

**Book Club
Kit**

**OMER
FRIEDLANDER**

***The Man Who
Sold Air in the
Holy Land***

STORIES



A Letter to Readers

For a while, I was preoccupied with figuring out why I wrote this story collection in English, my second language, rather than Hebrew, my mother tongue. Hebrew is a fascinating language because it was used for prayer and ritual for two thousand years. It was a holy language, and it was considered sacrilege to even ask for a glass for a water in Hebrew. It was revived as a spoken language only in the 19th century, and the gap between Biblical Hebrew and its modern-day equivalent is probably not as large as Chaucer's English and today's English.

As Amos Oz says, Hebrew is a minefield of Biblical allusions. When you're writing a domestic scene about a son asking his parents for pocket money, you have to be careful not to bring in Isaiah and the Psalms and Mount Sinai. It is like playing chamber music in a cathedral, he says, there are a lot of echoes.

But Hebrew is also constantly changing and adapting. Many of the new slang words introduced into the language come from military jargon, which is so prevalent in day-to-day life in Israel. As Yehuda Amichai writes: "to speak now in this weary language, a language that was torn from its sleep in the Bible . . . a language that once described miracles and God, to say car, bomb, God."

My decision to write in English, whether conscious or not, has to do with me feeling like both an insider and an outsider in Israel. I have never felt like I truly belonged in Israel, even though I was born in Jerusalem and grew up in Tel Aviv. And yet, even though I feel like a stranger sometimes, it is still my home, the place where the people's way of laughing and being friends and getting into arguments is most familiar to me. Writing in English allows me a certain distance that is necessary in order to be more probing and ironic, to see all the strangeness and particularity of a place, with its many contradictions and complexities.



Discussion Questions

1. Which story from *The Man Who Sold Air in the Holy Land* stayed with you the most after reading? Why?
2. In “Jaffa Oranges,” why do you think the narrator can’t confess his crime to Khalil’s granddaughter, even though part of him desperately wants to? How do you think she would respond if he did?
3. Many characters in the stories process grief through repetition, from the brothers of “Alte Sachen” replaying their father’s voice on a cassette to the mother in “Checkpoint” repeatedly washing her late son’s military uniform. How do these acts of repetition (are they, in fact, a type of ritual?) help the characters? Where do you think the line falls for them between “healthy” repetition and perhaps less healthy fixation? Do you think it’s possible to truly move on from losing a parent or child?
4. The title story is about Simcha, a man rich in imagination but poor in actual resources. How does Simcha’s imagination enrich his and his young daughter Lali’s life? How does it hinder him—and does it hold them both back? When is it appropriate to retreat to a fantasy world—and at what point must we set foot into the real one?
5. Friedlander peppers his stories with allusions to fables and fairytales, as well as art and popular culture. How did these details influence your reading experience? Were there any references you were compelled to research further? If so, what were they?
6. “For the first time, Simcha wondered if, when they sold bottles of air to tourists, she had been the one humoring him, rather than the other way around,” Friedlander writes. What do you think of the dynamic between this father and daughter? And what about her mother, and Simcha’s wife? Did you see any reversal in roles in the story—does the child become something of a parent by the end, or does the imagination prevail?
7. Author Omer Friedlander is a twin. How do various sibling relationships play out throughout the collection?
8. In “Checkpoint,” the narrator wonders about the future of children on both sides of the long-term civil conflict. “I wonder how long it will take for him to harden, become bitter and angry, how many more humiliating days spent waiting at the checkpoint . . . until he begins resisting with a group of other boys from his village, throwing rocks at passing settler vehicles, and confronting soldiers with riot gear and tear gas cannisters and rubber bullets, until he’s hauled off to prison for throwing one stone too many,” she says of a Palestinian boy. Of an Israeli boy: “How long until he becomes resentful and



inflamed, driving down the highway, his car pelted by stones thrown by Palestinian boys from the side of the road . . . how long until the child picks up a gun himself and, vowing revenge, takes the law into his own hands?” How do you feel about the way the story depicts the conflict? What do you think it’s saying about the cycle of violence, i.e., how it begins and how it continues? Do you think turbulent futures are inevitable for these children? Why or why not?

