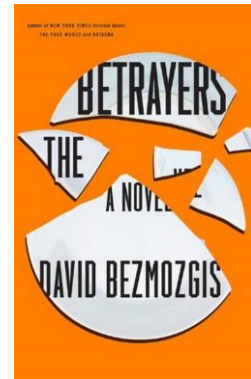


The Novel as *Writerly Returning*:  
Review of *The Betrayers*  
by Rabbi Aubrey L. Glazer, PhD



Change is hard. But any real progress in the spiritual life requires change. Only when we are open to change is reconciliation possible. Nowhere are change and its discontents more evident than in the novel. Most narratives we read in a novel, when presented in a linear style and content, according to literary critic Roland Barthes (1915-1980), are *readerly* texts. These kinds of novels conceal the multiplicity of meanings within the text, supporting commercialized values of the literary establishment and upholding the status quo view of texts as commodities—we *buy, we read, we are satisfied*. By contrast, *writerly* texts reveal those elements that the *readerly* attempts to conceal. When the reader is in a position of control, as in the case of the *writerly* text, s/he takes an active role in the construction of meaning, enabling a process of “ourselves writing”—that is, according to Barthes, a self-conscious expression that is much more aware of the discrepancy between artifice and reality.

I recently found myself immediately enmeshed in a *writerly* text while reading *The Betrayers*, the new novel by David Bezmozgis, where each of this novel’s characters must confront a challenge in order to grow. In reflecting on the characters’ unique attempts at reconciliation with one another, I began returning to my own subjective challenges to effect reconciliation [*teshuva*] and forgiveness [*mehila*]. The challenge of transformation through reconciliation applies all around—whether on the individual, familial, national, or religious level. I found myself examining not only myself, but my own family and its dynamics, as well as my relationship to Israel and the world at large. Whereas such American Jewish writers as Malamud and Roth could at best touch on the first two levels, Bezmozgis’s novel, as a *writerly* text, flutters *to and fro* between all these levels with mastery.

So how do openings towards change emerge in this novel? I want to suggest a pathway through *The Betrayers* by way of a *writerly* spiritual practice of *returning* to reconcile or *Teshuva*. Among the paths of *return* outlined by renowned Medieval philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204), for our purposes, the fourth through sixth steps of *Teshuva* will suffice. In order to truly transform through *Teshuva*, 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).

The contemporary American Jewish novel, of course, is a wonderful confessional vehicle for celebrating the pain of this kind of inner change—think of almost any novel by Philip Roth from *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) to *Sabbath's Theater* (1995)—and so too, not surprisingly, many of the characters in *The Betrayers* unknowingly go through these pathways of *Teshuva* and change in the process. The narrative in *The Betrayers* appears as a page torn from the tormented diary of a former *refusenik*, reborn as an Israeli politician, currently a fallen hero, Baruch Kotler. The novel is an extended day of missed moments in the life of Kotler that can be traced to recalcitrance on his principled stance regarding the West Bank settlements, leading his political opponents to expose his affair with a young mistress, Leora. In choosing exile to Yalta in Crimea over confronting the scandal back in the Home Land, Baruch then comes face to face with the “former friend” and informant, Vladimir Tankilevich, who denounced him to the KGB almost forty years earlier. Vlad has changed his name to Chaim, just as Boris has changed his name to Baruch—each of their lives appears to read as a *writerly* text, but who has really transformed here? In facing this crossroads of ultimate reckoning— both with those who have betrayed him and with those whom he has betrayed, including a teenage daughter, Daphna, his son, Benzion, facing his own ethical dilemmas in the Israeli army as a contrarian objector to dismantling the West Bank settlements, and his loyal wife, Miriam, who stood by his side through so much— Baruch is faced with seemingly every challenge of *Teshuva*. In each instance, his past stands before him in the present, and Baruch must decide how to navigate forward— either going down that same road or daring to traverse the road not taken; to live his life as a *readerly text* or as a *writerly text*—taking an active role in his own *Teshuva*, enabling a process of writing himself anew. The brilliance of this novel is how deftly it elicits pangs of reconciliation and forgiveness through the timeless story of *Teshuva*.

Reflecting for a moment on the Maimonidean pathways of *Teshuva*, the reader will continually rub up against those moments where Baruch falls prey to his old, wily ways that served him so well as a *refusenik* politician ascending the ladder of power in Israel. While he is able to change his name upon immigrating to Israel as well as exile himself to Yalta upon his disgraceful affair, it is unclear to what degree his behavior has really changed, right until the story's close. Contrary to the free-will that undergirds *Teshuva*, Baruch's inner voice seems to take an almost fatalistic approach to decision-making, at the moment he is about to confront his “former friend,” Vladimir Tankilevich, in saying to himself:

...he was responsible for it. He still had the power to change it. But he knew he would not. A man could not live two lives. A man was condemned to choose and he had chosen.

(*The Betrayers*, 104)

Such fatalism could not be further from the true spiritual nature of the human freedom to choose (Maimonides, *Laws of Return, Mishneh Torah* 8:1) and live one's life as a *writerly* text, yet this does not seem to disturb Baruch. Fatalism is the friend of rationalization and conforms to every expectation of the *readerly text*. But his apparent fatalism begins to be shaken once Tankilevich's wife, Svetlana, challenges him, while resting in their Yalta home:

Kotler responds to Svetlana:

I would say that one walks hand in hand with fate. Fate pulls you in one direction, you pull the other. You follow fate; fate follows you. And it is not always possible to say who is leading whom.

—but you said fate led you here.

—Fate led; I followed. I chose to follow. At first innocently, obliviously. But once I recognized where fate was leading me, no longer obliviously. Then I chose with full and deliberate knowledge.

(*The Betrayers*, 114)

Kotler struggles with the pangs of *Teshuva* throughout the novel, but it all comes to a head as he crosses this path that stands before him in the Yalta home of his “former friend”, leading to the final change that will take place in the *Hesed*-distribution office:

It was clear that Kotler was expected to grant his absolution even though Tankilevich offered no repentance.

(*The Betrayers*, 169)

As readers, we are left with the open question as to whether Baruch Kotler does indeed absolve Chaim Tankilevich, even if the guilty party offers no signs of return (unfortunately, Bezmozgis translates *Teshuva* here as Christian “repentance” rather than a more Jewish *return*, more apt for the character of Svetlana than Kotler). The novel’s closing *Coda*—and especially its final line (**spoiler alert**), *David, King of Israel, lives, lives, and endures!* (*The Betrayers*, 225)—hovers in mystery as to exactly whose name has changed as part of that *writerly* spiritual practice of *Teshuva*—David, the novel’s author? Baruch, the protagonist? David, the Messiah of Israel? You, the reader? And whose name echoes on long after the disgrace is over? Who has really changed in this novel—the *reader* or the *writer*? Or both? It is for these and other lingering questions that I invite you to consider joining this *One Bay One Book* communal reading and discussion, so as to enter into the *writerly* spiritual practice of *returning* moments of *Teshuva* along your own path throughout the coming year 5775.

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