



If I forget thee o Jerusalem || a Dystopic novel with which any Jerusalemite can identify

In “A City Forsaken,” Amit Goldenberg’s first novel, the secular inhabitants of Jerusalem are a persecuted minority. In an interview he elaborates why reality is not far from the plot he created.

Gili Izikovitz, 1.31.16



One Friday, eight years ago, Amit Goldenberg felt a suffocating sensation climbing up his throat. Goldenberg, then a 26-year-old philosophy and psychology student at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, was flipping through the culture section of a local newspaper in which he was a music critic as the feeling hit him. Suddenly it became clear to him: Jerusalem, the city in which he had lived all of his life and never thought he would leave, was pushing him out. In the middle of the day, with thoughts racing through his mind, he got into his decrepit old '88 Opel and started driving. As he exited the city’s gates and started descending the mountains towards the sea, he began to feel the notorious relief felt by all those who have left Jerusalem, a crumbling heaviness that dissolves with distance.

“The feeling that I couldn't stay in Jerusalem any longer, the realization that the city was pushing me out,” he remembers, was the motivation for “A City Forsaken,” his first novel which was recently published by Keter Publishing House. The sense of being exiled from one's own city and the inability to stop pondering a return are feelings experienced by many expatriated Jerusalemites.

“A City Forsaken” (in Hebrew *Ir Hanidachat*) is a *Halachic* (Jewish law) term which refers to a city whose inhabitants have sinned and therefore is worthy of being burnt and kept in ruins forever. It is a harsh name for a novel, but it is clear that Goldenberg is not trying to have mercy over Jerusalem. The cover of the novel is designed as a *pashkvil*, a type of poster hung in public places that is meant to prescribe appropriate behavior for the ultra-Orthodox community. Goldenberg's *pashkvil* warns people not to read his sinful novel.

The Jerusalem of “A City Forsaken” is a place torn apart by wars between religious cults. It is a near realistic dystopia in which the few secular inhabitants of the city are a persecuted minority in crumbling, filthy, violent streets. The city operates without regular water and electricity, and under the constant threat of orange sandstorms and unexplained falling trees. Compassion in the Jerusalem of “A City Forsaken” is dead, and the beauty of the city, whose inhabitants are forbidden from looking up at the sky, has long been decimated by religious fanaticism.

Against this backdrop, a few fascinating characters emerge: Farkash is a stubborn secularist and city patriot who sees red heifer cows wandering through the city. Alterman is a post-traumatic ex political poet who poses as an ultra-Orthodox talisman salesman in an attempt to hide from his past. Michal is a Tel-Avivian who suffers from a dissociative disorder which is cured as soon as she moves to Jerusalem, and Gelber is a burnt out employee of the Jerusalem Department of Sanitation. All are lost in the city's chaos and violent reality, and in their own lonely internal realities.

However, Goldenberg's dystopia feels almost like a true possibility. It echoes the fears and anxieties of Jerusalemites about Jerusalem and of Jews about Israel. “I wanted to describe a reality that extends outside of Jerusalem and includes all of Israel,” says Goldenberg, who is currently working on his PhD in Psychology at Stanford University. “On the one hand, I feel extremely strong nostalgia, but on the other hand this unbearable angst for something that is about to end. It is as if we are digging our nails into something while it is dissolving.”



Fighting for Home

Goldenberg is 34. He was born in the settlement of Kiryat Arba and raised in an Orthodox home in Jerusalem. During his mandatory military service, he served in a special forces unit and following his military service he studied philosophy and psychology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He started writing "A City Forsaken" while living in Jerusalem and during his move to Tel-Aviv. "I never thought I would leave Jerusalem," he says. "My wife always reminds me that when we first met I told her I would never leave the city. Back then, I only left because I really felt that the city was pushing me out. The feeling that your city is its own being and that it has decided that it does not want you there anymore is the feeling that I wanted to portray in my writing."

Jerusalemites tend to think about themselves as city patriots and to be personally disappointed by every deserter. However, many young, secular men and women leave the city every year. Goldenberg represents a generation of these expatriots. "There is paradox to life in Jerusalem," Goldenberg explains. "On one hand, there's a strong feeling that you are the one experiencing the true Israeli reality. On the other hand, this

point of view is incredibly narrow and many of the city's residents cannot really see anyone in the city beyond themselves. This is expressed by the characters in the novel who are all stuck in their own narrow point of view, which is how I felt when I left the city.”

You describe a feeling that is well known to many of those who have left Jerusalem - a kind of anger towards a city which does not belong to you anymore.

“When I left Jerusalem I had a similar desire to that of Farkash. I fantasized about destroying the city and leaving it behind. Jerusalem is an extremely important place for the Jewish people but for many who don't live there, it is a symbol, not a real place. I wanted to destroy that symbol so that a real place could emerge from the ruins. While writing the book I realized that this point of view is as narrow as that of those who just see the symbol. Farkash and I went through a similar process. As Farkash fantasizes about the destruction of the city, he begins to see its complexity and fall in love with the city. So did I.”

In your Jerusalem there are many groups of ultra-Orthodox Jews but no Arabs. Why?

“The characters in my book have a narrow, secular point of view. They don't experience the full complexity of the city because they can't see the other groups that live in it. It is not a coincidence that the ultra-Orthodox people in the book are described as nameless, faceless, zombie-like people. This is how secular Jerusalemites experience the ultra-Orthodox community. I wanted to express this kind of relationship to the city, which is on one hand extremely emotional and on the other hand ignores many parts of it including its Arab inhabitants. In the reality of the characters in the book, the secular community is eroding and everyone who leaves is a traitor.” Goldenberg thinks silently for a few seconds and then continues, “this feeling is also true for everyone who chooses to leave Israel. You become some kind of traitor. There is a type of insider ownership over Israeli discourse which is gained only if you served in the military and live in Israel. If you violate one of these rules you lose the legitimacy to talk about Israel. This perception is wrong, and it is what makes us so weak. It is important to recognize where we are so that we can change this place