

Dream On by Dalia Karpel

Haaretz 27/1/20

In his new and ambitious novel, "**Mahazir Hahalomot**" ("The Remaker of Dreams") Nir Baram almost destroys Tel Aviv in a terrible storm that is followed by a mysterious plague. "The rain returned just as the beggar finished tying his shirt," writes Baram. "The entire area was in an uproar: the exhalation of the hail, the cries of the cats, the barking of the dogs, the roar of the air, the claps of thunder, seemed to split the earth like a nut."

But the true protagonists of this voluminous novel, which was published by Keter, are not the ravages of the weather, but four people - two men and two women, and the marvelous ability of one of them to bring back dreams. The man who brings back dreams helps people to hold onto their memories, but eventually also controls and confuses their consciousness, and occasionally even steals memories from them.

In this novel, says Nir Baram, he interacted with his biography - with the boy he used to be in Jerusalem's Beit Hakerem neighborhood; with his mother Ruth, who died of cancer. With his father (former Labor MK) Uzi Baram, and mainly with himself. The main character of the novel, Alon, is searching for his lost love Noa ("I conducted a dialogue with lost loves of mine, and the book is full of figures from the past," says Baram) and asks Yoel, the man who brings back dreams, to help him.

The other female character is Lior, Alon's sister, who is suffering from a serious disease (Baram says it was very difficult for him to write those passages. "I felt a tremendous identification with Lior, and such great love for her that I had difficulty writing.") The characters in the novel and the fragmented memories that Baram introduced into the book were joined to his sense "that I'm an uninvited guest in my soul, which is also the way in which I conduct a dialogue with people and with characters in the novel. In a sense, a novel is a process of exorcism."

"The Remaker of Dreams" is the third novel by 29-year-old Baram. He says the idea for the novel came to him in London in 2002, after a long period of not writing, and only ravenously devouring the books of others. "I was sitting in the hotel, and I had a picture of someone who brings a dream back to another person. I saw a woman, feeling pessimistic, lying in bed, and someone manages to penetrate her consciousness. The picture was vague, and it seemed as though the two were conducting a passive interaction, but there was a moment when he managed to capture her dream."

Where did you get the idea of having Tel Aviv collapse from the ravages of weather, and of spreading a mysterious plague there as well?

"I don't like bourgeois, realistic literature that tries to imitate an actual life experience. I often feel this is very self-satisfied literature, which does not attempt to shake up or rethink the world. Literature that doesn't ask difficult questions, but is too programmatic. Books in which you get a kind of imitation of reality. I was looking for a place in which the ordinary routines would be fundamentally upset. The collapsing Tel Aviv, which is immersed in a flood that is an expression of this desire to undermine the ordinary routines, to transfer the familiar images of Tel Aviv as a Western city. To have it descend into chaos and then to examine what happens when it collapses and no longer exists."

Did the unusual structure of the book also stem from the play of consciousness?

"I don't like linear writing, in other words, one thing happening after another, in chronological sequence. When you create a chaotic world that is less responsive to the laws of the familiar world, there is a desire to destroy the time sequence familiar to us. That gave rise to the desire for the book to jump back and forth in time. I didn't want literature in which the heroes would experience life in a kind of layer in which everything is understood and there is an explanation for every activity.

In my experience, we are living in a chaos of consciousness, we hear noises, memories, dreams all the time. We do not control our consciousness, and in effect we are subservient to it most of the time. It was important to me to transmit in the book an authentic experience, which is not sufficiently represented in literature, and part of that was to undermine the realistic time sequence. Alon says in the book that he is living in a different time from the

others. During many moments in my life I experience an event, and at the time that I'm experiencing it, I'm already mourning its end."

Baram is also a critic and the editor of a series of books, and he himself knows how to diagnose his own book: "The book is not easy to digest, but from the reactions of readers so far, it turns out it contains something strong that sweeps you into another world," he says. "The book demands dedication on the part of the readers and at the same time, it dedicates itself to its readers. It's a novel that tries to contain quite a few things, both on the fantastic and the realistic level, and to speak about the familiar Israel as well as about another type of Israel that exists the moment Tel Aviv collapses. My desire was to write a novel and to put into it everything I think and feel about the world, and many readers will feel this is a somewhat new attempt to construct a world that does not answer to the laws of most of the novels written in Israel. A novel that gives a lot, and that gives the reader an experience that works on all his senses."

