

Exoduses

Exodus stories of our times: a novel of post-Revolution Iran...a memoir of pre-Nasser Cairo... Ethiopian Jews in Israel today... by Bonny V. Fetterman

The Septembers of Shiraz: A Novel by Dalia Sofer

(Ecco, 340 pp., \$24.95)

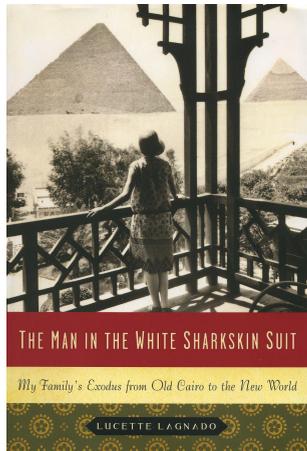
“When Isaac Amin sees two men with rifles walk into his office at half past noon on a warm autumn day in Tehran, his first thought is that he won’t be able to join his wife and daughter for lunch, as promised.” From the first sentence in Dalia Sofer’s finely wrought novel, we are caught up in events involving one Jewish family in Iran shortly after the revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power.

Isaac, an affluent gem merchant and jeweler, is taken directly to prison. Falsely accused of being a Zionist spy, he is well aware of his real crime: “I’m a Jew and I lived well under the shah,” he tells the interrogator who demands a confession of his sin. Though he worked hard all his life, his wealth as well as his religion make him an enemy of the state.

Not knowing if he is alive or dead, Isaac’s wife, Farnaz, searches frantically for him. Their marriage had become distant over the years as they led separate lives under one roof, but now she cannot imagine life without him. Her daughter, Shirin, forced to wear a headscarf at school, is becoming withdrawn, and her longtime servant, Habibeh, now openly taunts her: “Why should some people live like kings and the rest like rats?” Habibeh’s son, Morteza, who was Isaac’s office manager, steals from the business and blackmails Farnaz, all in the name of the revolution. Finally the family leaves everything behind to escape.

Sofer, who left Iran with her family at the age of ten in 1982, remembers the revolution of 1979 and the imprisonment of her own father. Though the characters

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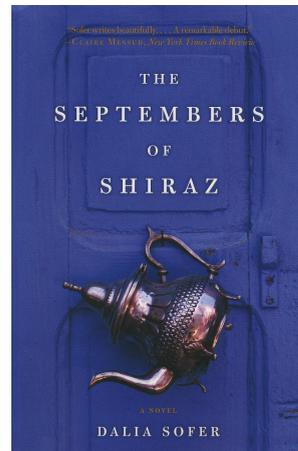
in this novel are fictional, “the emotions are autobiographical,” she writes, as are the circumstances of their flight. This novel captures in riveting images the prelude to the exodus of Iranian Jews.

The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: My Family’s Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World by Lucette Lagnado

(Ecco, 340 pp., \$25.95)

Lucette Lagnado’s memoir of her father Leon records a story at once personal and emblematic. It recalls a time when Cairo was known as “the Paris of Africa”—a cosmopolitan city where Egyptians and Europeans, Muslims and Jews, mingled freely, and where Leon, a successful businessman, thrived. Leon would start the day at synagogue and end it well past midnight in cafés and casinos. “Cairo had a million diversions and Leon took advantage of every one of them,” writes his youngest daughter. “Wherever he went, he stood out, a towering figure in expensive, hand-tailored suits made of white sharkskin.”

The political climate began to change with Israel’s War of Independence in 1948, and became more precarious after the forced abdication of King Farouk in 1952 and Nasser’s seizure of



power in 1954. Businesses were nationalized, foreigners were pressured to leave, and Jews—including Jews like Leon, who was born in Syria but had lived in Cairo since childhood—were subject to arrests and attacks. Leon held on longer than most Jews, leaving

in 1963 with \$212—all the government would allow for a family of six.

