

THE PLACE WILL COMFORT YOU ▶

By Naama Goldstein

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ABOUT THE BOOK:

This collection of short stories set in Israel and suburban America explores the complexities of cultural dislocation among Israelis, Israeli Americans, and American Israelis. The first few stories, grouped under the category of "Olim (Ascending)," are set in Israel; the second half of the book, "Yordim (Descending)," consists of stories set in the United States. From an expatriate cranberry expert to an uncomfortable male teacher in an all-girls' religious vocational school, these stories explore the cultural divide between American and Israeli Jews living in vastly different worlds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Naama Goldstein was born in Boston. At the age of three, she and her family immigrated to Israel and settled in the city of Petakh Tikva, where they were part of a Zionist Orthodox community. Ten years later, Goldstein and her family returned to the United States. A former bartender, accountant, receptionist, language instructor, librarian, and social services worker, she currently lives in Boston with her husband and son.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Goldstein writes in English, but she often uses Hebrew syntax. Several phrases in this book seem awkward because they are literal translations from the Hebrew. Can you identify some of these phrases? Why do you think the author chose to keep them in the book nonetheless?
2. [The Place Will Comfort You] What is the meaning of the title of this story? Why do you think the author chose it as the title for the book as a whole?
3. [The Place Will Comfort You] What are some of the elements of the "conduct for consolers," as explained in this story? When does the narrator abide by the proper conduct, and when does she fail to do so?
4. [The Place Will Comfort You] How does the orphan describe Americans? Do any of her stereotypes surprise you?
5. [The Place Will Comfort You] How do the narrator's school classes differ from the classes she would take if she lived in America?
6. [The Place Will Comfort You] What are the narrator's thoughts on Hebrew and Arab subtitles? How do she and the orphan react to the news program? What do you learn about the context for this story as a result of this scene?
7. [The Place Will Comfort You] Compare the narrator and the orphan's attitudes towards Arabs.
8. [The Place Will Comfort You] Consider the juxtaposition of the Leviticus assignment, the kitchen experiment, and the magic show. What do they all have in common?
9. [The Place Will Comfort You] "I talk two languages without being taught," says the ten-year-old protagonist of this story. "I know—I understand with the full feeling of living life—that you can be of one place and another, not all the same." Discuss this statement.
10. [The Verse in the Margins] This story presents several different worlds: the religious girls' school; Mr. Durschschlag's home in Bnei Brak; the Tel Shamai dunes. What are the differences among these worlds? What does each represent?
11. [The Verse in the Margins] Several prayers and Biblical passages, are quoted in this story. See, for instance p. 52 and p. 64. What is the significance of these quotations in the context of the story? How do they take on new layers of meaning?



12. [The Verse in the Margins] Mr. Durchschlag explains to the girls that he served in the army as a member of the "Holy Society" (p. 69). What is the meaning of this term? What exactly was his role? Who serves this function in America?
13. [Pickled Sprouts] The narrator says, "It is as if you were raised somewhere very different, then put down here. You drink milk. You speak soft and slow. You sneaked a taste of coffee just last week, and it's too late. The harshness! You've been raised on mac and cheese" (p. 73). How is food used as a metaphor for cultural differences in this chapter? Why is the narrator so nervous about her cafeteria duty?
14. [Pickled Sprouts] What is the story that Mrs. Altbroit tells the narrator? Can you imagine a scene like this taking place in an elementary school in America? Why or why not?
15. [Pickled Sprouts] What is the suspicious object that is found in the refrigerator? Why does Shlomtzee find it so intriguing? What does this object represent in the story?
16. [A Pillar of Cloud] The Pladelet may be understood as a metaphor for the barrier between Tiffy and her cousins. List some of the cultural differences between them. How would you characterize each half of the divide?
17. [A Pillar of Cloud] Why do you think Tiffy is so friendly to Ibrahim? Why do the cousins react as they do?
18. [Anatevka Tender] The opening page of this story, with its Hefty bad and Astroturf, suggests that we are suddenly in a very different world from that of the Olim stories that comprise the first half of the book. What other tell-tale clues are indicative of this shift?
19. [Anatevka Tender] In sorting through the possessions of the old man who used to live in their house, Eytan groups the figurine of the fiddler on the roof with Abe Lincoln. What does this reveal about his matrix of associations? Do you think an American child would ever place these objects in the same category? Why, for Eytan, are they both "foreign"?
20. [The Worker Rests Under the Hero Trees] Where does the title of this story come from (see p. 192)? What period in history is it referencing? Why is it in Adi's memory?
21. [The Worker Rests Under the Hero Trees] Is Adi's family Israeli? What does she mean when she says that they "thought they were ascenders for life" and that they were "never sufficiently absorbed" (p. 207)? Does Neer fit this description as well?