Speaking to the child within

On his pinkie, Nir Baram wears a silver ring set with red stones. It is the ring of his mother Ruth, who died of cancer about 11 years ago, at the age of 59. His father, Uzi Baram, was a Labor MK and minister, who retired from political life a few years ago. Moshe Baram, his paternal grandfather, was also an MK and a minister. Ruth and Uzi Baram had three sons: Noam, 45, is a real estate agent in New York, married with a daughter. The second son, Ran, 38, works in a bank. Nir was born in Jerusalem in 1976, and attended elementary school in Beit Hakerem and continued in the high school of Hebrew University. He was a mediocre student, and not much of a success. He completed some of his bagrut matriculation exams after his army service. "I was a non-combatant in the field unit headquarters. A very problematic soldier," he says of himself. After his discharge he took himself in hand. He completed his bachelor's degree in Hebrew literature at Tel Aviv University, and is now studying for his masters.

His first book, which was published in 1998 by Zmora Bitan, "Sapri Li Sippur Ahava Segol" ("Purple Love Story"), was on the best-seller list for five weeks, and sold 15,000 copies, a nice number in Israeli terms.

Baram says he understood when he began work on a second book that "writing is the place that is the most liberating, the most closed and the most my own that I have ever had. I never felt as good as when I was writing. When I write I feel I have opened a door and entered a strong emotional world that removed me from the need to deal with daily existence and all this life of mine, which is sometimes so hard to deal with."

Baram says that as a child he felt rejected, an outsider. With the help of writing, he spoke to the child within him. "I came to this child with the point of view of an adult, and I felt I was binding up his wounds and giving him a voice. That I was succeeding in putting into words the feelings I had at the time."

He testifies he was a total outsider. "I was the wild kid in the neighborhood. I read a lot, but I was the wildest and the most violent. My reactions were violent. My language was violent, too. From the age of 8, I was violent, and some of the actual violent incidents are in the book; for example, the incident when Yoel hits a boy named Michael with a can of cola, and injures him. I didn't get along in any framework, not in school, not in after-school enrichment programs, not with my parents and not with other children. I didn't tell my parents anything about what happened to me outside the house. I was ashamed. I didn't tell about the 200 times when my friends excommunicated me, and that I cried, and that they didn't let me participate in the Lag Ba'omer bonfire.

Everything stayed with me. That's also why I began to write at an early age. Up to the age of 18, I had difficult experiences that I didn't admit, that I denied. At the time, there was the social group of the other kids and there was home, which was an entirely separate territory. That's why I was a very lonely child.

"I was the youngest at home, and my two brothers were about 10-15 years older than me, and they didn't know what was happening, either. And only while writing this book did I enter the place of childhood for the first time with the attitude of an adult. I felt that for the first time I was able to take pity on that child, and to deal with what happened to him. Recently I attended a wedding with my girlfriend, Renee Verbin (a literary editor at Yedioth Ahronoth), and I met one of the parents from Beit Hakerem, who is one of the characters in the book. Renee was surprised by the man's coldness toward me today. Okay, I was a child, and today I see it as a traumatic experience, but what was surprising was that he, too, is still involved in this type of rivalry

that he demonstrates toward the "bad boy" who tried to ruin his "good" son. It actually made me happy, because it confirmed for me that what I remember actually did take place."

Memories that didn't exist

You became a writer at the age of 20, and today at the age of 29 you are publishing a third novel. Was writing a kind of decision?

"I began to write a diary after my mother died of cancer in 1995. My father and I remained in the house, the period of mourning ended, and on Saturdays it became quiet. I had no ability to function with the new situation, and it caused all my fears to come to the fore. What would happen if Dad died. I didn't have a strong family. My two brothers were abroad, and suddenly I discovered writing. I had been writing stories and poems from an early age, but this was a different discovery. I began to write a diary, and I had no thoughts of being a writer."

What did you write in the diary?

"I wrote a kind of orderly report of events, but soon I discovered that I wasn't interested in telling what had happened to me. I began to lie. There was a story I had written when my mother was ill, and I called it "He'arot Beshulei Haovdan" (Remarks on the Edge of Loss), which is related to that same diary I wrote during the last months of her life. I wrote the order of events, and I felt I was beginning to lie, that I actually couldn't report what was happening to me and to her, and I was inventing things that didn't happen. After her death I thought I had to go back to writing in the diary, so that I would remember what was happening, and again I found myself playing with imagination. I wrote my dreams there, and memories that didn't exist, and I began to distort memories. That's where my first book was actually created. In "Mahazir Hahalomot" the mother is a selfish, abandoning mother, who is busy with her own affairs.

