

I, Spy

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast. Passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast. Today we're going to have a conversation with author Yariv Inbar. Yariv Inbar is the pseudonym of an Israeli novelist whose real identity has been banned from publication by Israeli authorities. With years of experience serving in sensitive positions in Israeli intelligence, he still serves as a lieutenant colonel in the Reserves. In 2016, Yariv burst onto the spy fiction scene with the publication of his novels in Hebrew, which quickly earned bestseller status in Israel and received high praise from critics and readers. His most recent book, Operation Bethlehem, won the 2023 Jane Weitzman National Jewish Book Award for Hebrew fiction in translation and is the topic of our conversation today. He joins us from Israel. Thank you Yariv, for participating in the College Commons Podcast.

Yariv Inbar: Thank you Josh. And thank you for having me.

JH: To kick off the conversation, give us a brief synopsis of Operation Bethlehem.

YI: The book follows Daniel's Journey the protagonist. He was born in France, but always felt like an outsider. So after experiencing traumatic antisemitic incidents, he moved to Israel. He made Aliyah and joined the IDF as a lone soldier. When his service ended, he joined the Mossad and trained as an undercover field agent, but Daniel has an impulsive personality, he is quick to act and sometimes too quick. And, you know Josh in intelligence, you need patience. So Daniel tamper has gotten him into trouble more than once. He left the Mossad under a cloud and returned to France, but after a few months, he came back to Israel trying to redeem himself and to move on with his life.

YI: Now, without giving too much away, I just say that Daniel believes a Jewish national treasure is buried under a mental hospital in Bethlehem. So he decided to use his training at the Mossad and go undercover as a volunteer at the hospital. I will stop here, but I want to add something. While the story can be seen as an espionage novel, and the readers think it's an espionage novel, I see it as more than that. Yes, it offers an intimate look into the intelligence world,

especially the hidden lives of Israeli spies, but it's really about exploring national and personal identity. Another issue I wanted to address is that I talk in this book about the state's role in finding and preserving historical Jewish artifacts. By that I mean, what is the wide balance between risking lives and the importance of finding and recovering national historical treasures.

JH: Operation Bethlehem, as you say, is a spy thriller, but as you also say, it's about all kinds of emotional currents in a person's life, but particularly about a spy, which is very mysterious and unknown to most of us. What is unique about a spies yearning and missing home?

YI: The book explores the meaning of home and the feeling of yearning. And home is an essential part of identity, who you are and where you feel most like yourself. And it doesn't have to be a physical place or four walls, it's objective, of course, but everyone I think feels at home somewhere different. This feeling becomes even sharper for a spy operating in a hostile foreign environment. Why? Because working undercover means pretending to be someone else. Even when it comes to where home is, you must embody fictional home, of course, but to fake the sense of attachment to your home, it's something very very hard. You must suppress thoughts about everything that makes you homesick, your real home, your family, your friends, food, etcetera. If you don't do so, this memories could disrupt your focus and in a way, put you in at risk and in great danger.

YI: But on the other hand, this yearning is precisely why you are in this business. Spies on a mission and for their countries. They are driven by hope for a safer and a better future for their home and people, their family, friends, and community. So yes, there is a serious internal conflict. And if we take Daniel the protagonist of Operation Bethlehem, he wants to be an Israeli as possible. And for him being in the Mossad is the ultimate expression of being Israel. But to succeed and truly serve, he has to be the opposite. He must present himself as entirely French and a Muslim French. So hiding any trace of his Jewish identity, otherwise his life would be in danger. So the meaning of yearning to home for a spy is something very complicated.

JH: It comes through in the story and there's another kind of home yearning, homesickness that comes out in the story, which is also familiar to anybody who lives in a society that is populated by many immigrants. This is true of many countries around the world and the new world, and of course in Israel. So as an Israeli, what do you see as unique about the sense of home as experienced by a person who leaves their birthplace to live in Israel?

YI: That is a fascinating question, and it's something I try to explore while writing the book. For me having been born and raised here in Israel, Israel is simply home. It's natural and unquestioned. But I also think for many Jews, and I met a lot of them who were not born here or raised here in Israel, the land itself, it feels like their true home. And I think it's something unique to our people, to all the Jews all over the world. You know, they are often saying that from the moment they set foot here, they feel at home. And I met a lot of lone soldiers from Canada and from the United States, and they all say the same. They feel in Israel at home for the first moment. And I believe this is unique to our people.

