Why Israelis Should Use the Cease-fire to Read This Book of Lebanese Folktales

A collection of stories now out in Hebrew will give Israelis a rare glimpse into the hearts of their northern neighbors. Also, Ethiopian Jews' Sigd holiday and the Pride Film Festival in Be'er Sheva bring good cheer

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Like the rest of my stories,
This story I'm about to devise,
Was never heard with my ears,
Neither seen with my eyes.

This little poem opens a terrifying Lebanese folktale, "The White Rose," which appears in the brand-new Hebrew-language book "Tales from Bilad al-Sham."

It's a story about a poor Lebanese father of three daughters who leaves home in search of work in a far-away land. Each of his girls asks for a gift, just in case Daddy starts making some money again. One wants a fur coat, one demands a golden bracelet, and the third only a white rose.

Unfortunately, the modest daughter will find herself being given away by her father to a half-man, half-animal creature living in a grand palace, in a twisted version of forced child marriage. Like

many of the tales and poems in this anthology of folktales from the Levant, it's a combination of mythical creatures, ambiguous messages and a dose of healthy nonsense.

During the long Lebanese civil war, educator and storyteller Najla Jraissaty Khoury visited small villages and refugee camps in search of women – Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian – who would share their folktales. She collected 100 oral stories, some of which had to be rerecorded because the sounds of food being prepared ruined entire tapes.

While collecting the folktales, Jraissaty Khoury also toured Lebanon with a simple traveling theater company and retold the stories to children, often using shadow puppets. More than 60 of the tales appear in the new Hebrew anthology.

Folktales and children's' theater are probably the last things on Israelis' minds when thinking about Lebanon right now. Even in peaceful times, we refuse to learn about our neighbors and their cultures. We've just signed a cease-fire agreement with Hezbollah, but during the 14 months of fighting, marked by high-rise buildings being flattened by Israeli planes, most Israelis watched without understanding a word that the people who live there have to say.

For those who wish to become acquainted with another side of Lebanon, this large volume – an impressive three-year translation project by Maktoob Press and countless translators from the Arabic – will give Israelis a rare glimpse into the hearts of the people living across the northern border. After all, what better way is there to learn about other people than to read their folktales?

And reading the book now, during a war, has added value: Many of the tales mention imaginary wars and were originally retold by Jraissaty Khoury to Lebanese children during the 1975-90

civil war, often in difficult conditions. The book's ninth chapter collects many of the stories that have a general theme of war.

And as mentioned in the book's epilogue, folktales around the world have been providing a "corpus through which you can observe, explain and possibly criticize the war, without talking about a specific war."

"To be honest, we weren't sure the stories would work in Hebrew," says translator Kifah Abdul Halim, who edited the book together with author Eyad Barghuthy. "Folktales aren't regular texts; they have lots of rhymes, inside humor, nuances and nonsense. Many of the stories start with poems that have little to do with the actual story, and some texts clearly don't have any obvious meaning."

As a result, the team at Maktoob started reading the Arabic tales out loud and translated them live, using the rhythm and intonations of natural speaking. The next step was a workshop at the Mishkenot Sha'ananim cultural center in Jerusalem, which got young Palestinian and Jewish translators working together in small groups. The team later organized the stories in newly created chapters and added an index of key terms.

"It's like an encyclopedia of the stories from the Bilad al-Sham," says Abdel Halim, who lives in Haifa.

Were any of the tales known to you as a Palestinian?

"The story 'Jbene' is very well known in Palestinian families. The version my mother and grandmother told me is slightly different from the one in the book, about a woman who prayed to have a daughter as white as a piece of cheese, who she then gives the name Jbene, which sounds like the word for cheese in both Arabic and Hebrew.

"As with many of the tales, there are things that can't be explained, even as someone who speaks Arabic. Why would she want her child to look like a piece of cheese? I think she wanted her to be beautiful and glowing. But often there simply is no meaning, and that's also the beauty in these tales."

The lion's share of those stories were told by women. What can we learn from them on women in the Levant?

"Traditionally, it's women who told folktales to their children. It has always been a female space. And many of these women used this opportunity to tell stories about other women. Even in a patriarchal society, suddenly a female character is leading the story and is creating things. It was a space that allowed them to do good for other women.

"You can really notice the way they tell stories about other women, and sometimes the way they describe men. ... They could play a different role as storytellers, and a lot of their subconscious can be seen. Things women aren't allowed to talk about appear, like hints and jokes about sex. You'll also find beautiful music in those stories and rhymes that these women created live, while speaking, without ever writing it down, which is incredible.

