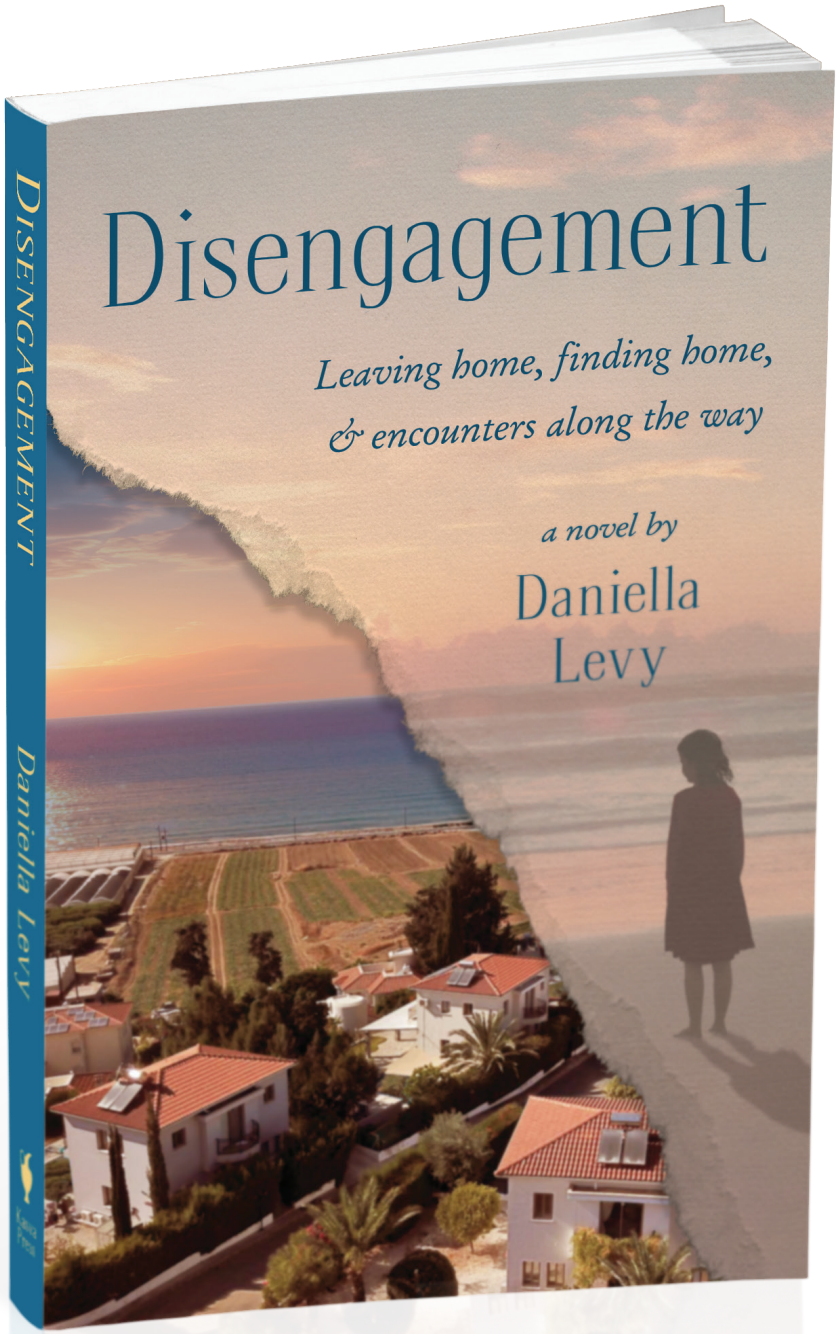
Disengagement

Daniella Levy

Discussion Guide for Book Clubs



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What's in a Title?

disengage *verb*

1. **a** *tr.* detach, free, loosen, or separate (parts, etc.) **b** *refl.* detach oneself, get loose.
2. *tr.* remove (troops) from battle.
3. *intr.* become detached.
4. *intr.* (as **disengaged** *adj.*) **a** unoccupied; free; vacant. **b** uncommitted, esp. politically.

