

**“Reluctant Warriors: Israelis Suspended Between Rome and Jerusalem,” Nathan Szajnberg, Xlibris Corporation, 1966.  
Reviewed by Alan Miller**

**The central problem of this book lies in its title - an unequivocal oxymoron. Either you are a warrior, or you are someone who is reluctant - but you can't be both. The most obvious example comes from Jewish tradition which invariably depicts the Wicked Son as a soldier, complete with spear and helmet. Nothing equivocal about that.**

**Dr. Szajnberg challenges us to reject this stereotype. There is, indeed, an army in which warriors are reluctant - the Israeli army. Since much has changed in this army over the years we are reassured by the author that he is focusing on a very specific group of soldiers born and bred from the kibbutz movement. After acknowledging that “the kibbutz’s near collapse as a social movement” was taking place” and realizing “that this historical phenomenon, this culture, was about to disappear, I knew that the only way I could capture the experience of the last group born and raised in the soil of communal settlements - who were also army matured - would be to hurry to harvest their knowledge. Like grapes for fine wine, these boys absorb the flavor, the fragrance, the taste of the soil around them.” (p.14). (As we shall see, le style c’est l’homme!) “They are mostly kibbutz boys, who tend to become elite combat unit soldiers. They face the enemy up-close. Only 3% of the population, kibbutzniks become 90% of pilots, 70% of paratroopers, and are over-represented as officers (and among those killed in action.” p.16) Formidable figures indeed!**

**Working with the American subjects of his earlier book the author had the luxury of choosing convenient meeting times for interviews.**

**“In the States I could interview individuals in one meeting over several hours, allowing me to complete portraits of their inner lives relatively quickly. During the Israel Intifada, when streets**

were vacated, and restaurants shuttered, the soldiers I met would not talk about soldiering or permit me to videotape them until they knew me, after I visit their homes, schools, cafes. We meet many times over four years. They want me to know their truths; stories bleed from their souls, like from stigmata, never-healing wounds. After informal meetings, then formal interviews, months, years, later they called me. "I felt like such an outsider on (the) kibbutz that I left. Now I yearn for it. Could we talk more?" "I remembered another death I hadn't told you about. We need to have coffee." "I want you to meet my fiancée, explain me to her." And so on." (pp. 16-17)

Szajenberg endures terrifying experiences in pursuit of his goal. Even hiring a taxi to drive to a meeting after dark can be perilous. His dedication, devotion and commitment to his subject and the humans involved which yielded this book are extraordinary, nay, exemplary.

A pupil and great admirer of Bruno Bettelheim ("Children of the Dream" – Erich Fromm's "Escape from Freedom" and also Erikson's "Childhood and Society" are invoked) Szajenberg is, therefore, not writing a book about the Israeli army as a whole but only about a very specific group from a very specific period and background. Unfortunately this fact is not always kept strictly in focus and in the final part of the book the author seems to throw all caution to the winds in speaking emotionally of the Israeli army as a whole – and that I find, especially in view of what has happened over recent decades and especially in recent years (not to mention currently), exceedingly problematic. Moreover the whole book seems to be encapsulated with nary a reference to emerging revisionist ideas about Zionist ideology in general and the Birth of the State in particular. The soldiers are surrounded by enemies determined to destroy them but no thought is directed as to why this is happening.

Bettelheim's work {"More often cited than read, it is frequently misunderstood" (p.14)} yielded evidence of the way in which the kibbutz bred a unique type of soldier – one who because of

a communal upbringing put the welfare of the group before that of the individual. Szjanberg does not appear to be aware that this is totally contrary to Jewish traditional thought, that the problem of self and other in extremis is discussed in detail in Rabbinic literature (and also by Ahad Haam in one of his most important essays.) If two people are walking in the desert with only one bottle of water sufficient only for one to reach civilization the one who has the bottle in his possession should drink it himself (The Talmud). I am not disagreeing or agreeing with tradition here only suggesting that a brief reference to past discussions on this topic would seem relevant if one is considering current Jewish problems. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13) is fundamentally Christian.

There is also a sense of Immaculate Conception, to continue the metaphor, in the book. The Enemy is already out there before the book starts. How did this happen? Where did He come from? Sometimes the Enemy is described in terms of vermin ( “the Palestinians scatter like mice...” (p.45) or like “jackals” (p.52) – redolent of recent comments by the fundamentalist orthodox Rabbi Obadiah - and we Jews should above all know that thinking about the Other as vermin is the beginning of dehumanization. But how did this situation arise in the first place?

Today one answer comes through loud and clear. It is certainly not the whole story – nor is it in any way a justification for terrorist acts - but acknowledging it in some fashion might help bring about some sense of reparation. We now know, thanks in large part to the work of revisionist historians (but many of us suspected this – knew this from the get-go for sure) that ethnic cleansing was involved, instructions from the highest levels of government to drive the Palestinians out. Dir Yassein, hotly denied, was but the tip of the iceberg. What an irony that the quotes are from the most beautiful person in the whole book, Eliaz the poet, the Knight of Justice.

