

## SNAPSHOTS



By Michal Govrin

Translated by Barbara Harshav

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Study guide by Ilana Kurshan

### ABOUT THE BOOK:

This novel, set in New Jersey, Paris, and Jerusalem, is the story of Ilana Tsurie, a brilliant, independently-minded Israeli architect who dies in a tragic car wreck in the book's opening pages, leaving a husband and two young sons. Ilana's story is told through "snapshots" – notes to her deceased father, photographs from her travels east and west, sketches for the utopian monument she plans in Jerusalem, and other fragments left behind after her death. We learn about Ilana's various struggles: to come to terms with her often estranged Parisian husband's obsession with the Holocaust; to protect her sons and maintain her community as missiles fall on Tel Aviv during the first Gulf War; to articulate her views on land and property ownership in Israel through an architectural project, while conducting an affair with a Palestinian colleague. The novel casts Ilana's own search for identity against a backdrop of political and social issues facing the modern state of Israel -- issues that continue to resound for Ilana even as she drives down the New Jersey turnpike to the music of Simon and Garfunkel.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Michal Govrin is a writer and poet, and an award-winning director of experimental theater. Born in Tel Aviv in 1950, she studied literature and theater at Tel Aviv University and received her Ph.D from the University of Paris. Her father was one of Israel's first pioneers, and her mother survived the Holocaust. Govrin now teaches at the School of Visual Theater in Jerusalem and is a part-time writer-in-residence at Rutgers University. She has been awarded the Margalit Prize for Theater Direction (1977), the Tel Aviv Foundation Award for *The Making of the Sea, a Chronicle of Interpretation* (1984), the Kugel Prize (1998) as well as finalist for the Koret Jewish Book Award (1999) for *The Name*, the Prime Minister's Prize (1998) and the ACUM Prize for best literary achievement of the year for *Snapshots*.



### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. If you had to create a soundtrack for this book, what songs would you include? Distinguish between Ilana's songs and her father's songs. How does their music differ from one another?
2. Ilana frequently draws on Biblical quotes and themes in her work on her peace monument. What passages are frequently cited? Do these particular Biblical passages say anything to you?
3. Sayyid directs a play called *The Binding of Ishmael*. What do you make of this title? Why is the story of the banishment of Hagar so crucial to this story? Can you identify the modern political significance of Sayyid's art?
4. How was Sayyid's upbringing and adult life influenced by historical developments in Israel? Where did he grow up, and where did he travel? Why was his return to Jerusalem in 1967 so dramatic? (see p. 50-55) What were the other significant turning points in his life?
5. Find Rembrandt's painting "The Sacrifice of Isaac" (available on Google), and reread Ilana's analysis of this work (p. 58-59). Do you agree with her interpretation? How would you say it is informed by her politics and her artistic vision?
6. In describing her religious background (or lack thereof), Ilana explains, "You must understand, Claude, we grew up cut off. With contempt for those 'Diaspora' 'religious' texts. How can I explain it to you... that was part of the auto-da-fe that took place in the Land of Israel. Zionism lopped off every other identity. Arabic, Diaspora, Jewish" (p. 73). What do you understand by Ilana's statement? Why didn't she grow up with more Jewish content in her life? How and where did she rediscover her Jewish heritage? How does her story differ from those of others you may know who returned to Judaism later in life?
7. Why do the ideas of the Sukkah and the sabbatical year speak to Ilana so deeply? How do these concepts fit into her notions about Zionism, the "global village," and the significance of Jerusalem? (see especially p. 74-5).
8. One of the characters in Sayyid's play cries out, "My life was broken on one day, like a straw . . . There's no limit to our disaster, to our Nakbah. Everything they stole from us. Groves, almond trees, olives. And we're here like garbage. And instead of our villages—their houses" (p. 87). Who is this character, and who does he represent? What is the "one day" to which he refers? Who are the "they" who stole everything?