"My mother was the opposite. Devoted and concerned, and understanding of a child's needs, to the point where I had guilt feelings. When I was little she was very devoted, and there was a very strong personal tie between us. As I matured, we grew apart. She didn't understand me and I didn't understand her. She was very angry when I became violent and unruly at the age of about 10. When I was a teenager it became even more difficult, and my relationship with her was difficult in the verbal sense. I was very disobedient, and didn't

observe her rules, and I was very messy. Things that were important to her seemed marginal to me, and along with her devotion to me when it came to food and clothing, a strong emotional barrier was created. She didn't know what was happening to me in my life outside the house, and the relationship between us became progressively more difficult. When she fell ill with cancer, everything fell apart. I can't say I didn't take some of the blame on myself. I was about 16 and a half when she fell ill, and that was ostensibly a moment when it's possible to reach some understanding or consolation or closeness, because from the moment she was diagnosed, I understood this was a process that would lead to her death."

Why?

"First of all, because I'm very pessimistic. I also understood that the disease had been discovered at an advanced stage. My entire relationship with my mother was based on the tikkun [correction, repair] that would come one day. From an early age it was clear to both of us that there would be a tikkun. She said, "When you grow up, you'll be able to understand." She felt I didn't understand her and the price she paid to maintain and keep a house with four men."

How is it that you didn't understand toward the end?

"I didn't understand. Only after she died did I learn who my mother really was. My father told me about her family. She came from a poor family that lived near the marketplace, and she was ashamed of the fact that she was able to estimate the weight of tomatoes on the scale by sight, because she spent many hours in the marketplace. I didn't understand her relationship with her parents, I didn't understand when she told me not to make rude gestures at her, because that came from the same place from which she came, from her Mizrahi [Jews of North African or Middle Eastern] origins. Her father's name was Mansour, and they came from Aden. Her mother came from a lower class Jerusalem Mizrahi family. I didn't understand her relationship with my father's family, in all its complexity. I began to understand her through my paternal grandfather, with whom I spent many intimate moments.

"My paternal grandfather was Ashkenazi [of European origin], and a minister in the Knesset. His wife, my grandmother, came from a Lebanese Mizrahi family, and when she met my Mapainik grandfather [Mapai was the forerunner of the Labor Party], it was hard for her to enter his Ashkenazi world, especially since she was not educated. I understood many things, as I've said, only after my mother's death. For example, how disappointed she was I wasn't born a girl, and that I wasn't the devoted and empathetic son. I understood that there was no tikkun, because I didn't succeed. I was young and not wise enough."

A problem being Ashkenazi

As an editor, you published a book about the Ashkenazim, and now you are editing a book about Mizrahi identity. What about your identity?

"When I was young, the focus of my identity was Mizrahi. I liked [soccer player] Eli Ohana, Hapoel Jerusalem [soccer team], and Grandma Gracia, my father's Mizrahi mother. Most of my family is Mizrahi, with the exception of the quarter Ashkenazi because of my paternal grandfather. I grew up as an Ashkenazi in the Beit Hakerem neighborhood, which was Ashkenazi, but at home I absorbed Mizrahiness from mother and the grandmothers, and when I was a child I had a problem with being Ashkenazi. I didn't understand that they were the representatives of the ruling hegemony, and my identification with the Mizrahim was instinctive. Even today, my identity is a complex question. It's hard for me to define what I am. I wander between the two identities and try to understand each of them, and that's the place that inspires me artistically. Part of my preoccupation with the issue finds expression in the books I edit, and in the novel I wrote.

"Today, there is no longer a clear division into Mizrahi and Ashkenazi, as there was 30 years ago. Today the identities are complex. Judging by the way [Labor Party leader] Amir Peretz was chosen, it is clear that part of veteran Israel sees the prime minister as a kind of respectable Ashkenazi suit with white hair, and finds it difficult to accept a different figure. I don't think I'm going to join his campaign. I was happy he was elected, and I believed in his path, and I think the alternative he should offer has to be socially and politically clear. I think part of the Labor Party list that was chosen now is not identified with Amir Peretz's issues. It's still a middle class Ashkenazi party for the most part."

The new book also taught him about love. "The book deals with the question of the extent to which love is possible, and the price one pays for it, when a soul connects to a soul," he says. "Today my desire for love is strong. There were years when I could only want and ask and demand, and I didn't understand what it required of me. There's a sentence in the book which is the most important sentence about love, that true love is the moment when someone experiences your fears as you do. Another person sees the world exactly from the place where you see it."

What are you saying, that today you are more prepared in your love relationships?