(from the Oxford English Dictionary)

What do you think?

- Why do you think the word "disengagement" was chosen by the Israeli government to describe this operation, and not another word, such as "evacuation" or "withdrawal"?

- What other associations does the word "disengagement" evoke for you?

Three Graces

p. 11-12 The following excerpt from Chapter 2 describes how Rabbi Shlomo Toledano feels when he first sets eyes on the beach that would later become Neve Adva — the same feeling he had when he first met the young woman who would become his wife:

Yes . . . he had felt this before, this profound stirring of familiarity that seemed just beyond the reaches of his memory. He first saw Shulamit at a classmate's wedding; she was just standing there among all the other young women, looking intently ahead at the wedding ceremony in progress. She never met his eye; never spoke to him, their paths did not cross during the rest of the evening. But he could not get her face out of his mind. He asked around at the yeshiva to try and find out her name, and when he found out that it was Shulamit, the image in his mind was soon accompanied by a soundtrack echoing in his head: Shulamit and Shlomo. Shlomo and Shulamit. Like characters from a fairy tale.

When he approached his spiritual advisor from the Har Etzion Yeshiva, Rabbi Yonatan had quoted the Talmud: "There are three graces: the grace of a wife to her husband, the grace of a hometown to its inhabitants, and the grace of an acquired item to its purchaser."

"What does 'grace' mean in that context?" Shlomo had asked.

Rabbi Yonatan smiled: "It's when you look at something and know instantly that it is destined to be yours—and you'll never be able to explain why."

What do you think?

- Can you recall the moment you made the decision to live in the place you currently call home? How much of that decision was rational?

- Have you ever made an important life decision—such as who to marry, what job to take, what house to buy, etc.—based on an intuitive sense of "grace," as Rabbi Shlomo's teacher describes here?

- Why do you think the Talmud specifies our connections to these three things—our home, our life partner, and our belongings—as the ones that defy explanation?

Scale of Disaster

p. 4 Below is an excerpt from the opening chapter, in which journalist Ehud Hazan describes the chilling reality many Israelis lived with during the Second Intifada:

I'm sure you are all familiar with the morbid body count game we play. You're listening to the news, and you hear that there's been a terror attack. You tense up. Your first question is, "Where?" Somewhere far away from you. You relax. And if it's over the Green Line, you likely flip your hand in dismissal. Crazy shit has been going down out there since time immemorial. You don't have time to feel concern about this. You don't have the emotional energy to waste on those crazed religious fanatics choosing to make their homes in that hellhole. Then, one of these bone-chilling stories breaks through: a mother and her four little daughters, gunned down at point blank range. And you look at their photographs in the paper and try not to see the faces of your own wife and daughter and you console yourself: "That's what they get for living on stolen Palestinian land."

What do you think?

- Are you familiar with the response Ehud describes here? Have you ever reacted to terrible news like this?
- Do you think this kind of response is cruel and uncaring, or understandable?

Preparation

Below is a passage from Chapter 13. Tali, a young female soldier, commands a unit that is on its way to evacuate its first family from Neve Adva: p. 116

The first home along the beach was the Cohens'. It was a big house, almost like the ones the millionaires had in her native Herzliya, with sand-stained white stucco, a tiled red roof and several balconies. Tali waited until her soldiers were in position, surrounding the house, before walking up the steps and the garden path to the front door.

She hesitated, absently teasing curls out from the clip at the back of her head. Images flashed through her mind: the footage from Neve Dekalim she had seen on television the other night. Settlers screaming and throwing things, soldiers being wheeled into ambulances. Settlers chanting, "Jews don't expel Jews! Jews don't expel Jews!" A woman holding up a child, screeching at the soldiers, "Look into his eyes! You will have nightmares about these eyes your entire life!"

Tali forced her attention away from these thoughts and onto the sign on the door in front of her. A block of polished wood with "Welcome to the Cohen family home!" in cheerful hand-painted letters. It looked like something she'd made in seventh grade. One of the things hiding in the shoebox under her bed.

