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A reluctant settler examines the Gaza disengagement in her fiction

Daniella Levy, an immigrant from the US, eyes the Jewish settlements, the traumatic 2005 pullout, and the meaning of home in a multi-narrative new novel, 'Disengagement'

By **JESSICA STEINBERG**

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1 August 2020, 9:32 am



Soldiers wait as Jewish settlers in Neve Dekalim are escorted from their houses in the Gaza Strip on August 18, 2005, the morning of the Gaza pullout, the event written about in Daniella Levy's 2020 book 'Disengagement.' (Nati Shohat/Flash90)

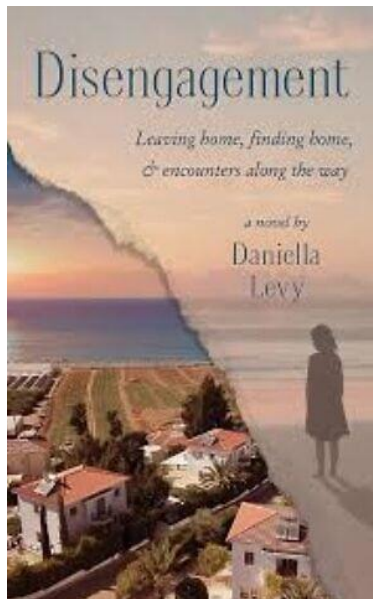
In August 2005, when Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip and dismantled its 17 Israeli settlements, Daniella Levy was 18 years old.

Levy, whose family moved from the United States to central Israel when she was 10, was performing a year of national service at the time and coming into occasional contact with families affected by the decision. But she could not bring herself to watch the news or follow the protests.

One year later, Levy, a content and copy writer who had been penning stories and books since she was 15, wrote a short story about a soldier who had been present at what became known as “the disengagement.”

Another 12 or so years later, she took that short story and encapsulated aspects of it into her second book, “Disengagement,” a fictional account of the Gaza pullout, told through a series of intertwining tales of characters and their experiences in the time before and during the Israeli withdrawal from the territory.

It’s a book that offers societal context on a major event in Israel’s political history, alongside a softer although still realistic historical account.



The cover of 'Disengagement,' Daniella Levy's new book, published in March 2020, about the 2005 removal of Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip. (courtesy, Kasva Press)

The publication of “Disengagement” (Kasva Press, 2020) was unfortunately timed, as it launched at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. But the subject matter is timely, as this week marks the 15th anniversary of the disengagement, when hundreds of families were removed from their homes by then-prime minister Ariel Sharon, the very same leader who pushed for the creation of the settlement bloc.

The anniversary of the disengagement, said Levy, is remembered only by a certain slice of Israeli society.

“Other parts of society are not really aware of it,” said Levy. “They don’t think about it that much, and they don’t like that part of society that does

mark it, that is so wrapped up in its own narrative. And the other part of society doesn't think about it at all.”

She can talk about the disparities in Israeli society with regard to the disengagement because she has experienced various approaches to the issues.

Moving to the central Israeli town of Rehovot with her parents from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Levy grew up in a Modern Orthodox home, where her father disagreed with the disengagement and her mother approved of it.

At the age of 21, when she married, she and her rabbinical student husband moved to the settlement of Bat Ayin, making Levy an unwitting settler of a sort, herself.



Author Daniella Levy wrote about the 2005 disengagement from Gaza years later, creating a fictional discourse about loss and home (Courtesy Daniella Levy)

“I wouldn’t say that the disengagement is my experience, but living in a settlement did bring me a lot of perspective. It made me notice that I had my own biases against settlers, and it made me examine them,” said Levy.

After the trailer home in Bat Ayin, they moved to Tekoa, another West Bank settlement.

Both communities have reputations for being quite liberal in terms of their communal political outlooks. Tekoa was the home of the late Rabbi Menachem Froman, who was the community’s chief rabbi and was known as a negotiator and peacemaker with the Palestinians.

When Levy first moved to Bat Ayin, however, she felt daunted by the new environment, having to pay attention to the security situation and driving on the same roads as Palestinians.

“There are things you don’t think about in the center of the country,” she said. “But spending time there helped me understand the slightly different rules.”

Even now, said Levy, she is ambivalent about where she lives, and that comes out in the very structure of her book.

“I see all sides of the issue,” she said. “I love my community and I believe in our historic right to live there, but you can’t ignore the fact that other people are living here and have the right to live happily.”

The results of Levy’s thought process have helped her create a thoroughly engaging novel, a quick but engrossing read that brings readers onto the sandy shores of a fictional Gaza settlement, Neve Adva, where two of the main characters, a rabbi and his wife, had moved with their young family and then, 12 years later, must deal with the fallout of the disengagement.

Levy's writing skillfully weaves together the perspectives of numerous characters, effectively recreating the build-up to the traumatic 2005 disengagement.

It is a broad introduction to a range of segments of Israeli society, including pious settlers, salt-of-the-earth farmers, earnest yeshiva students, confused soldiers, and Tel Aviv cynics. All told, there are 16 perspectives and 11 narratives in the novel.

Levy said she worried there were too many characters, creating a challenge that would overwhelm the readers.

But that was also part of her point.

When she began working on this novel — her second published, but her seventh written — she did her research, watching footage that she had intentionally skipped when the events were taking place 15 years ago.

“I empathized and opposed it all,” she said. “My main thought was, ‘Why aren’t these people listening to each other?’ I didn’t think I could write it because of the perspectives, but then I came up with idea of writing a short story about each of them.”

Those short stories were eventually interwoven into a full-blown novel, zeroing in on the human experience of loss and grief.

“It’s about loss and home and what does it mean to lose a home,” said Levy.



Jewish settlers carrying their furniture

walk in the streets of the Jewish settlement of Neve Dekalim, Gaza Strip during the 2005 disengagement, the subject of Daniella Levy’s 2020 novel, ‘Disengagement.’ (courtesy, Flash 90)

That was a question that Levy dealt with personally, having moved as a child to Israel. She looks at that experience through one of her characters, Reuben, a new immigrant from the US, as a way of filtering her own feelings. Voluntary immigration is not the same as being told one has to leave their home for political reasons, as in the Gaza settlements, but there are parallels.

“The US is always going to be home and Israel never will be, but Israel is home in ways that the US will never be,” said Levy. “It suspends you between these two worlds. I was drawing on that, on characters who lose their homes, or are moving away from something.”

She was also thinking about conflict and discourse, issues that are familiar from life in Israel as well as in the US, particularly of late, said Levy.

“It’s not new that there’s polarized political discussion, but it feels like people aren’t learning anything new,” she said. “I would really like for people who read the book to come away with the understanding that there’s a lot of value in listening to each other’s stories and in looking at things from a different perspective.”

Levy wants readers to feel “a little uncomfortable” when they read her book.

“I kind of planned it and wrote it and designed it that way,” she said. “It was not comfortable for me either, but I wanted to sit with the discomfort. I think that’s a really important thing for people to do.”