JH: Moving back to the internal experience of the psychological pressure of working as a spy undercover. In particular, Daniel, the protagonist works undercover in a mental hospital, as you mentioned. As you described him, he feels a connection to those patients in the hospital suffering mental health challenges, because he too, as you write, in some twisted way, had lost touch with reality. Is there some kind of distortion, some kind of inevitable breakdown that happens with undercover officers? We know it comes up in literature all the time with respect to spies, but is it real? How deep does it go?

YI: Yes, it's a very interesting point. I actually never thought about it before writing Operation Bethlehem. My choice of a mental hospital, which by the way, is a real place, this very hospital in Bethlehem, allowed me to write a unique scene that would not work in any other setting. The same goes for some of the characters. And it was actually my editor's idea to use a psychiatric hospital. So what is between undercover spies and people with mental health issues? I tried to clarify what I meant. Of course, I'm not suggesting that spies lose their grip on reality. But to work undercover for a long periods, as I mentioned, you need to forget who you really are and fully adapt a fake identity. And it's even more than that. You have to believe and convince yourself that this identity is real. Why? Because otherwise, something about you will seem off, putting you in danger of being exposed. The danger of someone realizing that Jalal, for example, Jalal is not actually Jalal, but he's Daniel.

YI: It's a serious grounded, perfectly sane person with high level skills, insisting that he is someone else. If this weren't such a serious subject, it might even seem funny. I think this is the conflict that you don't know who is he. And more than that, there are stories of spies who prefer to stay in their fake identities rather than return to their real lives, after they end their job. But maybe it's a topic for another book.

JH: In another context, our hero Daniel crosses back from Bethlehem into Israel. And when he does, he goes, as you said, a French tourist. And as such, he's able to avoid the worst of the checkpoints. You write, he felt conflicted by the sights of Palestinians squashed into the lane next to him, but forced himself to ignore them. What was Daniel's inner conflict?

YI: I will explain something for those who are not familiar with the geography here in Israel. Bethlehem is only a few minutes away from Jerusalem. It's located within the Palestinian Authority's area. And of course, it's a dangerous place for Israelis. It's an enemy territory. It's so close yet so far. And every day, thousands of Palestinians workers cross into Israel every day and return home in the evening. Now, the entry into Israel is controlled by a checkpoint, where people are screened for weapons and must show their security clearance to work in Israel. On the other hand, Bethlehem is also attracting many tourists to its church. And the foreign passport holders, like Daniel in the story, of course, use a separate line at the checkpoint, since they pose a much more lower security risk. So Daniel, who operates under a French cover and holds a foreign passport, passes through the tourist line. The sight of so many people standing in a crowded tight line is not pleasant for anyone.

YI: Now, here's something important to understand. A spy operating undercover in such a territory, posing as one of them, if he is professional, he has to develop a certain solidarity with

his surroundings. So he can't just view everyone around him as an enemy. He must stay alert, of course, and cautious. But he also needs to emphasize with environment so he can be authentic. And if I put myself in Jalal, not Daniel, Jalal's shoes, the fake identity, of course, Jalal is an Arabic name. When passing through the checkpoint as someone with tourist privilege, he likely feels the inconvenience. So he come, from Bethlehem to Israel, walk away without any problems. But to prevent this discomfort from affecting his judgment, he must ignore these irrelevant emotions. But inside him, he feels them.

JH: Do you personally experience this conflict as well?

YI: That's a tough question. To be honest, I need to divide my answer into two parts, before October 7th and after. I will start with the before. I think I always knew how to be empathetic with people as human beings, regardless of their background or whether they were my enemy. And as an intelligence officer, this has to be your mindset. It's not black and white, and there is a lot of gray in between. And in the world of espionage, almost everything is gray. To truly know your enemy and to do your job well, you have to be empathetic, because not everyone is the enemy. But at the same time, especially for undercovers, you can forget which side you are on. Personally, I never felt conflicted about this. And I believe also, and this comes across in my book. I think I presented the Palestinian side in a balanced, human way. As I think about it, I've received a lot of positive feedback on this because the reader can walk down Palestinian streets, join a family dinner or spend time in a local cafe, and all from Palestinian perspective, not only the Israeli perspective or the spy perspective.

