying Judaism and applying for exit visas to Israel. The vast majority of these visa applications were denied, and the consequences for those seeking to leave the country were often harsh.

Kotler's character is clearly based in part on the prominent activist Natan Sharansky (although the extramarital affair is a fictional device). Denied an exit visa to Israel in 1973, he emerged as a spokesman for fellow Soviet dissidents. Framed through the efforts of a roommate secretly working for the KGB, he was convicted on charges of espionage and treason, and was imprisoned under harsh conditions for thirteen years. Released in 1986, he immigrated to Israel, where he changed his name from Anatoly to Natan. As in the case of Kotler's wife Miriam, Sharansky's wife Natalya was allowed to immigrate to Israel ahead of her husband in 1974. There she took the name Avital, became religiously observant, and pursued efforts on the behalf of her husband and other refuseniks.

Sharansky became a politician in Israel, eventually founding a party representing immigrants from the former Soviet Union. More than a million Soviet Jews immigrated to Israel from the 1970s onward, with the greatest number doing so in the 1990s.

Post-Soviet Ukraine

The Betrayers illustrates the precarious situation of Jews remaining in Ukraine in the 21st century—a situation that has worsened since the novel was written. The Jewish population in what was once the Soviet Union is less than a tenth of what it was in the 1930s, reduced by the Holocaust, emigration, and assimilation.

The novel takes place entirely in the Crimean cities of Yalta and Simferopol. Jews from varied backgrounds have lived in the Crimean peninsula for more than 2,000 years. The remark that “if Stalin had only signed his name, it would have been a Jewish homeland” (166) refers to the consideration of the Crimea as a possible Jewish homeland in the early years of the Soviet Union. In 1923 the Soviet politburo accepted a proposal to establish a Jewish Autonomous Region in the Crimea, but then backed away from this decision. Nevertheless, many Jewish agricultural colonies were formed, and the dream of Jewish autonomy in the Crimea continued for some time, until it was used by Stalin as a pretext to accuse Jews of disloyalty to the state and came to serve as another basis of persecution.

The Hesed, which reluctantly gives financial assistance to Tankilevich in exchange for his participation in prayer services, is a program of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. With offices in numerous cities in the former Soviet Union, it provides assistance to Jews, a large number of whom are in poor health and have few resources.

The question of the future of Jews in the former Soviet lands is a controversial one. There are many obstacles to a revival of Jewish life, including intransigent anti-Semitism, political and economic instability, and lack of Jewish education. Although there are pockets of strong Jewish revival, often due to the outreach activities of Chabad, detractors believe that this is a chapter in Jewish life that is ending, and limited resources should be devoted elsewhere. The Simferopol community portrayed in the novel reinforces this negative vision—Tankelivich is compelled by his secret agreement with the Hesed to make a *minyán* that, in fact, can no longer reach a *minyán* (the minimum ritual quorum of ten required for full communal prayer and the public reading of the Torah).

II. Israeli Politics

The novel is set against the background of Israeli politics. Kotler's exile to Yalta is set in motion by his opposition to the government's proposed dismantling of a Jewish settlement in the West Bank—the land extending eastward from Israel's 1948 borders to the Jordan River, which came under Israel's control following the Six Day War of 1967.

Kotler's unwavering position against vacating a West Bank settlement echoes Natan Sharansky's resignation from Ariel Sharon's cabinet in 2005 to protest plans for the unilateral elimination of all Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip and several in the West Bank.

Opposition to dismantling settlements in the West Bank includes both strategic and religious rationales. Much of the strategic opposition reflects concerns about security, which has been amplified by disillusionment with the impact of withdrawing from the Gaza Strip.

The religious opposition comes from the fact that the West Bank (referred to by many religious Jews by the biblical names Judea and Samaria) is at the heart of the land promised to the Israelites in the Bible, and is the setting of many of the Bible's most significant events. Abandoning this land is unconscionable for many, with the breaking of a divine covenant seen as perhaps the worst "betrayal" of them all.

This is the deeply religious Benzion's conflict, for he is in a military unit whose job is to help vacate a settlement. When he tells his father he is considering refusing his orders, his father's response is surprising. Kotler advises Benzion to take part in the operation, even if it is contrary to his convictions. For Kotler, his son's duty as a soldier of Israel apparently trumps his individual conscience—a fascinating decision to come from a former dissident.

III. Repentance and Forgiveness

There is great overlap among those who are injured and those who injure. The fundamental tension comes from Kotler's role as both someone who can grant forgiveness and who is in a position to seek it. He has been wronged by Tankilevich, but he is in the process of wronging Miriam, his children, Leora, and Leora's family, as well as his supporters in Israel.