9. How did these stories change or augment your understanding of what it’s like to live at the center of conflict? How does Friedlander show us the experiences of people on both sides? To what degree do you think this collection overall is political?
 10. In “The Sephardi Survivor,” two brothers attempt to “kidnap” an old man in order to pretend they are related to a Shoah, or Holocaust, survivor. What is this story saying about the ways we—somewhat counterintuitively—sometimes wish to be more intimately connected to tragedy and trauma? Did you understand the boys’ impulse, however misguided it may have been? What does it say about their own sense of identity?
 11. In “The Sand Collector,” Salim shows how he feels about the settlers altering preexisting names in the region, saying “We had our own names for our places,” he says, “and you changed them all.” How does this illustrate the link between colonization and language? Can you think of other places in the world whose names were changed by settlers, invaders, or outsiders—even though people were already living there? How does this illustrate the link between colonization and language? Discuss.
 12. “I hated how he kept saying ‘you’ and ‘your government,’” the narrator says in the same story, “as if I were the one personally tearing down his home.” How much responsibility do we bear for the damage our country or our fellow citizens inflict on others? In situations like these, what can—and should—a single person do?
 13. Many of these stories reckon with the effects of change—to culture, language, geography, and heritage. How do you think the characters throughout the collection reconcile the old with the new, tradition with progress, the dead with the living?
 14. In his Acknowledgments, Friedlander cites the words of Israeli writer and peace activist David Grossman: “Every one of us has a kind of official story that we present to others, to strangers we meet, or even to people we know. . . . But if we are lucky enough to find a good listener, a sympathetic witness, then they will make us tell not only our official story but the story underneath it.” Friedlander adds that his wish for this collection was to “unearth the hidden stories of individuals beneath the fossilized official narrative.” Did you see that aim working through these stories—and to what extent do you think Friedlander succeeded in achieving what he set out to do?
- 

Recipe: Falafel

*It's not the Miser's falafel, but it might be even better! Cook this recipe from **Jerusalem: A Cookbook** by Yottam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi for your book club, your family, or yourself.*

INGREDIENTS

- 1 ¼ cups dried chickpeas
- ½ medium onion, finely chopped (½ cup in total)
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- 1 tbsp. finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 2 tbsp. finely chopped cilantro
- ¼ tsp. cayenne pepper
- ½ tsp. ground cumin
- ½ tsp. ground coriander
- ¼ tsp. ground cardamom
- ½ tsp. baking powder
- 3 tbsp. water
- 1 ½ tbsp. all-purpose flour
- about 3 cups sunflower oil, for deep-frying
- ½ tsp. sesame seeds, for coating

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Place the chickpeas in a large bowl and cover with cold water at least twice their volume. Set aside to soak overnight.
2. The next day, drain the chickpeas well and combine them with the onion, garlic, parsley, and cilantro. For the best results, use a meat grinder for the next part. Put the chickpea mixture once through the machine, set to its finest setting, then pass it through the machine for a second time. If you don't have a meat grinder, use a food processor. Blitz the mix in batches, pulsing each for 30 to 40 seconds, until it is finely chopped, but not mushy or pasty, and holds itself together. Once processed, add the spices, baking powder, ¾ teaspoon salt, flour, and water. Mix well by hand until smooth and uniform. Cover the mixture and leave it in the fridge for at least 1 hour, or until ready to use.
3. Fill a deep, heavy-bottomed medium saucepan with enough oil to come 2 ¾ inches up the sides of the pan. Heat the oil to 350°F. With wet hands, press 1 tbsp. of the mixture in the palm of your hand to form a patty or a ball the size of a small walnut, about a scant 1 oz. (you can also use a wet ice-cream scoop for this).
4. Sprinkle the balls evenly with sesame seeds and deep-fry them in batches for 4 minutes, until well browned and cooked through. It is important they really dry out on the inside, so make sure they get enough time in the oil. Drain in a colander lined with paper towels and serve at once.

Inspiration

Omer Friedlander explores his inspirations for the stories in The Man Who Sold Air in the Holy Land.

Some of the stories in *The Man Who Sold Air in the Holy Land* were inspired by real events, people, and places in my life.

My interest in fairy tales and fables comes from my father, who collects old, illustrated children's books. When I was growing up, I remember my father going to flea markets and used bookstores to scavenge for beautifully illustrated books, overlooked and dusty. Some were matchbox-sized, others heavy tomes. Many were falling apart, faded, thin as papyrus. In our home in Tel Aviv, they're stacked on shelves, piled on the floor, and towering on tabletops. Some of my favorite stories growing up were fairy tale-like. One about a hedgehog named Shmulik who gets strawberries stuck in his quill, and another called "Room for Rent" by Leah Goldberg about a group of animals living in a shared apartment building. Some books were printed in El-HaMaayan press in Tel-Aviv, such as fables by Aesop, about mice and golden bells, the jackal with the tail of wheat, the goose with the golden egg. I think listening to these stories, looking at the ink and watercolor illustrations, and handling the physical object of the book had a part in why I became interested in fairy tales and wanted to become a writer.