“We had barely drifted out of Alexandria’s harbor when I heard my father cry, ‘Ragaouna Masr’—Take us back to Cairo!” recalls Lagnado, who was six at the time. Somehow he knew he would never find his moorings anywhere else. His premonition proved correct: the second half of this memoir, entitled “Exile,” tells the sad story of a forced immigration that destroyed a once proud man. In New York, Leon tried to support his family by selling silk ties in the subway. The Arab-Jewish culture that defined him no longer existed; neither could he return to the place he called home. Lagnado’s richly textured memoir is a loving tribute to a lost man and a lost culture.

The Ethiopian Jews of Israel: Personal Stories of Life in the Promised Land by Len Lyons, with photographs by Ilan Ossendryer

(Jewish Lights, 240 pp., \$34.99)

In 1984, Operation Moses brought 7,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel—most of whom traveled for months on foot to reach the refugee camps in Sudan;

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For Discussion

The Union's Department of Lifelong Jewish Learning recommends two **Significant Jewish Books** quarterly and provides free study/discussion guides: <http://urj.org/books>.

Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods by Michael Wex

(Harper Perennial, 303 pp., paperback \$13.95)

In 1968, Leo Rosten published *The Joys of Yiddish*, an instant bestseller with a generation that remembered the warmth and humor of Yiddish expressions. From the outset, Michael Wex takes a different approach in his 2006 bestseller. "The material presented in this book does not always correspond to the way in which Yiddish is sometimes portrayed in the more popular English-language media," he writes. "Together with what we've come to see as typical Yiddish earthiness and typical Yiddish humor, there is a good deal here that is neither pretty nor politically correct—and there's almost nothing that could be described as naive."

For Wex, the epitome of the Yiddish mind-set is the *kvetch* (complaint). It is the contrarian nature of the Yiddish language—its acerbic commentary on the majority culture and everything else—that defines it as the language of the powerless. Drawing on his encyclopedic knowledge of the Yiddish language, as well as a penchant for stand-up comedy, he develops his thesis. Take the chapter on Yiddish curses: "A simple *kvetch* is a descriptive activity that conveys disapproval, but does nothing to alter or eliminate the cause of that disapproval." A *klole* (curse), on the other hand, "is a *kvetch* with a mission."

A combination of linguistics, folklore, and sociology, *Born to Kvetch* is a dazzling display of erudition. Still, some readers may object to the depiction of the Yiddish-speaking world as a society that sees life "through cataract-colored glasses." Maybe Leo Rosten's

view of Yiddish was too nostalgic. Or maybe we live in a crankier age.

The Speed of Light: A Novel by Elizabeth Rosner

(Ballantine Books, 242 pp., paperback \$13.95)

Elizabeth Rosner, a daughter of Holocaust survivors now living in Berkeley, explores the legacy of survivor guilt in her debut novel. Two adult siblings, Julian and Paula Perel, react to the sadness of their childhood home in seemingly different ways. Julian is a recluse who seldom leaves his apartment, fending off his anxieties with a strict adherence to his compulsive routines. His sister Paula is an extrovert, an aspiring opera singer single-mindedly focused on her career. Although their father told them almost nothing about the camps or his life before the war, his grief affects them deeply. "We were all black holes, dense with the nightmares we invent when the stories are kept hidden from us," Julian confides.

As Paula departs for a series of auditions in Europe, she arranges for her housekeeper to stay at her apartment and keep an eye on Julian, who lives upstairs. Sola Ordonio, a Latin Ameri-

BOOKS | URJ PRESS

Passage to Pesach: Preparing for Passover through Text and Tradition

Frances Weinman Schwartz's book encourages an enriched, text-based understanding of why we celebrate Pesach the way we do. An online study guide is available free of charge.