Sergeant Darom coughed pointedly. Tali swallowed, braced herself, and knocked on the door.

She took a step back, wondering how long it made sense to wait before giving the half-hour ultimatum. She was going over the breaking-in procedure in her mind when the sound of a handle turning startled her. The door pulled wide open, and there was a woman standing there, presumably Talia Cohen, with a wide smile on her face.

"Oh, hello!"

Tali stared at her. She was wearing an orange Gush Katif T-shirt over a three-quarter-sleeve shell and a flowy, layered skirt that fluttered as she moved. A few strands of dark hair poked wildly out from beneath the orange scarf tied around her hair.

The woman peered out past Talia. "Good morning, dear soldiers. You must be so hot standing out there! May I offer you some iced tea?"

In the preceding months, Tali had been prepared for every eventuality. She was ready to withstand verbal and physical abuse of all kinds; she knew how to use a water cannon; she had practiced holding steady in a storage container dangling from a crane, keeping a steady grip on a fighting, full-grown adult. The rigorous "mental preparation" program helped her reframe the hatred that was sure to be spewed at her, helped her conceive of her unit as a gentle, caring adult restraining a wayward child.

But nothing, nothing in the world, had prepared her for Talia Cohen standing on the doorstep and inviting her in for iced tea.

What do you think?

- Do you think, based on Tali's description, that the soldiers were prepared well for the disengagement? Why or why not?

- Why do you think it is so much harder for Tali to cope with Talia's kindness than with her hatred?

Helpless

In the following excerpt, we learn about one child's response to a terror attack that occurred in Neve Adva: p. 49

For weeks, maybe months . . . Levana came into Olga's room in the middle of the night, whimpering about nightmares with bad guys and bombs trying to kill her. After Olga would calm her, she refused to go back to her bed, sobbing that she was afraid the nightmares would come back. Olga would shush her and stroke her hair, and then lie awake long after her child's body became heavy and her breath slow and rhythmic. She would hold Levana tight, helpless against the tears dripping onto her pillow because she could neither promise her daughter that the nightmares wouldn't return, nor that they wouldn't come true.

What do you think?

- What is expressed so powerfully in this passage is the conflict a mother feels between the desire to protect and comfort her child and her commitment to the truth. How do we strike a balance between protecting our children and being truthful with them about the frightening realities of the world?

- If you are a parent, can you recall a moment where you had to reveal an unpleasant truth to your child? How did you handle it?

- What might help a child learn about terrible events without being traumatized by them?

Revenge

p. 57 In the following excerpt, Reuben recalls how his plans to move to Israel with Shelly were delayed, and the incident that sparked the couple to move forward with them:

Of course, things never quite work out as planned. Reuben and Shelly decided to get married a few months later, and Shelly was pregnant with Daniel at her graduation ceremony. Reuben decided to go for his MBA, and Shelly got a stable job at a speech therapy clinic in the city, and they decided that maybe it would be better to wait until they had saved up a little.

To the bewilderment of all their relatives, it was the Café Hillel bombing in September of 2003 that spurred them to move forward with their plans. Reuben found Shelly crying in front of the TV. She sobbed about Nava Applebaum, the young bride who had been killed the night before her wedding, and missed opportunities, and how life is too short to keep putting off their dream and establishing their rightful place in the world.

"We have to go," Shelly had said, clutching his hands, her eyes wide and bloodshot. "We have to go. As revenge."

What do you think?

- What do you think Shelly means by "revenge" in this context? Why do you think she sees moving to Israel as a way to avenge the death of a victim of terror?

- Do you think her response makes sense?

Protest

Yossi Toledano, the 17-year-old son of the rabbi of Neve Adva, is arrested during an illegal protest against the evacuation from Gush Katif. The following morning, his father picks him up from jail, and they have the following conversation: p. 67-69

More than the night he spent in the jail cell with several dozen other young men, more than the criminal charges he knew would be pressed against him for participating in the protest, Yossi was terrified of the look on his father's face when he came to pick him up in the morning. Rabbi Shlomo didn't say a single word to him beyond two-syllable instructions as he led him out to the parking lot, and the first half of the drive back down to Yad Benyamin was spent in tense silence. Yossi waited, biting his lip so hard it bled.

