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In a new book, critically acclaimed author Nir Baram settles the score with globalization, Western politics and the Israeli Left

After a hit novel about life under the Stalinist and Nazi regimes, Baram is back with a contemporary story – a chilling tale in which the masses undertake a global protest.

By Maya Sela | Sep. 20, 2013 | 1:19 PM



Nir Baram. "Our world as we know it won't remain as it is forever. We ain't seen nothing yet when it comes to protest against the world order." Photo by Kobi Kalmanovitz

Nir Baram has already confessed in the past to having a love of gambling, so perhaps it's no surprise that he is also a daring gambler when it comes to literature. He admits he is interested in taking on writing projects that he doesn't really believe he will be able to complete. "In this book more than in the other books, I was constantly walking on the edge of the abyss and I was afraid it would fall apart," he says, referring to his new novel, "Tzel Olam" ("The World Is a Rumor"). Published by Am Oved, it is certainly one of the most impressive books written here in recent years. It is an upsetting work that dismantles ideologies and power structures, crosses continents and skips among worldviews and literary styles as it raises major questions about the human soul, democracy, ethics and violence.

Baram is 37 years old, and this is his fifth novel, preceded most recently by "Mahzir Hahalomot" ("The Remaker of Dreams"; 2006) and "Anashim Tovim" ("Good People"; 2010), both of which were candidates for the Sapir Prize. "Good People," about two young people, a German and Russian, who make fatal compromises with the Nazi and Soviet regimes, respectively, has been published in several languages, to critical acclaim: A reviewer at NRC Handelsblad, in the Netherlands, for example, wrote that Baram so "majestically" captured the terrors of life under Hitler and Stalin that his novel had "reached the same level as books by Varlam Shalamov and Vasily Grossman." Another Dutch paper, Volkskrant, suggested that "Good People" is "much more a warning about the present than a reflection about the past," while Trouw called it "chillingly lucid."

In "The World Is a Rumor," Baram brings together three major forces in the world order: the force that lives off capitalism and disseminates it worldwide, in the guise of an American consulting company and its directors and employees; a second force, the total antithesis of the first, personified by a group of protesters who don't believe that social mobility can be achieved by democratic means and carry out a series of violent protests, ending with a worldwide strike of a billion people; and a third force, which is situated between the other two, and represented here by the Jerusalemite Gabriel Mantzur and the American Daniel Kay.

Baram says that he already knew what his next book would be about when he finished the writing of "Good People": "One of the things that people were less aware of in 'Good People' is that the male protagonist, Thomas, far from being a Nazi, is an almost naive believer in capitalist values. He's a type of German-American. I could have written a classic German character, but I chose instead to disrupt complacency, because in effect I imported [his character] to some extent from our time into historical time.

"I knew that the next book would be about the type of global capitalism that emerged beginning in the 1980s, in the days of Reagan and Thatcher, and is still with us today, and mainly about the vertigo it causes. In other words, about the encounter between ethics, maybe even the spirit, of the individual and the will of the powers, the systems, the corporations we encounter when we go out into the world. I wanted to write about that and I had no idea how to do so. So, I did what I always do – I read a lot of books and didn't write anything.

"In effect I started with my own family," he says. "I started from Albert Mansour, Gabriel's father, who is actually my mother's father – that was his name. Although he changed his name to Ben-Tzur, in the book Mansour doesn't Hebraicize his name. His son, Gabriel, changes it slightly, to Mantzur.

"My mother's father was born in Aden, and he immigrated to Israel from Alexandria. I didn't know him very well, he died in the 1980s, but there were lots of stories about him, and they also said that we share several personality traits."

The fictional Albert Mansour comes to Jerusalem, to an Ashkenazi Mapai-dominated environment, and tries to make his way in it.

Baram: "He's a sophisticated man who knows languages, who has traveled, who invents strange and brilliant ideas. The novel follows the stubborn ascent of his son, Gabriel Mantzur, to the centers of power in the Israeli economy. Gabriel realizes at some point that he doesn't know a single important person in Jerusalem, that nothing in Jerusalem is accessible to him. Not cultural institutions, not money, not politics."

You also settle accounts with the Israeli left.

"The Israeli left devoted itself to the political project [of establishing a state], nurtured and strengthened it, and that was its identity. It completely neglected the entire socioeconomic issue. Parts of that left improved their economic status due to Israel's transition to a freer market, beginning in the mid-1980s and due to the peace process and globalization. But, in effect, they were not prepared to bring about a real change in the socioeconomic arrangements in Israel because they themselves profited from them.

"In the 1990s I, too, was impressed by the peace process, and I said how nice, there will be a new world. I had a very great awakening from that type of left, which is not really willing to engage in an in-depth discussion about the economic changes that are necessary here, but is willing to fight for two states. That's also the reason why many people don't believe in that left."

