



The Outside World

Tova Mirvis

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Tzippy Goldman was born for marriage. She and her mother had always assumed she'd graduate high school, be set up with the right boy, and have a beautiful wedding with white lace and pareve vanilla cream frosting. But at twenty-two, Tzippy's fast approaching spinsterhood. She dreams of escape; instead, she leaves for a year in Jerusalem.

There she meets—re-meets—Baruch, the son of her mother's college roommate. When Tzippy last saw him, his name was Bryan and he wore a Yankees-logo yarmulke. Now he has adopted the black hat of the ultra-orthodox, the tradition in which Tzippy was raised. Twelve weeks later, they're engaged...and discovering that desire and tradition, devotion and individuality aren't the easiest balance.

Hilarious, compassionate, and tremendously insightful, *The Outside World* illuminates an insular community, marvelously depicting that complicated blend of faith, love, and family otherwise known as life in a modern world.

The Outside World Details

Date : Published May 10th 2005 by Vintage (first published January 1st 2004)

ISBN : 9781400075287

Author : Tova Mirvis

Format : Paperback 304 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literature, Jewish, Religion, Judaism, Adult Fiction, Novels, Contemporary, Judaica, Adult, Roman

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L** says

SPOILER ALERT! SPOILER ALERT!

I wanted to like this book. I rather enjoyed her short story (which was an early version of the book) "A Poland, A Lithuania, A Galicia." But the book seemed bloated and meandering at times. And after Mirvis relocates the married couple of Tzippy and Baruch to a Midwestern backwater, the story loses the shared focus on multiple characters that made it so interesting.

The story initially shifts focus from Tzippy and her mother to Baruch and his family. At various points, the story centers on Tzippy, Baruch, their respective mothers, and Baruch's sister, and Mirvis uses each character to explore religion, piety, observance, family relations, and coming of age in various ways. The familial interaction between Baruch and his parents and sister, for example, were powerful, especially as he flouts Jewish law regarding peace in the home and respect of parents in his quest to be more pious than they are. Likewise, he basically treats his sister almost as a non-person because, in his quest to be more observant, he fears interacting with a female. And outside of quoting Talmud or the lectures of his rebbe, he seems to have no interest in trying to explain or engage his family in his newfound amped up sense of religiosity except to use it as a battering ram against them and make himself feel more like Super Jew. By the time he married Tzippy, I found myself hoping to get his self-righteous self out of a central role in the story and focus on the less obnoxious characters and their experiences. His sister, Alana, for example, was emerging as an interesting, intelligent young woman who wanted to rebel against the constraints of the religious school she attended, yet still carve out a Jewish identity for herself. But her story is mostly relegated once the young couple moves.

I did, though, like Tzippy. And after they moved to the Midwest to manage a restaurant/ deli counter, I really enjoyed her growth-- the independence she found, the intelligence and strength she cultivated, and the intellectual curiosity that she started to feel. And then the colossal cop out--- an EPT and apparent decision to move back NYC. The adventurous path that could have happened if an observant young woman fitting her faith into a life that was self-empowered and functioned secularly was seemingly re-aligned for her to return to her traditional, observant, and strongly gendered world. The fact that this retreat was accompanied by some growth and maturity from Baruch was cold comfort. rather than showing how a woman in a religious world could combine a marriage and her own growth instead seems to end with her pregnant, back in the home, and back in the fold-- all so her husband can forge the path he wants.

Rachel says

There's a lot that's similar between this novel and the work that Mirvis would publish ten years later, "The Visible City." Both include characters who are asking questions about the meanings of their lives, and coming toe to toe with the realization that the path isn't always so certain, and their parents, children, spouses, etc have their own secret identities. I'm not quite sure why this one works a little better for me than the other--I likely can't completely discount my bias towards the struggle with Jewish spirituality, community, etc. But I also feel like maybe these characters are just slightly more layered, and their stories don't really wrap up nicely and conveniently, though the main character, Tzippy, seems to make some peace with the complexity of marriage.

Like Mirvis's other novels, this one is narrated from multiple points of view, though I tended to think of Tzippy (and to an extent her husband, Baruch,) as the main characters--Tzippy's profile is on the cover of the book, and her quest for a husband features prominently in the summary. So too does Baruch's transformation from Bryan, a modern Orthodox boy living in a Jewish New Jersey suburb, to an ultra-Orthodox young man. But the story doesn't rest on whether or not Tzippy will find her "beshert"/soulmate, or if Baruch will live happily ever after in Yeshiva. These choices are just their starting out points for how they will live their lives, grow as people and interact with their families as adults.