In her email message, Miriam says "I am willing to forgive," as do "our friends, our

community.” (191) But Kotler has not sought forgiveness, and his journey to it is more complex.

Teshuvah

It is significant that the action takes place in the late summer, prior to the Jewish high holidays, which is a time of spiritual preparation that emphasizes *teshuvah*—the Jewish term for repentance which has the literal meaning of “return.”

Rabbi Aubrey Glazer has brilliantly pointed out how Kotler’s journey reflects some of the steps of *teshuvah* enunciated by Maimonides in his legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*.

Glazer cites Maimonides’ teaching that, in order to truly transform through *teshuvah*, there is a need “...to change one’s name, as if to say ‘I am a different person and not the same one who sinned’; to change one’s behavior in its entirety to the good and the path of the just; to travel in exile from his home. Exile atones for sin because it causes a person to be submissive, humble and meek of spirit.” (Maimonides, *Laws of Return, Mishneh Torah, Chapter 3, Halacha 4*).

It is in his experience of exile that Kotler show evidence of transformation. He and Leora offer to spend money to save Tankilevich’s life. And they release of Tankilevich from his obligations to the Simferopol community. Although Tankilevich has not asked for forgiveness, they are bestowing it.

And they return. Miriam has written, “Even if you decide not to return to me, return speedily to the country and to your children.”(192) When Kotler elects to return both to his wife and his country, it is literally *teshuvah*.

Justice and Mercy

Tankilevich does not seek Kotler’s forgiveness, but his wife, Svetlana, actively does. And in invoking her “Christian convictions,” she turns forgiveness into a theological issue, in addition to a personal one.

She says, “I believe in God's grace. I believe that He hears our prayers.” When Kotler asks what she has prayed for, she says, "Like everyone else, I prayed for his mercy. I prayed for Him to ease the burden of our suffering." (115)

When the non-religious Kotler then recalls his own prayers many years ago, he notes, "When I was in prison, I asked Him to grant me the satisfaction of facing my

tormentors as a free man."

And Svetlana responds, "Well, what is to say He hasn't answered our prayers?"

Kotler's and Svetlana's differing prayers reflect the binary qualities of justice and mercy attributed to God. They are often seen as conflicting values, as mercy calls for a lessening of the consequences of one's actions. Svetlana's words suggest that perhaps both qualities are being summoned simultaneously in this drama.

And, indeed, justice becomes a sticky proposition, for, as Tankilevich points out, Kotler has done quite well in the long term (although Tankilevich conveniently minimizes the death sentence and years of harsh imprisonment), while Tankilevich lives in bad health under a false identity in a place that remains oppressive.

And Kotler eventually says, "I agree that he has served his term, such as it is. If it were simply between him and me, I would say it: Volodya, I forgive you. But I can't go before the world and say that he was not culpable for his actions. (173)

Names

The names in *The Betrayers* are evocative. The numerous changed names reflect the practice of many Zionists to shift from a "diaspora name" to a Hebrew one, often upon moving to the land of Israel.

Boris has become Baruch, meaning "Blessed," while Milena has taken the name Miriam, means "Sea of Bitterness." Their son Benzion's name means "Son of Zion," befitting a child born in Israel. Their daughter Dafna's name means "laurel," reflecting a common practice of giving children the names of plants and trees native to Israel, and thus emphasizing the connection of the people to the land.

Leora means "My Light," and, interestingly, the Russian name Svetlana similarly means "Light."

Amnon, the name of the man who blackmails Kotler, means "faithful." And it is the name of King David's son, who dishonors his father.

And Vladimir Tankilevich has become Chaim, meaning "Life." Significantly, he has done so without moving to Israel. One might interpret Leora's plea "Let him live" (219) in such a light.

In a moving passage at the book's end, Kotler "would never have supposed that the sight of Miriam's name, typed in Hebrew...could so stir him." (187) He recalls how her name figures in their story together. When she became his wife, her name changed from Milena Ravikovich to Milena Kotler. Upon becoming activists, she became Miriam, swapping a Slavic name for a Jewish one. And once they became Israeli, her name came to be spelled in Hebrew characters. These transformations mark the experiences that bind the two of them, even if their romantic connection has faded.

Psalms

Psalms feature prominently in the story, most significantly when Benzion writes an email message to his father containing only the cryptic subject line "Psalm 137:5." (184)

Beginning with the line "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion," Psalm 137 reflects poignantly on the experience of exile. Line 5, to which Benzion refers, promises, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning." It is this line that Benzion will literalize as he destroys his hand.