You actually aren't perceived as a Mantzur, but as someone who is well connected, the son of politician Uzi Baram. Maybe that's why you were able to write this book. You understand the language of the well connected.

"Everyone sees himself in a certain way. I was trapped inside my life story, and I didn't see myself as a privileged person, because of my relations with my parents, because of the way I grew up, in a middle-class family, without houses and property and all that. It took me time to understand that I come from a family about which people have an opinion, and that clearly comes with privileges, and I have to recognize that.

"Once it was very difficult for me to deal with reactions relating to me, later I realized something: Even people who don't like you have a narrative, a story, complaints. But more than that, a writer doesn't write only his own experiences: I've never invaded the dreams of other people ... I'm a writer who uses his imagination, and in this novel, the challenge was to let various voices speak. In my opinion, an interesting novel doesn't divide the world into good guys and bad guys, and doesn't

portray people who live with the awareness that they're sinners. On the contrary, I create voices that sometimes contradict each other, with equal force and equal passion. In other words, I challenge the identification system of the reader, who will often seek one character with whom to identify and in whom to believe."

Asked why he chose to tell the story of his mother, who died when he was 19, Baram says that that story was always thought to be less important at home. "My mother was entirely Mizrahi (Middle Eastern). On the one hand Siton, which is the side they're proud of because it's 'pure Sephardi,' and on the other hand Mantzur. My mother used to say, 'Well, Siton is an aristocratic family,' although she complained about their status, to put it mildly, and then there was the somewhat inferior Mantzur side."

Did she have an inferior complex vis-a-vis your father's world?

"I don't want to do an injustice regarding the way she saw herself. In my opinion, my mother denied her Mizrahi background completely ... In my youth, I didn't understand her story: At a very young age she managed a family of limited means after her father, Albert, left home. At the same time she was also a successful woman at a very young age, running a minister's bureau at the age of 27, at a time when there weren't many women in such positions; during those years she was more successful than my father.

"At a certain point, because of the children, she gave up her career, something she never made peace with. Not with that and not with the fact that she didn't attend university. Only when I moved to Tel Aviv did I understand that my mother had a real problem with the way she grew up, with the fact that her family was quite poor. On the other hand, people who knew my mother in the political world admired her greatly, people would consult with her about everything."

In the book, you describe major forces that move the capitalist machine, and you demonstrate that there is no way to really know for whom we're working and for whom the man opposite us is working.

"The world of globalization is complex and ramified – you never know who stands behind the man you've met. It's a network. In the book, there's a worldwide elite that has conflicting interests, even among itself. In such a world, it's hard to understand the consequences of your actions ... All the forces are flexible, moving, changing.

"In the book there are a lot of masks. Even the American consulting firm has the liberal, quasi social-democratic mask. Within this masked ball, people work under difficult conditions of uncertainty. There are many people who lose their most natural safety nets: their pension, their eroding salaries.

"The novel actually describes a dynamic in which the familiar balances among the various forces are suddenly violated, spin out of control, so that the familiar order no

longer works. I think that's liable to happen when there's a system that inherently transfers money to a small number of people. The most important thing is where the money goes, what the division of resources is and the extent to which people have the ability to improve their lives. On the other hand, the book also presents the achievements of Western capitalism after World War II; it doesn't deny them, but presents a complex picture."

Unrestricted rebellion

Baram describes the moment when the balance is violated, and obedience is replaced by rebellion with no restrictions or rules. The worldwide protest group in the book is not interested in the democratic game or the existing system. Even Daniel Kay, a senior employee of an American consulting firm, and a central protagonist in the book, finds it hard to play the game.

"In our generation, there is sometimes complete separation between your profession and your ideology," Baram says. "You get up in the morning to serve forces that deep inside you don't believe are beneficial to the world, to put it mildly. And then in the evening you return home and write posts on Facebook against those forces and their ilk.

"In totalitarian regimes like those I wrote about in 'Good People,' they demand your total loyalty. They say: Work for us and believe in us – or at least pretend that you believe in us. Whereas, capitalism says: You can be a socialist or a Marxist, you can shout at demonstrations, but give me your talents, and, for example, invent apps that will make 14-year-olds press a button. That depicts a very large gap between the professional and ideological worlds, a gap inside the soul that is hard to repair."

Daniel Kay decides to stop.

"Daniel is a unique case of someone who was involved in very unusual events. He's not just some person who saw one of his newspaper articles spiked because his boss didn't like it. He's someone who worked on behalf of horrifying campaigns that made him feel he was carrying the burden of major sins on his back. Daniel no longer believes in Western politics, with elections and campaigns. He makes a moral choice as a person who can't serve those forces.