The four parents, Shayna, Herschel, Naomi and Joel, and Baruch's teenage sister, Illana, also get mini arcs in the wake of the courtship and marriage. I had a particular soft spot for Naomi; like Batsheva in Mirvis's "The Ladies Auxiliary," she's in line with the type of Jewish woman I want to be--spiritual, a deep thinker, empathetic towards family and embracing of pertinent traditions. This naturally put Naomi in contrast with her son, Baruch, for as she sought to find a compromise between the realities of her life, his ultra-Orthodoxy was more rigid. That's not to say that Mirvis didn't handle these characters with grace; at no time was their relationship the basis for a one dimensional battle between two world views.

Tzippy was an interesting mix of traditional and modern as well, surely defying some shallow stereotypes of ultra-Orthodox women, though I couldn't help but think that whenever she, or anyone else, thought about the contrast between her "sweet" self and her "angry" self, it had more to do with her quest for self-determination rather than any wild mood swings. Illana and Shayna also had intriguing storyline quirks.

When it came to the menfolk, Joel was kind of like a more annoying version of "Visible City"'s Jeremy--perhaps Mirvis's inspiration for Jeremy's father. Baruch was a little more baffling to me, with how easily he shed off and didn't even think much about his formerly more secular identity as Bryan, but I suppose the rigors of yeshiva education might do that. In fact, as his life path continues to change, Mirvis uses subtle language ploys to show how he views his education based on where/when he is.

Heschel is probably the most flabbergasting character, and I'm not sure Mirvis built him up enough for me to buy just how manic he turned out to be. Overall, she uses a detached, narrative language with few frills. It's not the most impressive style--I've stated before that it's sometimes on the nose--but she makes up for it with the story she's telling. I'll admit, I got a little teary at the wonderful, non-sentimental telephone reunion between two particularly estranged characters. It was good stuff.

Cindie Harp says

I loved her first book and could not imagine liking another book as much. I was wrong. This was less a condemnation of a cultural group, and more of a loving empathetic window into 3 characters. I enjoyed the Orthodox setting but I think the story was universal and applicable to any one -- especially any woman.

Stacy says

This is a book that is marketed to be about dating and relationships within Jewish Orthodoxy, but really it is a book about faith - what drives people's faith and belief in God, and why is there such a vast difference between people? It is a topic worthy of much discussion and deep introspection, so it was interesting to see it tackled within the context of Jewish Orthodoxy, a world most of us know little about.

I live in Brooklyn, probably just a few blocks from where this book takes place, so it was very easy for me to imagine their world based on the author's descriptions and what I've seen myself. I also happen to be friends with an Orthodox Jewish woman, so I was familiar with many words and concepts that may have otherwise been more difficult to understand while trying to enjoy a novel. It was interesting to read these character's voice from the inside.

One thing my Orthodox friend did warn me about was that this book may be a little unfairly biased against Orthodox Judaism. After reading the book, I can understand why she feels that way. There is an awful lot about the difficulty of keeping up appearances, the endless rules, the lure of the outside world, but less about why this way of life is so fulfilling. It would have been nice to read more about that.

I also found the various points of view and shifting of the omniscient 3rd person point of view jarring. Sometimes it was hard to tell whose thoughts I was reading, and just when I got used to one point of view, it would change. The same thing happened with time passing. It was very confusing to realize I'd shifted forward months without a clear transition.

Overall, I felt it was an excellent concept and still gave me good food for thought along with an entertaining story, but I wish it had been better executed.

Robyn says

I borrowed this from my best friend having already read "The Ladies' Auxiliary", Mirvis' previous book. My best friend said the book was good, but she liked LA better; I actually disagree. While I did give both books 4 stars--I would say this is the better of the two.

Being a Reform Jew who is fascinated with the Orthodox world, it was interesting reading how they view 'our' world--but also about the laws and rules that govern their faith and practice. Mirvis does a great job of talking about the 2 different--quite observant--families and how even in Orthodoxy, there are differences.

The only reason why I can't give this book 5 stars is that about 2/3 of the way through the book I wanted to punch Herschel in the face and some of the writing got a little slow; although it picked back up again quickly. By the end, I still wanted to punch Herschel in the face, but I was happier with the way the other characters ended up as well.

My one caution for non-Jews reading this book (and LA for that matter): if you don't understand something; ask a friend who is Jewish. Although I'm Reform, I have some more observant family members and I felt like I understood a lot of what was going on merely because I was Jewish period; I don't know if non-Jews reading this book would 'get' a lot of the seemingly minuscule issues that Mirvis delves into.

Sarena Neyman says

A little stilted writing yet the story compelled even tho the story was a little pat. But great believable descriptions of love and other relationships.

Laura Boudreau says

LOVE Tova! Always become so immersed in her characters.

Vitani Days says

Un libro scritto in modo intelligente, un romanzo godibile e che si fa leggere in breve tempo. Stile quasi cinematografico, nel senso che sembra davvero di guardare un film mentre si legge, una di quelle commedie per famiglie dall'inevitabile lieto e lieto fine (anzi, strano che non ce ne abbiano ancora girata una, la vicenda si presta completamente e a tratti sembra scritta con quello scopo). E' una commedia, come ho detto, di quelle intelligenti.