The story "Alte Sachen" was inspired by my year of National Service spent in Tsfat, a city in the Galilee, in the

north of Israel, home to blue-domed synagogues, narrow cobblestone alleyways, and Kabbalah mysticism. After finishing high school, I began my national service, working at a last-opportunity school for teenagers from various backgrounds. There were many youths from Haredi Ultra-Orthodox backgrounds, who began to question their faith and stray from a religious path. On some occasions, they were even excommunicated from their homes or communities and had to live on the street. At night, I'd wander the streets with the other national service volunteers (nicknamed "shinshinim" for the Hebrew acronym for national service) and meet these teenagers to talk, sharing tea brewed on a portable stove, with mint leaves picked from the side of the road, or a game of backgammon or checkers.

We were from vastly different backgrounds, but we usually managed to find common ground. Mostly, they wanted someone to listen to their stories. They had so many stories. They talked about their experience during the Second Lebanon War, when Katyusha rockets were falling on the city; going to bathe in the ritual mikveh waters or praying in the synagogue. One kid, whom I became very close to, told me about the wild horse he tamed. He was the only one who could ride this horse, no one else dared. He was 15 years old,



and deeply ashamed of the fact that he could hardly read or write. When he was sent to serve a few months' sentence in a juvenile detention facility, he told me that his mother drew him a picture of a horse on a scrap of paper, which he always kept in his pocket, to remember her and keep his spirits up.

I remember one of the teachers in this last-opportunity school very vividly. He was in his late 60s, close to retirement, a widower. He was striking, with snow white hair and blue eyes. He told me a story about his mother, a Holocaust survivor. For months, his mother hid in the Black Forest during the war, surviving on berries and rats. One day, she heard the boots of soldiers coming towards her, marching in the forest. She climbed up an oak tree. On the branches beside her, ravens perched, eyeing her. There were dozens of black birds up in the tree, and she prayed that they would not be startled and make a sound, revealing her presence to the soldiers marching below, their heavy boots sinking into the wet earth and moss, slipping on the sprawling roots of the massive tree. And the birds were totally silent. They didn't chirp or flutter their wings or fly off. They didn't make a sound, and for that she's always been grateful. She survived the Shoah and every time she prays, she gives thanks to the birds that stayed silent and saved her life.



I have many memories of that year of national service. One of the most vivid snapshots I can think of is making prickly pear jam. I remember taping a knife to the handle of a broomstick and going to cut prickly pear on Cana'an hill. I cut the plump purplish sabra off the cactus, and my friend held a bucket underneath to catch the falling fruit. We rolled

the fruit on the grass, to get rid of the thorns. Then, we made jam, stirring the fruit in a big pot, and dipped our fingers inside, licking the sweet, sticky jam.

The story "Checkpoint" was inspired by my paternal grandmother's work in the human-rights organization *Machsom Watch*, a women-only group that worked at the checkpoints in the West Bank, documenting and reporting on interactions between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians. Every week, my grandmother, at the age of 75, went to the checkpoint with her bulky old video camera to film at the checkpoint. At home, she'd watch the videos, over and over again, and pause at certain moments, over a face or a crucial moment, choosing certain frames to enlarge and print. A child holding her mother's hand, an old man taking a last drag of his cigarette, a soldier wiping the sweat off her forehead. During the revision process for this story and the collection as a whole, I shared the story with several volunteers from *Machsom Watch*, and I met with some of the women who worked with my grandmother at the checkpoint. We went to the West Bank together and they told me about their experiences. Some have been working at the organization from its very founding two decades ago.

The story "The Miniaturist" has multiple sources of inspiration. The first was actually meeting two Jewish-Iranian brothers at a small shop on Ben-Yehuda street in Tel Aviv. They sold carpets made by their elderly mother, and also beautiful vases painted with fish and flowers. I began talking to the brothers, and they told me about some of their experience immigrating to Israel from Isfahan, a city in Iran

known for its textiles and carpets.

The second source of inspiration was my maternal grandmother, who came to Israel from Egypt. She grew up in Alexandria. Her family was originally from Syria and Morocco, and could be traced all the way back to the golden age of Jews in Spain, before the Alhambra Decree of Isabella and Ferdinand forced them into exile. When she came to Israel with her family, at the age of 16, she was sent to a Ma'abara (like the protagonist of my story), an immigration absorption camp, with the most terrible living conditions in tents, with limited water and sewage running openly. She spent almost a year in the tent-city, and still can barely talk about that time.

