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Blood Relatives

Daniel Schifrin - Special To The Jewish Week

Not long after the recent café bombing in Haifa, I interviewed best-selling Israeli author Sami Michael, an Iraqi-born Jew whose novel "A Trumpet in the Wadi" (Simon and Schuster) has just been published in English. During a break between speaking engagements organized by the San Francisco Israeli Consulate, Michael answered questions about both politics and prose. But he seemed to come alive when the conversation turned to the multi-ethnic symbolism — and reality — of Haifa.

"It is the eye of the hurricane in the Middle East," Michael said of his adopted hometown. "There is real coexistence there. It is a place that enrages fanatics, because it offers an alternative to them. At the [bombed] café, Jewish and Arab blood mingled on the floor. And Jews and Arabs rushed together to give aid." As a Jewish Israeli whose first language is Arabic, Michael himself is an intersection of narratives, a one-man Haifa.

This issue of lives being intermingled, of a quiet collaboration in the narrative of everyday existence, is at the heart of "A Trumpet in the Wadi." It is also a kind of shadow reality that exists just behind today's headlines, bombings and political posturing. If we want to view this more three-dimensional landscape, to show the complex, even subconscious connections between Jew and Arab, we will have to turn off CNN and pick up a book.

"A Trumpet in the Wadi," which takes place at the beginning of the Lebanon war, focuses on the love affair between Huda, a young Arab woman, and Alex, a recent immigrant from Russia. The two star-crossed lovers, living cheek by jowl in an Arab neighborhood, protect and nurture each other, with their relationship emerging organically out of proximity and human need. Alex drives away an angry suitor for Huda's sister; Huda's mother brings Alex food; Alex awakens Huda's heart with his exotic trumpet; and Huda presses Alex's army uniform when he is called to active duty. It is a messy, difficult union. But the two lovers are hopeful, and the reality and courage of their love makes a small dent in the worldview of the Jews and Arabs with whom they live and work.

Although he is an Ashkenazi Jew, A.B. Yehoshua, in his new novel "The Liberated Bride" (Harcourt), unfolds another kind of partnership between Arab and Jew. The book focuses on Yochanan Rivlin, a professor of Middle East studies who is suffering from writer's block. After a terrorist kills a young Orthodox colleague studying the texts of war-torn Algeria of the 1950s, Rivlin becomes fascinated by that country's descent into bloodshed, mostly as a cautionary tale for Israelis and Palestinians. He soon becomes entangled in the family life of a Palestinian student who is helping him translate the Algerian documents, and the texture of Rivlin's intellectual awakening becomes inseparable from the lamb he eats at the student's wedding, and the Arabic poetry heard at midnight deep inside an Arab village.

This kind of creative partnership plays out again in a new one-woman show by Israeli actress Noa Baum, "A Land Twice Promised," which Baum is currently presenting around the country. Baum's performance is a series of monologues told from the point of view of various members of Baum's family, plus several members of a Palestinian family Baum met while in graduate school in California. Baum was struck by how similar the two sets of stories were — concern for family members, evocation of food and landscape, the certainty that the "other" would stop at nothing to eradicate an entire people. The central moments in the play concern two mothers, bracing for violence, hoping to find some flour before hunkering down in their respective apartments.

The stunning result of Baum's work is not a competition of narratives, but a consolidation of them. Or to use a musical metaphor, her alternating of Jewish and Arab stories created a point/counterpoint that feels more like a richly dissonant piece of music than a political debate.

At first Baum seems pessimistic about the possibility of people being able to listen to the enemy's tale. Speaking about her grandmother, who lost her family to the Holocaust and then her son during the War of Independence, Baum asks: "How can someone who lost so much still have room for the other? For their story?" Baum's answer, however oblique, is in the very existence of her performance. Baum finds her voice by making room for another in a collaboration as desperately nourished by stories as the flour cooked by Jewish and Arab mothers hoping to keep their children alive for one more day.

Baum acknowledged that an academic town in America was a neutral, almost utopian, location for an Israeli and Palestinian to share their stories. And neither Sami Michael nor A.B. Yehoshua suggests that a solution to Jewish-Arab animosity is simple. But at a time of heated emotions, and in a global culture of impatience and television, these literary works offer an opportunity, for thinking freshly about how Jews and Arabs already do live together, for acknowledging the Haifa rescuers, laboring off-camera to help Jew and Arab alike, knowing that blood is blood.

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