

Reading Guide

1. The book opens with the journey of Bashir and his cousins on a bus to their childhood homes in al-Ramla. What must have been going through their minds during that time? Can you imagine the internal dialogue in their heads, as they rode the bus, then walked around their old hometown? How would you have felt if you were Bashir, approaching the old home, and pressing the bell?

2. Dalia's very existence, and her arrival as an infant to Israel in November 1948, is the result of remarkable circumstances that combined to save some 47,000 Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust. How much importance would you put on the actions of Dimitur Peshev, the parliamentarian, or Bishops Kiril and Stephan—and how much to other factors? Finally, the book (p. 43) describes Dalia as carrying “an extraordinary legacy” with her to Israel in 1948. What was that legacy?

3. The Arab-Israeli war of 1948 is known as the “War of Independence” to Israelis, and the “Nakba,” or “Catastrophe,” to Palestinians. Chapter Four describes how Bashir's family, and Dalia's cousin, Yitzhak Yitzkaki, experienced the war. Take the point of view of Bashir, during the first several months of 1948, and tell the group how you experienced those times. Now, do the same with Yitzhaki.

4. Bashir and his family kept their focus on the “right of return,” as promised by U.N. Resolution 194, as their exile extended into the 1950s, and then the 1960s. Why was this such a singular focus for Palestinians during this time? If it were you who had been displaced, would you also demand to return home, or would you, at some point, decide it would be easier to live in peace, if also in exile?

5. Dalia describes herself as growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust (pp. 112-115). Even though her family escaped these atrocities, she nevertheless experienced a young Israel as deeply traumatized. At the same time, she grew up among a new community of Jews who were trying to re-form their identity. On pp. 118-120, a discussion of the Sabra, or “New Israeli Man,” describes a desire among many Israelis to “wash off that old Jew” and “stand tall for the first time.” How much of a role do you think the Holocaust, and reaction to it through the crafting of a Sabra identity, played in the formation of Israel's national psyche?

6. The emerging trust between Dalia and Bashir was shattered in February, 1969, when a bomb exploded in a Jerusalem supermarket, killing three people. Bashir would later be convicted of complicity in the bombing and sentenced to fifteen years. Is your own view of Bashir transformed by the description of these events? How is this tempered, if at all, by the accounts of his torture and imprisonment? In the meantime, Dalia cuts off all contact with the family. Describe her state of mind during this time, and her own ambivalence about contacting Bashir.

7. After Dalia's parents died, and Bashir got out of prison, Dalia did indeed get in touch with Bashir. Why? Describe her evolution from being "zealous in the defense of Israel" (p. 180) to meeting Bashir at the home of a Christian minister in Ramallah. At that meeting, Dalia offered to share the home in Ramla. What is the meaning of this gesture? What is the meaning of the agreement Dalia and Bashir forged that day?

8. In 1988, near the beginning of the intifada, Bashir was deported to Lebanon. On the eve of his deportation, Dalia wrote an open letter to Bashir that was published in the Jerusalem Post (pp 200-203). Weeks later, Bashir replied (pp. 216-220). Describe your reaction to both letters.

9. Bashir and Dalia finally meet again, in the midst of rising violence and political tensions, in Ramallah in 2004 (256-262). They find that their political differences are as great as ever, but that their personal relations are as warm as ever. How does one explain that?

10. Near the end of the book (p. 262), Dalia says, "Our enemy is the only partner we have." What does she mean by that?

Suggestions for dramatic readings:

Some reading groups enjoy reading passages aloud, with different readers taking different roles and reading their parts in character. For sections that work well as dramatic readings consider:

- i. the conversation between Bashir and Dalia in Ramallah (pp. 154-63, especially pp. 158-163) or
- ii. Dalia's open letter to Bashir published in the Jerusalem Post (pp 200-203) and Bashir's reply (pp. 216-220).