The story "The Sephardi Survivor" comes from several sources as well. The first is a conversation I had in Brooklyn with several Israeli friends, actors and jazz musicians living in New York. One of my friends, of Iraqi origins, said that growing up he's always been jealous of his Eastern European Ashkenazi classmates, who had relatives that were Shoah survivors. It was such a strange, but understandable, sentiment. To be jealous of another person's suffering was an odd idea, of course, but the historical event has such prominence in all Israeli discourse, it strangely becomes a kind of social cache, a matter of prestige to have relatives that survived (or died) in the Shoah.

My paternal grandfather is a Shoah survivor. At home, we joke that not only is he a Shoah survivor, he's like the Elvis of the Holocaust. He's a prize-winning historian. My grandfather's life story is remarkable, and he's an incredible

storyteller. My grandfather was born in 1932 in Prague, "at the worst possible moment," as he writes in his memoir, "four months before Hitler came to power." On the night of a terrible snowstorm, in 1939, the Germans marched into Prague. My grandfather spent the war years in France, where he was living in hiding in a Catholic monastery, while his parents attempted to cross the border into Switzerland and were caught by the gendarmes and deported to Auschwitz. Years later, after the war ended and my grandfather was preparing for the priesthood, he learned of the tragic fate of his parents. My grandfather became a Zionist, and more conscious of his Jewish identity, and immigrated to Israel.

When my twin brother and I turned 13, the year of our bar mitzvah, we got a school assignment to write a family tree. I remember the day we interviewed our grandfather. We met in Paris, where my uncle and cousins live.

"Don't forget to press record," my father said, before my brother and I entered the dimly lit brasserie, dark wood-paneled, high-ceilinged, its tall windows open to the busy Parisian street. My twin brother and I had dark curly hair down to our shoulders, and a brand-new tape recorder in our hands. We were working on a school project, a family tree, and so we had set up this *interview* with our paternal grandfather, Saba Poli we call him, on a family vacation in France.

Dazed by the mesmerizing, glittering langoustine shells on silver trays, bone-colored mother-of-pearl-walled oyster shells with squishy insides, bloody steaks on wooden platters, heaps of fatty, twig-thin fries, chocolate gateaux glazed with



sickly-sweet cherries and mountains of whipped cream, my brother and I, of course, forgot to press record.

Saba Poli sat in front of us, silver hair cresting his face, sharp, cliff-face nose, thick-fingered hands, tap-tap-tapping just like our father. A shared family nervousness, the Friedlander gene, we called it. Saba Poli waved to a waiter: *Pommes frites pour les enfants*. As we ate the greasy fries, Saba Poli told us: “I was born in Prague, at the worst possible moment.”

“Walking Shiv’ah” was inspired by my maternal grandfather’s family story. He grew up far, far away from the Middle East, in the polite, snowy wasteland of Montreal. His family originally came to Canada from Belarus. His grandfather boarded a ship first, to find work in the fur industry and send money back to his wife and infant children. Several months later they were supposed to board a ship and join him in Canada. When the time came for his wife and kids to board the ship, they had the incredibly lucky misfortune of missing their departure. While heaving the various bags and suitcases aboard the ship together with the burly, vodka-chugging dockworkers, the wife forgot, in her haste and anxiety, one child’s precious and expensive violin at home.

They decided to send the suitcases ahead on the voyage, and board the next ship, leaving in a week’s time, with the violin. The ship, which luckily they did not board, sunk. All of the passengers perished. My grandfather’s grandfather, hearing about the terrible incident, mourned and sat shiv’ah for his wife and children for a week, when suddenly they appeared, alive and well, at his doorstep, clutching the precious violin.

For the last editing stages of “Jellyfish in Gaza” I spoke to several veterans of the Gaza wars—one of whom became an expert therapist for those suffering from PTSD—who shared their experience with me. In the story, I wanted to focus on the strange rituals and beliefs children sometimes have, the ways in which magical thinking can be a form of protection for their loved ones. Growing up, my parents told me the beautiful fable of the angel that comes down from the sky and puts his finger on the cleft between the newborn’s mouth and nose, to make him forget all of the knowledge in the world. And of course, being a twin brother, I like writing about the complex relationship between siblings, a mixture of love and rivalry.