"I've been with Renee Verbin for about a year. I've always had long relationships. First of all they failed, and secondly, I achieved emotional maturity and I was able to pay the price of love in the smallest things. For example, I'm a person who if told he has to send a letter from the post office, will take a week to think about how to do it. I can't function in the small details. It's hard for me to accept that if I want a connection now with my partner, she is not free at the moment. Since I was a young boy, when I want something, it's hard for me to hide the fact, and I shout that I want it now. So it's hard for me especially to give up symbiosis. As far as parenthood is concerned, recently I've been thinking a lot about what kind of father I'll be. After all, I have a very narcissistic side, and I'll have to learn not to be preoccupied with myself all the time."

'I have no crowd'

Baram spends a lot of time being interviewed, writing and appearing at cultural events. But he says the only thing that interests him is writing, and his output is low - only 1,000 words a day. He says he recently went on vacation in Thailand with Verbin and he used it to write eight hours a day.

To which Tel Aviv crowd do you belong, and in which cafe do you sit?

"I have no crowd, and I don't belong to any clique. It's something I've hated since childhood. Everyone has his Tel Aviv and my novel deals with that. I've been in the city for six years, and I'm friendly with many people, but it's hard for me with all the people who create or help to create its local-newspaper image, with these symbols and nonsense, and the Westernized atmosphere and the entertainment. I have difficulty with the people who maintain the deceptive metaphors of Tel Aviv. I don't think it's possible to create an interesting Tel Aviv urban literature from such vulgar viewpoints. The

arrogance and self-satisfaction of people in the city are very problematic for me. I feel there is some stereotype here that represents the figure of a Tel Avivian who creates culture, and I don't see how it can be manifested in good art.

"Much of the literature written in Tel Aviv by young and older Tel Avivians does not demonstrate a desire to take apart Tel Aviv and to dive deep inside it, and certainly not to think about Israel and Israeliness. Even the political aspect, with everyone declaiming the same political slogans without any real commitment and without a desire to challenge their positions or to suggest solutions.

"I'm alone a great deal. There are months when I don't go out in the evening at all. It's impossible to understand my generation through people who live only in Tel Aviv. Part of the process of my book is an attempt to connect Tel Aviv to Israel. To pull it out of its own image and to connect it to sweaty, chaotic and impoverished Israel. When asked which Israeli books have influenced him, he mentions the epic novel by S. Yizhar (Yizhar Smilansky), "Days of Ziklag," about the 1948 War of Independence, which is also considered a revolutionary novel because of the unheroic way in which it viewed the war. "That's the important principle in literature, says Baram, about this novel by Yizhar, "to take the familiar reality and to distort it and improve it in a manner we haven't seen. His language, that is so amazing and strong. A large part of my literary pretensions came from that book."

He mentions the novel that brilliantly analyzes the Tel Aviv Ashkenazi bourgeoisie, "Zikhron Devarim" (The Memory of Things, published in English as "Past Continuous") by Yaakov Shabtai. Baram: "This is a book I loved to read, but for me it symbolized the place where I don't want to be in literature. It gave me an excellent realistic text that analyzes the Israeli bourgeoisie brilliantly, and in a fascinating manner. My desire for literature is for a place that operates on totally different coordinates, such as an attraction to magic, to the futuristic, or dealing with more abstract questions, such as memory and dreams."

Baram mentions Yitzhak Laor, Leah Eini, Albert Suissa ("Akud' [Bound] was the first Mizrahi novel I read, and it gave me an entirely new perspective on my family"), A.B. Yehoshua, Dan Tsalka.

In spite of the long list, he says that actually, non-Israeli literature has had more of an influence. "Virtually all of Israeli literature is literature that I find hard to like, because I have a hard time with the psychological and bourgeois realism. My natural associations are not Israeli. My favorite writer is Proust. A novel that greatly influenced me is "The Man Without Qualities," by Robert Musil, who created a hero who contained within him all the complexity of our time. The writings of Czech authors such as Michal Viewegh and Bohumil Hrabal, whose humor and imagination excited me."

Are you nervous as your book is about to hit the stores?

"The book is me. I sent someone a text message: "I sent you the book. If you like it very much, I'll be happy to hear from you. If not, we'll meet in hell." If someone tells me that he likes me and I'm charming and smart, but "Mahazir Hahalomot" is nothing special, I won't be able to accept that. I'm sending the book to the world, and in effect I'm going into the street naked, and if someone says that it's not good, that will be terrible. Everything that anyone has ever said about a book of mine is etched in my memory. Mainly things that are less positive. If I feel I'm threatened, I can go out to battle. On the other hand, I have the fears and anxieties, and all I want is for people to tell me they liked it. Many years after Beit Hakerem, I wanted to prove to the whole world and to my family that I'm not the child who only causes problems. I'll show you something yet."