

## ADJUSTING SIGHTS

By Haim Sabato

Translated by Hillel Halkin

First published in Hebrew by Miskal, 1988

English translation published by Toby Press, 2003

### ABOUT THE BOOK:

*Adjusting Sights* begins soon after the outbreak of the Yom Kippur war, when 19-year-old Haim returns on leave to his family home in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Bayit ve-Gan. There he grew up with his best friend Dov, an immigrant from Romania. The two studied together at the same yeshiva and shared a tank in an armored corps base in the Sinai. Haim was the gunner; Dov the loader. But in the chaos of war they are assigned to different companies, and Dov is killed in one of the most devastating series of battles in Israel's history. This book is the story of Haim's attempt to uncover the circumstances and come to terms with Dov's death. He describes crossing wadis, ducking shells, and driving across uncertain terrain, interspersing his narrative with the liturgy and the texts of Jewish tradition: "I have called out to the Lord in distress . . . All the nations compassed me, but in the name of the Lord will I destroy them." Haim's personal and spiritual journey, woven into the fabric of a great national struggle, makes for a deeply compelling and riveting account that lifts the fog of war to reveal not just the chaos of battlefield, but the forces that tear at the heart of a friend.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Haim Sabato was born in Cairo in 1952, the descendant of a long line of rabbis from Aleppo, Syria. He was forced with his family to leave Egypt in 1957, and settled in the Jerusalem immigrant neighborhood of Beit Mazmil. Sabato attended a yeshiva of the national religious community and did his army service as a gunner in the tank corps. Among the reservists called up following the Yom Kippur attack of 1973, he fought against the Syrians in the Golan. It was this experience that he felt compelled to write about thirty years later in *Adjusting Sights*, which won the Sapir Prize for Literature. Haim Sabato now teaches in a Yeshiva near Jerusalem, which he co-founded.



**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. What is Haim's family background? Where is he from? Describe his early years as an immigrant to Israel. Are you familiar with other aliyah stories? In what way is this one different?
2. How does Haim describe Tiberias? What makes it a holy place?
3. How do Haim and his fellow soldiers observe the Jewish holidays while at war? What sort of changes do they have to make in their ritual observance in order to accommodate themselves to their circumstances? How are they able to give voice to their values even if they cannot practice as they otherwise would?
4. In describing Tiktin's survival, Haim says, "Man's doings are of the Lord; how can a man then understand his own way?" (p. 79) What does Haim mean by this statement? What does it reveal about his faith in God?
5. Why does Haim tell the story about putting on his tefillin late in the day? How do tefillin become important later in the story?
6. In a small country like Israel, nearly everyone is affected in some way when a war breaks out. How does this become clear in Sabato's novel? Consider those characters who are not soldiers – Haim's family, his rabbi, and the woman from the kibbutz who gives him a ride back to his base. How does the war impact their lives?
7. How does the regular evening prayer take on new meaning for Elhanan when he recites it at Camp Sufa (p. 103)?
8. Elhanan states, "The people of Israel will triumph even if there is no telling what will happen to any one of us" (p. 103). How do you interpret this statement? What is the relationship between the individual and society in this novel? Are they ever at odds with one another?
9. Haim has several realizations when he hears others tell their stories to the psychologist and the historian who ask the soldiers to describe one full day of the war (p. 71). What are some of these realizations? Do they weaken or strengthen his faith?
10. How is the Sabbath described and personified in this novel? What challenges does it pose for the observant soldiers? How do they sanctify the day?
11. Gidi is one of the only secular characters in this novel. How does he relate to the more religious soldiers? How is his attitude towards the outcome of the war both similar to and different from theirs?



12. What is the symbolism of the moon in this novel? Why does the book begin and end with the sanctification of the new moon?
  13. How does Sabato use the language of the Jewish religious tradition to tell his story? Are there any phrases or prayers that you recognize? What is their significance in the context of this narrative?
  14. In describing the deaths of so many soldiers in war, Haim says, "The Owner of the fig tree knows when it is time to gather His figs." How would you describe this attitude? Is it fatalist or faithful or both? Does this strike you as a Jewish perspective?
  15. Does Haim ever undergo a crisis of faith? How do you account for this?
  16. How do you interpret the title, "Adjusting Sights"? What are the various meanings of this term?
1. Grossman's novel has been described as a fairy tale. Do you agree with this assessment? What are some of the elements in the story that resemble a fairy tale or fable?
  2. Grossman's novel reveals the ethnic diversity of Jerusalem today. Who are the different kinds of people you meet in this book? What types of people are the main characters, and what types of people are only in the background?
  3. Are there any sectors of the population that are noticeably absent?
  4. Dinka leads Assaf to a place that "he assumed...was a deserted Arab village, whose inhabitants had fled during the War of Independence (according to Rhino). Or were cruelly banished (Reli)." What is the difference between Rhino and Reli's accounts? Which do you think Grossman is more likely to support? Where do you stand?
  5. Who are the hungry children whom Assaf finds in the deserted village? Where are they from? Would you say that their inclusion in this novel can be viewed as an indictment of Israeli society?
  6. When Tamar tells Shai about her planned rescue mission, he tells her, "This is not Entebbe Operation Thunderbolt." What is he referring to? Does Tamar ultimately prove Shai wrong? How does this reflect on Israel's cult of heroism? Do you think it is significant that the character of Tamar is a girl and not a boy?
  7. When Pesach and his men surround Assaf and Tamar, one of them says, "The Temple Mount is ours! Now let's take care of Abraham's Tomb." How does his use of this metaphor show the way in which 3000 years of Jewish history and politics influences day-to-day life in modern Israel?