Finally, Rabbi Shlomo opened his mouth.

"I don't know what to do with you, Yossi."

Yossi knew better than to speak now. He stared at his lap, playing absently with the fringes of his *tzitzit*.

"What more can I say? You've heard me say it a thousand times. This is not the way."

"*Your* way doesn't seem to be doing much," Yossi spat, unable to contain himself.

Rabbi Shlomo took a deep breath. "I know it may seem that way to you," he said, his voice shaking a little, as though he were forcing it to remain even. "But burning tires and jumping in front of cars on Ayalon Highway is the opposite of helpful to our cause. It only increases antagonism, increases the anger, increases the hatred. We don't need any more of that now."

"'We have love and it will win,'" Yossi quoted the slogan in a mocking voice.

Rabbi Shlomo glanced at his son, his jaw hardening. "Is this all some kind of joke to you, Yossi? Do you realize the implications of being charged with disruption of public order? Of deliberately endangering the lives of people? Do you understand what might have happened if a car had caught fire from one of those tires? If someone had been hurt? Do you understand what it looks like when a group of teenagers attacks the car of an innocent Arab, like a mob of barbaric terrorists?"

"We didn't do that."

"You'll have a criminal record now. It may hurt your prospects in the professional world, in the army . . ."

"As if I want to serve in the army of this country."

Rabbi Shlomo slammed the brakes, jerking the car to the side of the road, his eyes smoldering.

"Don't . . . you dare," he hissed. "Don't you dare."

Yossi clamped his lips shut again, looking out the side window at the shrubs in the sand next to the road.

"Look at me," Shlomo said. Yossi shrugged one shoulder. "*Look at me.*" Yossi turned, his jaw set in defiance.

"God did not bring us back to this land after two thousand years to have us reject His gift just because we don't like the policies of the current government. You have no right to turn your back on this country. I don't need to remind you what our family has sacrificed for Israel."

"But was it worth it, Abba?" Yossi fixed his father with a challenging glare. "Everything you fought for in Lebanon—we pulled out of there, too, and it became a breeding ground for Hizbullah. The first few years living in isolation in Neve Adva, the years we had mortars raining down on our roofs, the windshields we had smashed by the rocks and Molotov cocktails from Khan Yunis, our neighbor . . . was it all worth it if we're just going to let ourselves be herded out of there like a flock of sheep?"

Rabbi Shlomo sighed, shaking his head for a moment, and then started up the car again.

"You don't understand, son," he said. "You don't understand any of it."

What do you think?

- Sometimes, protesters are seen as violent hooligans; other times, they're hailed as heroes. Where do you think the line is drawn between legitimate protest and rioting?

- Yossi represents an argument that once all the peaceful, organized methods have been utilized to no effect, someone fighting for justice has no choice but to take more extreme measures. Do you think there is truth to this argument? If not, what do you think would be a better response?

False Hope

The following passage takes place on Tisha B'Av, the day of mourning for the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, and the day before the evacuation of Gush Katif is scheduled to begin. Yossi, the 17-year-old son of the rabbi of Neve Adva, checks to see whether midday has arrived — a turning point on the fast day, when Jews are no longer required to sit on the floor or low stools like mourners: p. 84-86

Yossi pushed himself to his feet and walked to the refrigerator to check the rabbinical times posted on the calendar. Then he returned to the living room and offered his father a hand. Rabbi Shlomo took it and let his son help him to his feet, and they both moved to settle on the couch. Yossi was smiling. Rabbi Shlomo scrutinized him through narrow eyes.

"Why are you so happy all of the sudden?"

"Because this is the moment where things start to turn around," Yossi said, a strange glint in his eyes. "Tisha B'Av morning is the lowest of the low. When midday comes around, we start to rise up. It's only uphill from here."