Still Small Voice: Reflections on Being a Jewish Man

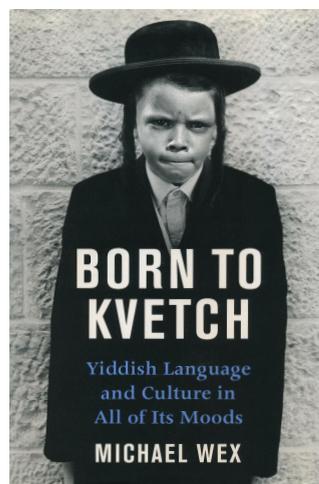
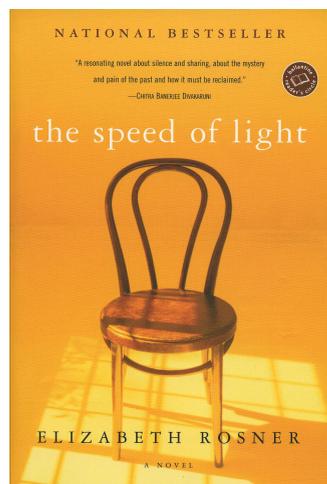
In this new book, edited by Rabbi Michael Holzman with a preface by Doug Barden, fathers and sons, young men and older men reflect on the question, "What does it mean to be a Jewish man?" and offer some surprising answers.

For ordering information contact the URJ Press at 888-489-8242, www.URJBooksandMusic.com.

can immigrant, has ghosts that haunt her too. She is the only witness of a massacre that wiped out her village, perpetrated by government forces searching for rebel hideouts. "How can I be the only one left?" she asks herself at night.

Written in three alternating voices, the characters speak separately to the

reader in interior monologues, until, slowly and deliberately, they break through each other's shells. As Julian discovers in this novel about grief and healing, "When you tell other people, you make them witnesses too." □



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in 1991, Operation Solomon brought 14,000 more, airlifted from Addis Ababa in the midst of a civil war. Almost the entire community has now made *aliyah*.

Today there are about 100,000 Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Len Lyons wanted to know how they are faring from their own perspective. The interviews in this book, illustrated with Ilan Ossendryver’s magnificent photographs, allow us to meet an extraordinary group of individuals who represent the first generation of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. All of the people interviewed, most arriving as teenagers, have to a great extent “made it” in Israel. They are teachers, lawyers, and social workers; army officers, scientists, and engineers; an actor, a playwright, and a broadcaster for Radio Amharic. “Right now, the Ethiopian community is taking more responsibility for its own future than it ever has,” says Adissu Mesele, the first Ethiopian member of Knesset.

Despite these success stories, the

Ethiopian community at large suffers from unemployment (sixty percent) and “underemployment” (people with degrees often have to take low-level jobs). “The people and government of Israel deserve praise for taking on the enormous challenge of absorbing a Jewish population so starkly different in background and culture from their own,” Lyons writes. “But something is wrong when there is a widespread feeling among immigrants who arrived twenty years ago that they are second-class citizens and, even worse...second-class Jews.”

The Ethiopian Jews were strict followers of the biblical commandments who believed in God, the sanctity of the Sabbath, and the holiness of Jerusalem. Upon arriving in Israel, they were shocked to see traffic on the streets and people working on Shabbat. At the same time, they bristled at the rabbinic establishment’s attempts to teach them how to be Jews according to rabbinic law. Israel still does not permit Ethiopian religious leaders, the *kessim*, to perform marriages. Actor Sirak Sabahat explains the resentment:

“If Israel doesn’t give respect to the *kessim*, they are rejecting me too.”

“We are trying to preserve Ethiopian Jewish culture and heritage and to pass it on to our children to give them self-identity, to teach them to be proud of themselves,” says Shlomo Akale, founder of Bahalachin, the Ethiopian Jewish Cultural Center. “We didn’t come here because we were starving. We came because we are Jews.” This inspiring book celebrates the resourcefulness of this community as it finds its voice and makes its own contributions to Israeli society.

Also of note:

Silent No More: Saving the Jews of Russia, The American Jewish Effort, 1967-1989

by Henry Feingold (*Syracuse University Press, 400 pp., \$45*) traces the political background of the struggle to win “freedom of movement” for Soviet Jews which resulted in the exodus of 1.2 million Jews from the Soviet Union between 1967 and 1995. □