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Reviewed by Elaine Margolin, Hewlett, NY

It seems as if the exceptionally talented Rebecca Sacks isn't always certain what sort of Jew she wants to be. Like so many other Jews, she is torn between the call of Jewish particularism and a desire to embrace universalist notions guaranteeing freedom and liberty for all. Either choice seems to eclipse the other. Sacks is a humanist at heart, and we hear her anguish throughout her moving novel, "The Lover," which pulls her protagonist in opposite directions. Sacks grew up in a nominally Jewish home in Canada and felt alienated from much that surrounded her. She left as a young woman for Israel where she pursued a master's degree in Jewish studies. Sacks was smitten by the sense of intense belonging Israel offered, and she proudly proclaims, "I became a Jew in Israel." But she felt strong undercurrents of turmoil she felt impelled to explore. Her main character in this exquisitely wrought novel, Allison, seems like her alter-ego, and speaks to us in a first-person narrative voice that seems to come directly from the author's heart.

Allison is a 27-year-old woman who has come to Israel to study the ancient Jewish texts. She accidentally falls in love with a 19-year-old active-duty soldier named Eyal who is currently being sent on repeated missions to Gaza where he partakes in dangerous missions to neutralize forces threatening to the Israelis. They meet at a bus stop and Eyal is entranced by a green ribbon beautifully wound up in Allison's hair. He asks if she is Jewish, and she explains she is a half-Jew. Her mother is a Gentile, and her father is a descendant of Lithuanian Jews who migrated to Canada generations ago. Allison expects her confession to deter him from pursuing her, but he asks gently if she feels Jewish and she nods vigorously. He softly mutters something about how amazing her eyes look. They exchange phone numbers, and their relationship begins, somehow made more precious by her clunky Hebrew and his fumbling English.

Allison is speaking to us from the future. She is already married to another Jewish man, and they are expecting their first child. Her new husband is an Israeli intelligence officer who makes her feel safe and protected. What prompts her free fall into memories of Eyal is a box she accidentally discovers of his letters which she is afraid to open and read. Sack's narrator, Allison, tries to describe the magnificence of their coupling: "Eyal-the soldier I loved so many years ago.

His name came to me across the years. Eyal. Like it was yesterday that I touched him, that I sat in his parents' car as we drove him to war, that I wrote him letters, that we dreamt of each other sleeping. Like it was still happening and not nearly a decade ago." She describes Eyal as her "*ha-ex ha mitologi*: the mythological ex. The one who changes you forever." Sacks is masterful at describing the drowning feeling that accompanies such a love affair; the exhilarating sense that one might disappear.

Allison tries to stop thinking about Eyal. She tries to focus her thoughts on her new husband Timor and his bold assertions about the price Israelis must pay to exist; the endless antisemitism they must endure. Allison doesn't have his assuredness about anything; she is more porous; somewhat vulnerable. She realizes with Timor, there is "an element of calculation. We assessed our needs and priorities: we found they aligned. With Eyal, it was hopelessly improbable. Nothing about us made sense. We fell in love against the odds, and never before or since have I been in love so completely. We only get to do it once, before we direct such hopeless devotion to our children."

But before she was with Timor, she found herself consumed by a restlessness when Eyal was away in Gaza. She decides to make an Arab friend, finding it strange that although she lives amidst so many Arabs, she is close with none of them. For reasons she doesn't fully explain or seem to understand, she disguises herself with her new Arab friend Aisha. The two women share a passion for shopping, particularly in boutiques that sell fancy skin care products. She tells Aisha she is from Canada and studying poetry in graduate school. She leaves out that she has a lover, and he is away in Gaza doing all kinds of inexplicable things. She blocks off Aisha from her Facebook posts that reveal her Zionist enthusiasms. Aisha trusts her and bears her soul to her; even taking her home to her family where they sit and discuss the disgraceful things Israelis are doing to their people, believing she is a sympathetic listener. Allison is intrigued by the counternarrative Aisha provides, believing her stories about the intensity of her suffering. She sees that nothing in Israel is black and white; there are all sorts of power imbalances that remain unaddressed and untended to. She finds the stories of her Mizrahi roommate compelling. She too feels uncomfortable in Tel Aviv amidst the Ashkenazi Jews whom she believes look down on her. She misses the Arab music she grew up with that still moves here in a way Israeli music doesn't.

When Eyal comes home from Gaza he is an emotional wreck. He cries intermittently throughout the night, and when she asks Eyal's mother to get him some psychiatric help, she is told that is not how it is done here. She tells her Eyal will be fine. It will just take time. But it grows worse. When Allison reveals her friendship with Aisha, and how she deceived her, Eyal explodes with rage, thinking her deception heinous and crying out how she should have left the poor girl alone. He is struggling with post-traumatic stress, and believes he may have killed someone accidentally, but he isn't sure. Many of them were firing at this target, and he isn't sure which bullet pierced the man's heart. Eyal ends the relationship with Allison that night claiming he no longer loves her.

Distraught, Allison throws herself into her studies, spending hours filling her notebooks with "etymologies, references to articles about the degeneration of one letter or another in the various iteration of Hebrew over the centuries." She begins planning her dissertation about "the nexuses of longing in the Talmud—a slippery collection of documents that reflects the Jewish struggle to salvage a religion, or really, reinvent it, after the loss of the Great Temple in Jerusalem."

Rebecca Sacks is showing us through Allison's travails the difficulties Israel poses for a woman like herself; a Jew who relishes her Jewish identity yet is bothered by the inequities of Israeli life, and the aggression of the Israeli armed forces. She wants Israel to be a place it can't really become; a land where liberty, equality, and freedom for all is the norm, rather than the exception. But Sacks seems to recognize, as does her alter-ego Allison, that the personal cost of living in such a place necessitates embracing a willed blindness that shields her from the harsh reality that for her to live her chosen best life, others will be denied theirs. Because by now, Allison, despite the chaos, eternal conflict, and fighting, can't picture a life for herself anywhere else other than Israel. She feels it belongs to her. This is the only place where she feels special; where her Jewishness makes sense to her; where she feels a liberation she never felt back home. She is turned off by her earlier responses to all forms of zealotry. She recalls being bothered by Eyal's mother's Zionist discourse which she spouted robotically seemingly unaware of the contradictions and false assertions embedded within it. She isn't offended by it any longer. She's tired of apologizing to overeager critics everywhere who want to destroy the Jewish state and smells the smoldering antisemitism that lingers in-between their condemnations. She has concluded that we Jews can never lose sight of the fact that there is "an undeniably straight line from the gas chambers to the

creation of the Jewish state.” She’s had enough already. She no longer feels compelled to embrace the never-ending debates.

But something about Rebecca Sack’s certainty feels ambiguous. We aren’t sure if Allison’s embrace of it is permanent or temporary. We find it hard to believe the part of her that sought out Aisha and listened to Aisha’s stories has disappeared forever or simply been pushed underground for now. Rebecca Sack’s exquisite novel makes us consider closely the costs and benefits of all sorts of ideological thinking; and some of the dark places it has taken us.