Yossi suddenly laughed, a laugh like the glimmering of sunlight off the sea in their window.

"'This is where the redemption starts," he went on, breathless and wild-eyed. "We will begin to see miracles now. God will hear our prayers. There's no way He couldn't now, not after all these tears we've shed. The soldiers will come and they will be blinded by the sheer power of our pain and they won't be able to do a thing. Life will continue here as normal. I just *know* it."

Rabbi Shlomo studied his son, an odd discomfort rising within him. On the one hand, his son's words were a reflection of everything he and the rest of the anti-disengagement movement had been prophesying and preaching, and everything he wanted to believe. The Talmud teaches that even if a sharp sword rests upon one's neck, one should never desist from asking God for mercy. The youth groups had drawn up schedules of summer activities in the Gush that extended well beyond the 15th of August, and very few people had taken up the government on its offer for compensation and relocation. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement among the settler leadership that planning for the disengagement to actually happen meant admitting defeat.

On the other hand . . . was it really the best course of action to deny what Rabbi Shlomo had to admit was the most likely outcome? Shouldn't they at least be emotionally prepared for the possibility that the following day, the sun would set on an empty Neve Dekalim, and that three days later, the soldiers would appear on their own doorsteps?

Rabbi Shlomo looked into his son's eyes, dazzled at the light he saw in them. Yossi had been so quiet and moody since the protest incident; it had been a long time since Rabbi Shlomo had seen him so animated, and his heart ached. The hope emanating from his son's face seemed to lift him out of the black hole of despair he had sunk into the previous night at the first note of Lamentations. He imagined extinguishing that hope, and realized that he would rather lose his other leg.

"May it be His will," he said.

What do you think?

- Do you think Rabbi Shlomo made the right choice in this scenario? Why or why not?

- What about the settler leadership — do you think they should have prepared better for the eventuality of evacuation, or was giving the people hope more important?

Adults Are Weird

The following conversation takes place between the children of a family that left Neve Adva voluntarily. Years of growing tension between their mother Olga and her twin sister Svetka came to a head when Svetka discovered their plans to leave, and she has refused to speak to Olga ever since. Olga takes her children on an outing on the day of the evacuation to stay away from the news, and has just given them some money to go buy some ice cream: p. 155-156

"Where do you think Aunt Svetka and Uncle Mickey will move?" Benny asked Kinneret as soon as their mother was out of earshot.

Kinneret shrugged. "Ashdod, maybe? I don't know."

"Can I have a large ice cream cone?" Levana piped up, skipping next to them with her long brown ponytail bouncing.

"You'll never finish it," Kinneret said.

"I will, I will! I'm eight now! I can eat a big one!"

"I'll finish it if she doesn't," Benny offered, ever the gentleman.

"Fine." Kinneret surveyed the poster displaying the ice cream options.

"Do you think they'll make up now that they've moved?" Benny pressed.

"Who?" Kinneret asked absently.

"Mama and Aunt Svetka."

"Aunt Svetka has to be willing to talk to Mama again first. Adults are weird about stuff like this. When they fight about something it's never really about the thing."

Benny had no idea what that meant.

"So it wasn't just about moving?"

"No, you idiot. It was because Mama decided to leave Neve Adva after the government decided to evacuate it. Aunt Svetka thought she was being a traitor and a coward and that the disengagement wouldn't happen if it weren't for people like us who cooperated with the government. So even now that it's all over, she probably still thinks of Mama as a traitor."

Benny stared at the ice cream poster without really seeing anything on it. For the first time in his life, he didn't really feel hungry for ice cream.

"So…" he pressed. "Do you think Aunt Svetka will ever forgive her?"

"I don't know!" Kinneret snapped. "Stop nagging me already, you pest! Let me choose an ice cream in peace!"

Benny fell silent. The newscaster on the radio babbled on about settlers and soldiers and Kisufim Checkpoint.

What do you think?

- What do you think Kinneret means when she says "Adults are weird about stuff like this. When they fight about something it's never really about the thing"? Do you agree with her?