L'ambiente è quello dell'ortodossia ebraica contemporanea, Stati Uniti d'America, la storia è quella di due famiglie. Da un lato abbiamo la famiglia di Tzippy, una madre rigidamente osservante, un padre troppo sognatore, cinque figlie femmine da crescere e accasare; dall'altro c'è la famiglia di Bryan/Baruch, che vive la fede con più morbidezza. In mezzo, c'è un matrimonio.

Il libro si apre focalizzandosi sul personaggio di Tzippy, ragazza che a ventidue anni è già considerata zitella. Sua madre, Shayna, non vive che per trovarle marito. Sogna il matrimonio perfetto con il ragazzo perfetto, tutto secondo i precetti della religione e secondo il credo della competizione coi vicini. Nella comunità ortodossa di New York le voci corrono, tutti si conoscono, gli abiti, i mobili, le frequentazioni parlano. E Shayna, che in gioventù non era religiosa, ha il terrore di commettere errori e di essere tagliata fuori da quel mondo in cui si è tanto faticosamente integrata. La maggiore delle sue figlie, Tzippy, deve essere lo strumento della sua affermazione sociale.

La ragazza però non ci sta. Scarta un pretendente dopo l'altro e arriva a decidere di trascorrere un anno a Gerusalemme, alla ricerca di quella libertà di essere che in casa le è negata.

Proprio a Gerusalemme rincontra Baruch, un suo vecchio compagno di liceo, e scatta il colpo di fulmine. Baruch, dal canto suo, è un ragazzo che si è riavvicinato alla fede solo di recente. Invece di studiare alla Columbia, ha deciso di proseguire fino in fondo lungo il cammino della religione. Vive per lo studio e per la preghiera, cercando di cambiare anche il modo di vivere delle persone attorno a lui.

La frequentazione dei due giovani, e il seguente matrimonio, costituirà il primo e fondamentale cambiamento nelle vite di entrambe le famiglie.

Shayna avrà il suo matrimonio perfetto, ma poi si sentirà come svuotata.

Herschel, padre di Tzippy, si butterà in un'impresa lavorativa dall'esito incerto.

Baruch scoprirà che le esigenze del "mondo fuori" mal si conciliano con quelle dei suoi studi.

E così tutti gli altri personaggi. Ognuno, nel suo piccolo, cercherà di affermare il vero se stesso all'interno o al di là dei precetti della fede.

L'intelligenza del libro sta proprio qui: nel modo in cui i personaggi sono in perenne movimento, pur restando all'interno di limiti abbastanza circoscritti. C'è chi si butta nel lavoro, chi ritrova la spiritualità pur se in modo "diverso", chi vuole esplorare il mondo "di fuori", il mondo della gente che non mangia kosher, il mondo della gente che fa cose "proibite". O chi, semplicemente, sfida le convenzioni andando al college. Il tutto narrato con uno stile efficacissimo, mai pesante o noioso (unico appunto su questo fronte: la forte presenza di termini in ebraico, non tutti presenti nel glossario a fine volume. Andarli a cercare ogni volta rallenta un po' la lettura).

Tova Mirvis ironizza un po' sui precetti più rigidi dell'ebraismo - a volte davvero ridicoli - e sui modi che la gente trova per aggirarli. Ironizza sulla società ebraica ortodossa di New York senza mai scadere nel caricaturale, porta alla luce il fascino dei rituali e della lettura dei testi sacri. E intanto i suoi personaggi - tutti molto ben caratterizzati e sviluppati - girano fra le pagine alla ricerca di un equilibrio autentico, e capiscono

che la vita non corrisponde a una serie di regole rigide. Comprendono infine che tutti, al di là della facciata, hanno le loro debolezze. Ma anche che le debolezze possono essere superate. Si parlano e, finalmente, riescono a capirsi un po' di più gli uni con gli altri e a crescere, genitori e figli.

Il mondo fuori è il cambiamento che si sceglie, quale che esso sia.

Solo una cosa non mi è piaciuta, una sensazione che si è accentuata verso il finale. Questa faccenda che "tornando a casa si sistema tutto". E' vero che allontanarsi un po' serve a volte ad appianare i conflitti, ma non è tornando sotto il tetto da cui si è partiti che tutto magicamente torna a posto. Si rischia di non crescere mai davvero, così. E spero davvero che gli spiragli volutamente lasciati aperti dall'autrice intendessero condurre a un'interpretazione diversa.

Tuttavia, poiché in questo caso era abbastanza coerente - se non scontato - un risvolto del genere, mi tengo questi dubbi per me.

Una lettura gradevole anche se non imprescindibile.

