



DRAWN FROM WATER

Dina Elenbogen

READING GROUP GUIDE

Interviewed by Sabrina Veroczi

Q. When you move to Chicago after living in Ma'alot, you write that you “don’t know, spiritually, how to be a Jew or a poet in this country.” How has that feeling changed for you over the years? Do you still feel like Israel is your home as a Jew and a poet?

A. That sentence came straight out of my journal after my return visit in 1989, after having been away from Israel for five years. I was in my twenties living alone in an apartment in East Rogers Park, teaching part-time at several universities. I was not part of a Jewish community. I was not settled with the fact that I was living in the United States instead of Israel. I still felt like a crucial part of myself as both Jew and poet was more alive and belonged in Israel. The urgency that came into my work in Israel, partly dictated by circumstances, did not pervade my American poems.

This feeling has changed over the years as the circumstances of my life have evolved. I have found a fulfilling way to be a Jew in America. When I got married and had a family, joined Beth Emet, The Free Synagogue in Evanston, and sent my children to a private Jewish day school. I felt like I was growing and thriving as a Jew in America. Both my children’s school and one of the institutions where I taught, Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, were on a Jewish calendar and allowed me time off for holidays. This helped us build Jewish lives for our children and deepened our sense of community. Our children speak Hebrew and read Torah. We have Shabbat with family or friends every week.





I don't worry so much anymore how to be a poet in America. I write poetry. I have poet friends. I try to go to poetry readings when I can. I teach creative writing, so I am always talking with my students about literature.

Having said that, although I do live a satisfying Jewish and literary life in America, I still feel that Israel is my spiritual home that offers me something deeper as both a Jew and a poet. Poetry is in the air there. Jewish life permeates. Cities still come to a standstill for the Sabbath. But life there has also become more complex. I am less naïve, and the country is less idealistic. It isn't the same country I fell in love with in 1977 and 1984.

Q. After writing an article containing the “composite voices of all the different people” you have interviewed about the Ethiopian Jews, you say that “the reporter is taking over so the poet can rest.” This book seems to require that the reporter and the poet collaborate. Can you discuss the balance between the two sides and the process of writing this book?

A. When I first started writing about the Ethiopian Jewish community I felt a certain responsibility to tell the story factually. I tried to be a good journalist in the first articles I wrote on the subject. I sensed back then that my personal stories with Elad and Osnat were an important part of the narrative, and so sometimes I interspersed journal entries into more factual writing. On my first and subsequent return trips to Israel, as I say in the book, I was trying to find the truth about their absorption into Israeli life. This led me to the offices of anthropologists and sociologists. In the early drafts of the book, these voices competed with each other. There were too many interviews and too much personal material. I also sensed that Elad and Osnat's families were not typical. In order to tell the whole story I needed to find out how Ethiopian communities were faring throughout the country. The search for the larger picture led to a more journalistic voice.





I knew I wanted to work with Ben Furnish at BkMk after he read a draft of the book and asked me to revise with my poet's hat on. I had been looking for permission to write from my own perspective, a poet's perspective, for a long time. When Yossi Klein Halevi read my book and said that the Ethiopian Jews had found their poet, I knew that I had achieved my goal.

Q. At times, the language barrier between you and the Ethiopian Jews keeps you from understanding the complexities of their journey, yet it also seems to provide you with a deeper connection to the families that you work with. How has your time in Israel and your study of Hebrew affected the ways that you use language?

A. One of the things I share with my Ethiopian friends is the way we consider language to be sacred. As they speak their most profound truths in parables, I speak mine in poetry. We try not to waste words, to speak aimlessly or to speak dishonestly. Israelis are direct in their speech and do not hide behind language the way that Americans sometimes do. I have become a more direct and sometimes *chutzpahdik* communicator from living in Israel. I am a more delicate speaker from being among the Ethiopians. I love speaking Hebrew because of its conciseness and the poetry inherent in the language. I hope I have picked up some of the rhythms of Hebrew in my poetry.

Q. Of all of the relationships that you have in Israel over the years, why do you think that Elad and Osnat remained so important to you?