- There are multiple layers of sibling tension in this passage: two adult siblings who aren't speaking to each other, and three child siblings bickering. Which do you think is a healthier dynamic — silence or bickering? If you have siblings, which is more familiar to you?

Q & A with Daniella Levy

How did you come up with the idea for Disengagement?

It started with a short story I wrote about a year after the Israeli disengagement from Gaza, about a female soldier who evacuates a widow from her home in Gush Katif. A few years ago, when I found myself focusing on short fiction, I came back to that story and decided to rewrite it — but this time, to research properly and make it as true to life as possible.

So I sat down and watched footage from the evacuation for 3 hours. And I came out of it with so many different feelings about what I'd seen. Some of those feelings were in complete conflict with each other. And I felt I couldn't rewrite that story, because I simply couldn't choose only one perspective to portray when I had so many conflicting feelings about the event.

I think it may have been my husband who pointed out that I didn't actually have to choose: I could write a different story for each. So I did, and the story became a collection of stories, and that collection eventually grew into a novel.

How were you personally affected by the disengagement from Gaza?

I was 18, a recent high school graduate, when the disengagement took place. But I never actually visited Gush Katif, much less lived there. I attended a Bnei Akiva high school that was strongly Zionist-religious and most of the staff members (and many of my friends and classmates) felt connected to the settler movement and community. At home, though, it was more complicated: my dad supported the disengagement and my mom opposed it. On principle, I identified more with my mom's point of view, but I was always ambivalent.

When the day came, I barricaded myself in my bedroom on the top floor of our house in Rehovot and refused to watch any of the footage. It was just too painful for me. My dad watched avidly, and he was deeply rattled by it. I remember him telling me about a dream he'd had, something about meeting a friend from Pittsburgh (the city we'd left when we immigrated to Israel nine years before) and a sense that he could never go back. That dream — which he doesn't remember having — was the inspiration for the story that grew into Reuben's perspective.

Why do you think the disengagement from Gaza is still relevant to us in 2020?

Well, one obvious reason is that we are still dealing with the geopolitical implications of the withdrawal today. But more importantly, the disengagement was a microcosm of the polarization we are seeing all over the world in political discourse.

Each side was not only 100% convinced that they were right, they were dismissive of the other side

to a point where the other side wasn't even real to them. Settlers believed that most of the people of Israel were on their side. I read materials from the Museum of Gush Katif claiming that the soldiers wouldn't have been able to carry out their orders if they hadn't been so thoroughly "brainwashed." (Someone else might have called it "adequately prepared.") The left-wing, on the other hand, saw — and still sees — settlers as some kind of Baruch Goldstein caricature, crazy, Arab-hating, religious fanatics putting their children in danger for the sake of a messianic dream. The other side weren't real people, with intelligence, concerns, and hopes just like them. And thus, they didn't talk to them as though they were real people. When the settlers tried to reach out, they spoke using their own points of reference, their own internal language, as if repeating those slogans should be enough to bring those other people back from the dark side. The left-wing, on their part, saw the settlers as a lost cause. As one character says in the book, "There's no talking to these people."

This is exactly what I see going on in the US now. Republicans are all gun-toting racist rednecks, and liberals are all entitled neo-communists with a victim complex. Neither are real humans to each other. It's very disturbing.

In my opinion, the real tragedy of the disengagement was less the loss of the land or people's homes, and more the loss of empathy—the ability to listen to and care about other people's stories.!

On a more personal level, why do you think you felt compelled to write about this topic, especially considering how fiercely you avoided involvement in it while the event was happening?

I think I only learned the answer to that once the book had taken shape and I began to see the common themes emerging.

At its heart, this is a book about home: about what it means to have a home, and what it means to leave a home.

The defining event of my childhood was leaving the only home I remembered living in, in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, and moving to Israel with my family. I was a few months shy of 10 years old at the time.