Why do you think Israelis should read these tales in Hebrew?

"I'd say it's true for any language; these tales would be interesting to anyone. But one of the main reasons was that these stories came from a time when the Levant was one area and the tales were shared by the people living here. It looks like something so distant now. I want people to realize the history.

"And folktales reveal so much about the people who carry them – what they think, what they feel. They show the Arab peoples and their set of mind, what they dream of, how their imagination works, how they see the world, their approach to

people and nature. There's a good reason why they're called folktales. Even the mythical creatures that appear in our stories tell a lot about us."

Talking about monsters, some of the stories are truly scary.

"We call this a book for all ages, but it isn't for small children. Some things are truly hardcore. Like a tale about a father who remarries and the new wife convinces him to get rid of his children, so he leaves them in a forest. Nowadays we also rarely tell children the Brothers Grimm's more twisted tales, which include cruelty and incest. Some elements in the stories in the book can actually be somewhat compared to the Grimms' tales, like 'Snow White' in the case of Jbene."

The book contains mentions of certain Jewish characters, like King Solomon. The people who told these stories – what can we learn about their relationship with Jews?

"It's not something that comes up a lot. Only here and there. We call King Solomon 'Our Grandfather King Suleiman' – we even call Sarah 'Our Grandmother Sarah.' We know they're Jewish, but we see them as people who also belong to our history. Islam acknowledged Judaism and its characters, and many of our stories are connected. Solomon and Sarah are mentioned in a completely natural way in the stories.

"It's not forced, it's something that's naturally part of the Arabic and Muslim culture. And that shows you something about the way things used to be – so much more normal."

Rockin' around the Sigd art

Come December, the square at Jaffa's clock tower gets decked out with Christmas decorations and receives from the municipality a huge plastic evergreen that draws visitors every night. For the first time, the square this December will have an

installation dedicated to Sigd, the Ethiopian Jewish holiday that's being celebrated this week throughout Israel.

The artist behind the temporary artwork, which was placed right next to the clock tower, is Shimon Wanda – "Like 'A Fish Called Wanda,'" he says by phone from his studio in Haifa.

Wanda, 34, answered a tender issued by the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality calling on artists to propose ideas for artworks to celebrate Sigd. "Originally I had wanted to make something influenced by the image of the stork, a migrating bird that was important for Jewish families in Ethiopia," he says.

"When people saw a stork they would say, 'This bird must have visited Israel once.' But because of time constraints I ended up making this sculpture, which has a *kes*, an Ethiopian spiritual leader, walking in an endless circle with a group of people. They're all wearing traditional clothing."

According to Wanda, while working on the sculpture, passersby called out "Happy Sigd!" – including people who didn't come from the Ethiopian community.

Sigd takes place 50 days after Yom Kippur and isn't very known to Jews not of Ethiopian descent. It received its name from the Hebrew word *sgida*, which means worship, and includes a fast and a group walk to Jerusalem. This year, Sigd fell on a Saturday, so the ceremonies and the walk were moved to Thursday.

Earlier this week, other major Sigd events took place across Israel, such as the annual culture festival the Sigdiada (curated by Shai Ferdo), which took place in Tel Aviv and included a theater piece, jazz performances and an African groove concert. The event also took place Wednesday at an Israeli army base.

In Haifa, the main event that was scheduled for the beginning of the week was postponed due to the war.

Desert queens also like cinema

TLVFest, Tel Aviv's queer film festival, is spreading to Israel's south. Next week, Be'er Sheva's second Pride Film Festival will take place and allow audiences who don't live in queer-friendly Tel Aviv to enjoy quality LGBTQI+ films.

The organizers behind the smaller spin-off of the main festival are Naomi Zoreff and Shlomit Lazare, who were fed up with having to drive all the way to the center of Israel just to consume culture.

"We see having this festival here as a major stepping stone in promoting a varied and inclusive culture in Be'er Sheva and the Negev Desert as a whole," the two said in a statement.

The small festival will include a special screening of the short film "I Am Not Okay" on a young gay woman who finds herself locked up in a gym with her ex-girlfriend and the ex's new boyfriend during a rocket attack on Israel. The screening will include a talk with the filmmaker, Joy Rieger. Other films are "Born for You," "Lesvia," and "A House Is Not a Disco."