The psalms have particular meaning for Kotler, who, while in prison, "found in the Psalms, if not quite religious conviction, then something more vital to him, a sense of continuity with his people from deepest antiquity..." (184) Reciting the words used by many generations of Jews seeking strength and comfort, Kotler felt a unity with oppressed Jews throughout the ages. He titled his autobiography *Song of Ascent*—a rendering of the Hebrew words *shir ha-maalot* which mark the beginning of Psalms 120 through 134. The word *maalot* shares the same Hebrew root as *aliyah*, the term Jews use to describe the act of coming to dwell in the land of Israel. The political party that Natan Sharansky founded is called *Yisrael Be'Aliyah*, and the title of Sharansky's autobiography, *Fear No Evil*, is taken from Psalm 23.

And as the novel concludes in a chapter called *Ascent*, set on an airplane bound for Israel, Kotler recalls a similar flight twenty-five years earlier, with "the words of the Psalm resounding in his head in a strong mystical voice, *When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like dreamers.*" (225) If Psalm 137 is a song of exile, then Psalm 126, which begins with the aforementioned line, is a song of return.

King David

The figure of King David is evoked a number of times in the novel, beginning with the epigraph taken from the First Book of Kings. David is viewed traditionally as the author of the Psalms, and Kotler mentions that he had found in the Psalms a connection to “King David himself who was made palpable through his verse as a man of flesh and blood racked by the same fears as Kotler was.” (184)

The Star of David appears a number of times, and Tankilevich says to Kotler, “You are the Shield of David protecting Israel from my toxic influence.” (174)

Problematic hero

There are numerous comparisons to be made between Kotler and David. Both are musicians, both rise to power against expectation, and both lose their stature. But most palpable is that both are righteous, but deeply flawed characters.

Baruch’s affair with the younger Leora perhaps evokes David’s lust for Bathsheba in the First Book of Samuel. David’s inability to control his desire leads to his deliberately sending Bathsheba’s husband, the loyal soldier Uriah the Hittite, to the front lines to die in battle. In classical rabbinic commentary, David’s brings on himself his subsequent misfortunes — particularly the death of the child of this union, and the rebellious behavior and deaths of his sons Absalom and Amnon—as punishment for this earlier misdeed.

Miriam acknowledges the coexistence of positive and negative impulses as a natural condition, invoking a line from Ecclesiastes: “For there is not a righteous man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.” (191) And she posits that “our part is to struggle against nature. Our part is to resist our bad inclinations with our good.”

Father and Son

David was beset by rebellious sons. They sought to displace him, which is not the case with Benzion. Nevertheless, “the son had gone against the wishes of the father. It was nothing new. It accounted for the greater part of human history.” (185)

And Baruch detects not only religious devotion, but hostility against him, in Benzion’s self-injury. Benzion has destroyed his hand, the part of his body that Baruch (a gifted pianist whose hands were not a fit for his talents) admired the most (200).

Bathsheba and Abishag

In her long email message to her husband, Miriam compares Leora to Abishag, the young woman brought into service to keep King David warm in his old age in the opening lines of the First Book of Kings. And Miriam compares herself to David's aging wife Bathsheba.

Miriam comforts herself with the reminder that, in spite of the humiliation Bathsheba experiences in bringing herself into her husband's presence while his body is warmed by Abishag, she is ultimately rewarded when her son Solomon becomes king and builds the Temple (189). And the very line that Miriam cites from Ecclesiastes is, according to tradition, penned by Solomon himself.

David, king of Israel, lives and endures

The final words of the book are "David, king of Israel, lives and endures." This is a translation of "*David melech Yisrael; chai, chai, vekayam,*" a line from the Talmud (Tractate *Rosh Hashanah* 25a) that is sung with gusto in Israel at times of celebration.

Baruch recalls the song being played and sung when he first reached Israel. And he imagines it being sung outside Benzion's hospital room while Benzion recovers from his gunshot wound (201). One possible implication is that Benzion is supplanting Baruch as a new kind of hero appropriate to his moment in history.

And another reading is that the sort of flawed figure exemplified by David is a model of our internal struggles. As David Wolpe writes in his book *David: The Divided Heart*, "David fits as the ancestor of the Messiah precisely because of his weaknesses, his transgressions, his artifice, his divided heart. He is great because of his complexity, not in spite of it."

In Kotler, we have such a divided heart. Both hero and villain, success and failure—it is this fullness that makes him a compelling figure on the moral and political change.

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