9. How do you imagine you would you react if you were a member of the audience listening to these words?
10. What is Alain's view of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians? Who are the "beautiful leftists" to whom he refers (p. 92 and 210), and why is he so disdainful of them?
11. What is the role of the italicized newscasts that punctuate this book? What do they add to the story? Can you list a few events that are included here? Do you remember reading about any of these events in the news yourself?
12. How does this novel explore the experience of Russian immigrants to Israel? What is unique about their perspective? Consider, for instance, the Russian who describes building SCUDs in the USSR (p. 228).
13. How does Ilana's account of the Gulf War deepen your understanding of this period? Did Ilana's narrative surprise you in any way, or teach you anything new? How does her experience compare to those around her, such as her Armenian friend Anton (p. 256)

## REVIEW QUOTES:

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Consider these quotes individually. What does each add to your understanding of Govrin and her work? Do you agree with the claims they make?

"A mutiny of clashing voices, each with its own version of past, present and future... *Snapshots* becomes a symposium on Jewish history and on the future of the State of Israel, conducted by four radically different voices."  
—*The Forward*

"This brave and complex work must be read by everyone still lured by the hope of peace."  
—David Shapiro



## OTHER BOOKS BY MICHAL GOVRIN AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH:

*The Name* (Riverhead Books, 1998)

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Battle of Latrun** (259) – This battle took place during Israel’s 1948 War of Independence. Latrun, a monastery in the Ayalon valley about 15 km west of Jerusalem, was the site of a British police fort until the British departed from Palestine on May 14, 1948. The fort was occupied by the Transjordan Arab Legion, which used the strategic fort to shell Israeli traffic on the highway and thus effectively impose a siege on Jerusalem. Just ten days after the declaration of the State of Israel, on May 24, 1948, the fort was assaulted by Israeli forces. The attack failed with heavy casualties, as did a similar attack a week later, and the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway was not secured. Nonetheless, the battles contained the Arab Legion and allowed the opening of the bypass road, which lifted the siege from Jerusalem.

**Campaign Danny** (259) – This campaign was initiated by the Israeli army in July 1948, during the War of Independence, in an effort to ease the growing pressure of Arab forces on the cities and towns in the center of Israel, particularly Ramle, Lod, Latrun, and Ramalla. In the battles at Ramle and Lod, the Israeli forces succeeded; at Latrun and Ramalla, they failed. The success at Lod was particularly important as it allowed for access to the most important airport in Israel, which today is known as Ben Gurion. The Danny Campaign was named for Danny Mass, the commander of the Lamed Hey convoy, charged with bringing ammunition and supplies to Gush Etzion. All 35 soldiers in the convoy were killed along with their commander.

**DDC** (217) – This acronym stands for Defense Device for Children, used to protect children from gas attacks during the Gulf War. The Hebrew equivalent is MaMaT, which stands for “mitgam migun la-taf” (babies’ defense device).

**Nakbah** (87) – This term, Arabic for “catastrophe,” is used by Palestinian Arabs to refer to the date of the establishment of the State of Israel, May 15, 1948. The war that broke out when neighboring Arab states invaded Israel, following Israel’s declaration of independence, resulted in the flight or expulsion of an estimated 700,000 Palestinian refugees, and the destruction and abandonment of up to 418 Palestinian villages.



**Second Aliyah (62)** – The Second Aliyah was the the most important and influential wave of immigration to Palestine. It took place between 1904 and 1914, during which approximately 40,000 Jews immigrated, mostly from Russia. The primary cause for the aliyah was mounting anti-Semitism in Russia and pogroms in the Pale of Settlement, as well as economic problems in Eastern Europe. This aliyah consisted of many idealists who sought to create a communal agricultural settlement system which became known as kibbutzim. The first kibbutz, Degania, was founded in 1909, as was the city of Tel Aviv.

**Sharm-al-Sheikh (184)** – This city, situated on the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, is of great strategic importance. It was captured by Israel during the Sinai conflict of 1956 and restored to Egypt in 1957. A United Nations peacekeeping force was subsequently stationed there until the 1967 Six Day War, when it was recaptured by Israel. Sharm-al-Sheikh remained under Israeli control until the Sinai peninsula was returned to Egypt in 1982 after the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty of 1979.