**Szajnberg comes to this appraisal after honing his very considerable interviewing skills manifested in a previous book dealing with a far larger group (76) of American students. Here he presents us with nine individuals of whom only the first (Eliaz, the Knight of Justice) and the ninth (Nehamia) are identified (with their permission).**

**So what happens to the other seven? The author uses his experience as a psychoanalyst to disguise the individuals concerned. He explains in detail how psychoanalysts disguise their patients hopefully beyond recognition in their published papers and books. But this is not your ordinary run- of- the -mill disguising. This is literature of a high order. Any single one of these “case histories” would fit beautifully into The New Yorker. So the author makes these “fictitious” case history characters come to life and does so (perhaps a little too) successfully (shades of Pygmalion and Galatea?). I read somewhere that the author has written a novel or is in the process of writing a novel. Bring it on, please! Words which come from the heart penetrate the heart. I have no difficulty in admitting that when Eliaz the poet (p.47) renders the Shema upside down as it were –“Hear, O Lord” ( translated by Naftali Moshe Szajnberg ) with God being addressed, being put on the spot, as it were, by the religious dialogue, I wept. As I did with at least one other narrative. A little occasional touch of purple in the prose but nothing that diminishes the humanity of it all. (By the way could we please stop this G-d spelling phenomenon which has absolutely no foundation in halachah and exudes a literal fundamentalism rather than any religious aura of holiness). So well written, however, almost too well, that one becomes ineluctably aware of the distortions that must have been made in concealing the original “reality”. So on some level the exquisite style interferes with the author’s set goal.**

**There is a most unfortunate description of how the typical American “jarhead” prepares for combat by cursing, swearing and worse whereas the Israeli (ex-kibbutz?) soldier discusses the finer points of Maimonides’ philosophy with his lieutenant in similar circumstances (p.21) We should compare like with like**

**not with an opposite extreme. Many distinguished soldiers from distinguished military families have come out of West Point and Sandhurst. The Royal Air Force pilots who won the Battle of Britain were not raised on a kibbutz. The unprecedented heroism and self-sacrifice of young men from Oxford and Cambridge and members of local airplane clubs saved British Jews from Auschwitz. Without that victory the State of Israel might well not have come into being. I don't see the British Public School (in the British connotation of Public) as being remotely like a kibbutz and flying Hurricanes and Spitfires was solitary business.**

**In writing or speaking of Jewish history we must distinguish between real History and theological History - Heilsgeschichte or Salvation History. You can't write about "when we were slaves in the Land of Egypt for four hundred years" and not indicate that this is not borne out by the actual historical record. Even Ben Gurion understood this. And we really shouldn't use "Jewish" as an adjective before the sixth pre-Christian century. Deborah didn't have a Jewish army. Also in this day and age BC and AD should surely become BCE and CE – especially for Jews! At the end of the book, after acknowledging that, "perhaps they do not represent all soldiers, nor Israelis" the author concludes:**

**"May their stories remain with you. May their lives give a window into their souls, the soul of this unique army, this unique country, this Israel." Which led me immediately to "This royal throne of kings, this sceptered isle, this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England."**

**I often reflect on the fact that we Jews lost two Temples, not just one. Of course a collectivity cannot possibly be subject to the repetition compulsion which so many of us wrestle with in the course of our own individual lives.**

**The road to peace will only come when we totally reject theological readings of the story of Zionism and stop using an ancient most sacred document called the Torah as a**

justification for a land claim in the twenty first century. The damage that has been done by fundamentalist Orthodox Jews creating “facts on the ground”, encouraged, aided and abetted by Jews world over is a story yet to be told. Foundational myths such as the Revelation on Sinai, the origins of Christianity and Islam are just that - myths. Myths are lies which tell the truth - a poetic truth, a religious truth. They must be distinguished from reality.

We live in a post-halakhic age, a post-modern world. On some level we also live in a post-Zionist age. The messianic fever which swept the Jewish people through Sabbetai Zvi and the pseudo-messianic movement he generated led to unanticipated consequences and indubitably had something to do with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in the fifteenth century. The Holocaust cannot be a blue print for a Jewish State. How many of those who died would have countenanced the devaluation of another people?

There are errors in the book which should be mentioned. I am confused by the poet Eliaz having attributed to him what appears to me to be a lack of distinguishing between the verb to choose and the verb behind the term for first born son. Two different verbs are involved (see Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament by Brown Driver and Briggs, Oxford ad. loc).

Eliaz is a poet who is editor of a journal called Mashiv Haruach (p.25). The phrase is intertextual by which I mean that anyone acquainted with the traditional Jewish liturgy recognizes it immediately as a prayer connected with rain and means: “He causes the wind to blow (and brings down the rain)” - so to translate it as (“He) Returns The Wind” - is puzzling.

“The family is known as mishpachah shekulah; for this there is not a good translation – perhaps an “orphaned family.” (p.26) But this has to be an incorrect transliteration of the original Hebrew which involves a verb which means ‘bereaved’- used most powerfully (and oddly topically) in Jacob’s lament

**(Genesis 43: 14 “...and if I am bereaved I am bereaved.” (Please note that I am speaking from within the university of discourse of the myth and am not referring to a specific occasion when these words were actually uttered and we might have heard them).**

**“You know, Pirke Avot, states: who has built a new house, planted a field, or just married, should not go to war, for he may be killed and another man could occupy his house, lie with his wife, reap what he has sowed... But in its wisdom the Pirke Avot continues: if the people of Israel are in danger, even a groom on his first wedding night must go to protect Israel.” (p.41) Here again we have a problem with the text. No such discussion is to be found anywhere in Pirke Avot.**

**The original is from Deuteronomy 20 somewhat generously translated. But this is also a case of ignoring origins. It so happens that Pirke Avot are included in the liturgy and are read in synagogues from the Sabbath after Passover to the Sabbath before New Year, chapter by chapter.**

**“Limbo is a place where souls suffer for a time, because they still need to be cleansed from venial sins or have still to pay the temporal punishment due to mortal sins, the guilt and the eternal punishment of which have been remitted.” (p.95)**

**Isn't that Purgatory? For Limbo see Dante. And shevelah is surely shefelah.**