"Not that I think he's a big hero. Daniel is a very complex character. He uses the ugliest methods for ostensibly 'good purposes.' You also have to ask how you leave those places: Anyone who leaves without anything has a harder time; if you leave with some financial security it's easier for you."

The people participating in the worldwide strike that you describe, in London and worldwide, are people who have nothing to lose.

“That’s a group composed of all kinds of characters; most of them from poor families. They come from a place where the entire democratic world of power and money is foreign to them and they have no access to it. Because they aren’t part of it they don’t apologize for anything ... and that’s part of their power. They have none of the restrictions of family or education that teach you to believe in the rules of this world. There’s another type of protest, one that begins in very esoteric places, like their idea to fight cultural institutions the world over.

“They examine the situation and say: We want to dismantle that, not to change it. It’s a voice of protest with which we’re less familiar in recent years. We’re familiar with the protest of the middle class, which incidentally won great achievements when it came to arousing awareness, but was also very dependent on the affection of the media. I remember reading the complaints of protesters all over the world, about why they didn’t receive coverage. After all, the media forces are usually not with you. That’s not in their interest. It’s a struggle among various interests. I was interested in imagining a different type of dynamic. This is a novel, and one of the things that I like about novels is the use of imagination.”

How do you see the future?

“We have a feeling that our world has managed [to exist] thanks to some kind of status quo and that it’s being challenged in a way that doesn’t violate the balances, but if you look at the 20th century, you see that that’s nonsense. Dramatic changes that nobody imagined are taking place. Our world as we know it, which is relatively safe for some of us, won’t remain as it is forever.

“I think we ain’t seen nothing yet when it comes to protest against the world order. A certain awareness is taking shape which understands that the things we were taught don’t change a thing – and that’s also dangerous, and I don’t enjoy saying this – so the question becomes one of how to act.

“In the novel, that’s a very important question. Because, okay, we know how to talk, but how does a person act in the world, what’s your ethical choice and what’s the price you’re willing to pay for it? Because sometimes that price is high. The chaos described in the book takes place sometime in the future. I’m not a prophet, but I see many people who believed in the existing order and say let’s change it, and now they’re wondering about it. Because if in democracy as we know it, things can’t be changed, and elections don’t change a thing – then what makes it democracy? What exactly is democracy if there are entire classes for whom no matter who is in power the wheels of the machine turn at exactly the same pace, and these people always remain in the same place? Do they have democracy?”

The protest in Israel gave rise to two MKs and Yair Lapid.

“It’s almost monstrously grotesque that the outcome of the [social] protest is Yair Lapid. The transition from the things said by the protest to politics is almost impossible. The protest group in my novel presents a fundamental challenge to the liberal order: It says that none of this works any longer, that we somehow manage brilliantly to convince people that it can change if we vote for Lapid or [Tony] Blair or [Barack] Obama – who has very good intentions and has also done things, but his presidency is for the time being a colossal example of this issue.

“On the other hand, the book also acknowledges the positive changes that have taken place thanks to certain actions of the liberal ad-campaign firm. I think that the novel is critical of all the forces it portrays, including the children of the worldwide strike.”

‘My generation’

“The World Is a Rumor” does not arrive at clear conclusions, and Baram says that he’ll be happy if people are confused when they finish reading. “I believe that interesting literature is literature that doesn’t end with conclusions but that, on the contrary, causes the channels of the reader’s interpretation and thought to become wide open. This is a novel about my generation, about our world. I would like my generation to read it, but it’s important that it be read by people from all parts of the spectrum.”

What about if tomorrow, people start destroying works of art in galleries all over the world. That will be your fault.

“Well, there are more interesting acts described in the book ... Besides, that has been said about many books. I’m not some kind of megalomaniac who thinks that people will read my novel as an operating manual. It’s impossible to look at the book from outside and to say: Now we’ll be more careful here and there. More dangerous books have been written.”

It will be interesting to see how the book is received in the world in light of the fact that its subject is global.

“I’ve learned quite a lot from the encounter with readers and critics worldwide. My first amusing encounter took place in connection with ‘The Remaker of Dreams’ in Germany. They asked me whether the re-maker of dreams is busy with dreams because he wants to forget the Nakba [the “catastrophe,” the Palestinian description of Israel’s establishment, in 1948], or because he no longer believes in peace. It occurred to me – and I’m saying this with tongue in cheek – that many people in Europe have a very ‘Orientalist’ attitude toward Israeli literature. They want us to tell them what’s happening in this desert where Palestinians and Jews persecute one

another. And [they ask] what about Tel Aviv, which is a very turbulent and passionate city? They want us to tell them how this world works, but please don't make it too complicated. If it's realistic and if there's a soldier who can't make up his mind – even better. They direct you to a certain type of literature. Israeli literature has to be very careful about satisfying that perspective.”