YI: But I will admit that what happened on October 7th has made it very hard to me to stay empathetic toward the other side. It's not easy. It's not easy after what we saw. But even so, I think it's... No, I don't think, I know. It doesn't affect me professionally. Yariv, the professional and the intelligence officer, and Yariv, or another name, that is the real man, with his thoughts and feelings. But to show solidarity with the other side is more difficult these days.

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JH: The story takes us also in a different direction that you began to speak about briefly in your introduction about the attraction of national treasure. From a novelist perspective, tell us about this incredible attraction in fiction to the temple treasure, which anybody who's old enough and maybe even young people too think of Indiana Jones...

YI: Indiana Jones.

JH: Yes. And any number of other things. It's an ancient mystery that has attracted people forever. Tell me how and why it attracted you?

YI: It's an exciting subject. And like you said, it is not for nothing that so many films have been made on this subject and so many books have been written. I think the appeal of the Temple Treasure comes from its mix of mystery, history, and deep, in our case, the Jewish people, deep cultural meaning. In Operation Bethlehem, this treasure served me more than just a valuable object. It's a strong symbol of heritage, survival, and even desire to connect to our past. And Daniel, as the protagonist, he must have a cause much more significant than he. Something to risk your life for. And to risk your life for being the one who finds the menorah, for example, it's something incredible, just imagine. And I think it's more than that. The mystery runs that Temple Treasures creates endless story possibilities. It's allowed me to explore not just history, but also aspects of identity, beliefs. And the sacrifices people and the state make to protect their heritage.

JH: We won't give a spoiler, but let's take the Temple Treasure to its cultural and political direction that you begin to describe. In one scene, Daniel, our French-born protagonist, argues with an Israeli-born senior officer. And they're arguing about the importance of the Temple Treasure, precisely as you described Yariv, in terms of cultural and political importance. In this scene, Daniel believes that the treasure will prove the roots of the Jewish people in the land of Israel, which he's really committed to, as you described. However, the senior officer believes that we don't need the treasure to prove that. The roots are already well established. And the senior officer is actually afraid of the treasure, because he believes that it will stir up Jewish religious zealots who want to rebuild the temple and have a very apocalyptic view of religious governance in Israel. It's a whole political story. And the senior officer is afraid of that religious zealotry destroying the state of Israel, basically. The senior officer says to Daniel, who wants to find the treasures, he says, "You're still stuck in the past, thinking like a minority in France". What does he mean?

YI: At this point, Daniel argues with the head of the Shabbat, the head of the Shin Bet, the Israeli FBI. In my opinion, it was one of the peaks of the plot, because it really touches on the heart of the book, national identity. And this argument shows two perspectives, like you said, against each other. On one side, there is the high ranking Israel official as saying, "I don't need to prove my connection to this land anymore, to anyone". In other words, to say, I'm already the sovereign here. And my job as a sovereign is to maintain it without steering up a conflict. And we all know that the Temple Mount is the most, explosive place in the whole world. And, everyone in the Israeli security organization want this place to be quiet without any problems. And Daniel, on the other hand, he represents the view that Israel existence is not something to be taken for granted. Even if we already have a country for 75 years, he sees finding the Temple Treasure as proof that's our history here in Israel. A solid proof that you actually can see and hold in your hands. Who could argue if the menorah were found buried in the land of Israel.

JH: What surprised you in writing Operation Bethlehem?

YI: Wow, a great question. While researching for the book, I discovered many fascinating details about the, archeological work done here in Israel and in Jerusalem over the last century. So writing the book taught me a lot about this topic. And I mentioned, many actual details and events in the story. These events spark my imagination, and I don't want to spoil anything for those who choose to read, but I think that everyone can read about various exploration or expedition if you want, and to start to see sites from an adventure movie. And if you come to visit Israel and goes to Jerusalem, for example, a lot of details from the story, you will see it over there. Every step in Jerusalem and in this area have greater story than you can imagine. And that was the most amazing thing that, I understand while writing the story from historical point of view.

YI: And something else. The second level and perhaps the deeper one for me personally, is the impact this book had had on me as a person. It made me realize how important it is not to take Israel for granted. It is not a given. And the book was written in Hebrew few years ago during 2016 and 2017. I could not imagine then what we are going to face on October, 2023. And I feel now that since writing this book, I have come to understand adapt and respect the perspective of those who are not born here. It was very surprising for me.

JH: Well, Yariv Inbar, thank you so much for the conversation and congratulations on winning the National Jewish Book Award and it was a real pleasure to spend some time with you.

YI: Thank you. Thank you, Josh.

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