Some of it has to do with timing. Osnat and Elad are the first Ethiopians I met and the first children I fell in love with. It was a magical time in our lives. As newcomers to a completely different world than the one they knew, they noticed and cherished the small miracles of daily life. Israel, and especially Ma'alot, was also a new world for me, although not in as extreme a way it was for them. Discovering each other and our otherness added to the miracle. Elad was such a cute child; he sparkled. I loved his mischievousness, and I felt his sadness that he couldn't





articulate. I assumed it had to do with what took place on his trek and his time in Sudan. I knew it had to do with his father who remained in Ethiopia. I just loved him, and love him now and have taken pleasure in watching him grow up into a true mensch.

With Osnat it was similar. Because she was older we shared more with each other. As I write in the book, I think we recognized something in one another—our quest for learning, love of language, our sometimes shy and quiet natures. Our relationship has evolved over the years, and she has become the one who takes care of me when I visit Israel. Now she is the Israeli who has her own home and family that my family visits. I am constantly amazed by her inner and outer beauty. During my most recent visit, I felt that same connection with Elad's sister Batya. She has come to feel like family the same way that the others do.

Q. Can you discuss the title, Drawn from Water?

A. Moses or Moshe literally mean the one drawn from water. My Ethiopian families came to Israel with Operation Moses. In Ethiopia they washed all of the time, particularly when they came in contact with strangers. They think of water as purity, and bathing in water as purification. I think of them as having been drawn from the purity of their religious practice in Ethiopia to a practice in Israel that has become less pure because of what they've had to abandon. One of those rituals is the mikvah where women purify themselves after menstruation and giving birth. In Ethiopia they bathed in rivers and lakes. In Israel they looked for natural bodies of water but had to settle for mikvahs in town or nothing at all.

Q. Early in the book you meet Yossi's mother, a scientist from Vienna who supports your decision to teach the Ethiopian Jews. You write that "Unlike her son, Ora understands that home is not always about comfort." What is your understanding of "home"?





Home is where one can truly be oneself. It is where we are loved and honored for who we are and pushed to reach our potential. As far as the immigrants are concerned, I believe they are at home when they are able to hold onto the customs that are dear to them, to their essence, and at the same time benefit from their new culture and become productive and thriving citizens.







D I S C U S S I O N Q U E S T I O N S

1. Why does Dina go to Israel? What hopes does she have when she first arrives at the kibbutz? How is the experience different from what she expected?
2. Why does Dina decide to move to Ma'alot? What is she looking to find in the new community? What are the challenges she faces?
3. What does Dina realize when she returns to America? How has her perception of America changed? What rituals does she create or enact to honor her time in Israel and remember the people she has befriended?
4. What does Dina learn from the artist Alemu Eshtie and his paintings? What does she discover about him when she visits his home? In what ways might it be easier to tell a story through painting, music or poetry?
5. Dina writes that what she "love[s] most about Ma'alot and in Israel in general is the richness of daily life." What do you think she means by this? How is this different from life in America?
6. What role does food play in *Drawn From Water*? How can food help define a culture and community? What examples can you find of the various rituals that are centered around meals?
7. When Dina visits Osnat's room at Haifa University, what important discovery does she make? In what ways does Osnat use her writing to connect with her Ethiopian culture and her experiences in Israel? In what ways can literacy preserve heritage?





8. What does Dina learn about the Ethiopian Jews from the professor at Hebrew University? Would you consider him to be an objective source? How does Dina respond to his “sadness, anger, and disillusionment”? What challenges do journalists face when conducting interviews?

9. Dina writes that “The Ethiopian community still speaks in whispers, protests in silence but more and more voices could now be heard in song and in other forms of expression. Over time, the singers, dancers, artists and artisans have found ways to express their struggles, their history and their identities through their art.” What does Dina discover by watching Shlomo Gronich’s concert? What does Gronich tell her in his interview?

10. What role does poetry play in *Drawn From Water*? In what ways do you think the voice of the poet was present in the narrative? In what ways can prose and poetry intersect?

11. What does Dina realize when she tries to share her experiences of Israel with Steve? What questions does it raise for her about their relationship?

12. Why do you think Dina ends the book with a letter to Osnat? What does the letter say?