And the thing about aliyah (immigration to Israel) is that it is both leaving home and coming home in a way. The USA is home in ways that Israel can never be: it's where my family culture is from, where my mother tongue is spoken, where my earliest memories were shaped, where many of my family members still live. On the other hand, Israel has always been home in ways that the USA can never be: it's the homeland of the Jewish people, the only place in the world where Judaism is the majority culture, the only place where I don't have to feel strange and different for the way I dress or practice my religion. Those two realities coexist in a constant contradiction, and I've spent my life navigating the tension that stretches between them.

So I think I felt compelled to write about the disengagement because it is also about home: what it means to leave home, what it means to find home. And the book addresses that question on many different levels.!

I think I was in a unique position to write this book, partly because of my personal background and partly because of who I am as a person.

The book is written from 16 perspectives — half male, half female, some religious, some secular, some sabras, some olim, and even one Palestinian. How were you able to write convincingly from such a wide range of perspectives?

My mother tells me that even as a young child, I was always most interested in the kids who were different. I was often the first to befriend the "new kid," the outsider, the immigrant. And then I became an immigrant myself. From then on, I was an outsider. Israelis call me American; Americans call me Israeli. Even in the Anglo community in Israel I feel different, because many of my friends and the people I meet made aliyah as adults, whereas I partially grew up here. As mentioned above, I feel as though I've always been suspended between worlds.

Feeling as though you never exactly fit in has its advantages. I often see both sides of the argument so well, I don't quite know what side I'm on. This makes me a terrible decision-maker, but an effective writer when it comes to portraying a variety of very different viewpoints.

Did you know when you started writing who your characters would be or did they take shape in the writing?

For the most part, I had no idea who they would be, beyond the most basic details. I made an outline with just a few words sketching what the story would be about. When I started writing Ehud, for example, I had no idea he would be so funny. I knew it was going to be a very serious book, and he surprised me. When I started writing Maayan, I didn't know she was a poet, and I had no idea who the young man she encounters was, either, until he told her! As usual, some characters strolled into my head fully formed, while others took a while to take shape..

Which perspective did you find most difficult to write?

Ironically, the perspective I struggled with the most was the one that was closest to autobiographical: that of Reuben, the oleh from Boston. I had to completely rewrite the first chapter because I felt that the writing was too distant, too detached. Why is it so hard for me to connect to my own story in fiction? I guess that's a question for my therapist…

Which perspective did you most enjoy writing?

Oh, so hard to choose. I tend to have the most fun writing the lighter, more humorous parts, so Ehud and Hedva were up there in my favorites, and Maayan's perspective had a lot of that snappy, banter-y dialogue that readers of my previous novel will find familiar. But Talia's perspective required a deep dive into my own darkest fears and doubts and anger with God, and there was something profoundly therapeutic about that. Amal's story also has a special place in my heart.

Were there particular characters that you felt closer to, or who represented your own conflicts surrounding the disengagement from Gaza?

Honestly, they all represent my own conflicts, not only surrounding the disengagement from Gaza, but surrounding a lot of other issues, too. I identify with all of their struggles, even though their experiences and world-views may be very different from mine.s

You write movingly of the crisis of faith suffered by one of your characters. What answers might you give someone dealing with similar issues?

That chapter may be the strongest in the book, because of how "true" it is—straight from my own struggling, hurting heart. I have no answers. I just hope that chapter helps people who are dealing with similar issues understand that they are not alone, that it's okay to struggle and okay to be open about that struggle, even—maybe especially—as a person of faith..

Do you feel that the viewpoints in the book accurately represent the various factions of Israeli society that were affected by the disengagement?

Unequivocally, no. I wanted to cast as wide a net as I could, but ultimately there was a story to tell and I had to choose perspectives that served the story and that I was able to write. I feel I'm already challenging the reader quite a bit in asking them to identify and empathize with so many different characters. I regret that I was not able to represent more perspectives..

Do you think you'll come back to any of the stories in Disengagement in your future writing?

Well, I've never written sequels, and tend to prefer to leave stories at their natural conclusions. But I wouldn't rule it out. There's a first time for everything.