Emily says

This book has so much subtlety and complexity for such a short story. It wrestles with some big questions through a pretty narrow little story, just a couple of years in the life of two families. One thing that jumped out at me especially was how I could see every character's point of view - usually I'm rooting for someone to come out ahead and get their happy ending, but here I could see where just about everyone was coming from and how they all needed each other to get to that happy ending. I kinda chalk that up to it being in large part a story about "how do we live our lives in relation to God?" - there's no right or wrong answer to that, everyone has to get there on their own, and as a nonreligious reader I have no opinion of my own to interfere. (I do wish we'd gotten a little more of Ilana's story - she was just starting to wrap her own head around what she believed, and her little moments of rebellion stood out among the more mature and traditional characters!)

I also enjoyed this as a counterpart to the romance novels where two characters court/date/marry each other swiftly and it's a total fantasy of that working out just fine. The first third of this book is the whirlwind romance, and the rest is messy reality, but you still get the sense that love is going to get them through and things will work out in the end. It was a lovely balance of heavy subjects weighing on people who are generally happy and going to be okay.

Lisa of Hopewell says

The Story

Ultra-Orthodox Tzippy Goldman is nearly passed her marital sell-by date. Bryan Miller is worrying his is modern Orthodox parents by wanting to study in Jerusalem. Both are searching, but for what? Marriage? Faith? When they meet it seems to be that each has found the right person. But what will this do to their families and their lives?

What I Loved

I loved the way this author describes the life Tzippy was living. Orthodox or Fundamentalist religious life

does the same things to girls across seemingly all faiths. They aren't allowed much education, they are kept close to home, and their virginity is more valuable than their sanity. The author does a great job of showing Tzippy and her parents as people, not as stereotypes of their religion. I also liked the way she showed Bryan's parents amusement turn to near anger. I'm with them—who turns down Columbia??

Like the t.v. show Counting On—about the grown up kids of the massive Duggar family who have grown up in a sheltering, near-cult, or it's clone, Bringing Up Bates, the best part of the story is seeing where Bryan and Tzippy end up after leaving home. It is interesting to see what they keep, add, or throw-out from the faith in which they were raised.

The author's earlier book, The Woman's Auxiliary, has been on my to read list since Goodreads began—I'll be making a big effort to get to it, finally, in 2019 at least, since I so enjoyed this book.

My Rating

3.75

Lemar says

The Outside World by Torva Mirvis is at its heart about raising kids and the quest to have them adopt their parents' beliefs and traditions. Mirvis selects the fascinating and extreme world of Orthodox Jewish families in which to set this dynamic.

Mirvis employs a marvelously light touch which frees her to go deep inside her characters' motivations without ever seeming preachy or judgmental. Modern society has an expectation that our kids will be better off financially than we were, better educated and somehow freer. This expectation runs into its nemesis in Orthodox religion. Baruch, the male protagonist immersed himself in the traditional culture found in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Mea Shearim where,

"Jews seemed unaware that the cobblestone streets they trod weren't the same as those in their ancestors' villages and shtetls. The few hints of the twenty-first century - the bus stops, the advertisements on them, the phone booths that took telecards - stood out as anachronistic, not the people in their old fashioned dress."

When Baruch returns to New Jersey, his family has to grapple with the question of whether the future will resemble something new or rather a return to the distant past of the nineteenth century.

Mirvis takes time to see the simple but profound plot elements through the minds of seven different characters, each of which is utterly convincing and captivating. Her natural curiosity about people is infectious and she has the writing skills to render these thoughts with elegance and clarity.

The issues of independence from birth families and the excitement and pitfalls of following one's independent dreams are applicable to any family. By setting the novel in the world of Orthodoxy she has heightened the tensions and boundaries to great effect.

Jenny says

I'd really give this story a 2.5. I enjoyed other Tova Mirvis books a lot more then this one.

erl says

This book was so engaging, I zipped right through it. It tells the story of a young couple, raised in opposite ends of the orthodox spectrum. While modern Baruch yearns for the authenticity of Chassidism, his Flatbush bred wife, Tzippy, is drawn to the independence she sees in the more modern approach. Clearly the author knows her way around the Jewish community, and little insights ring true over and over. But parts of her book were insulting and offensive. For example, Tzippy is a trained preschool teacher, something she only does because it's not a challenging career. As one who taught preschool for many years, I must say I've come across this misconception before, and finding it here is tiring. And the Brooklyn Jews come across as shallow, materialistic, and judgmental. Baruch's father, Joel, goes through the motions of modern orthodox practice but doesn't appear to believe anything in particular. Baruch's mother is the only person in the book who seems to have any developing spirituality, but her emerging practice is decidedly unorthodox. Still, the writing drew me in. I adored Baruch and Tzippy and hope they adjust to the learning curve of marriage. And I love how the author gave her hometown of Memphis a moment in the spotlight.

Ellen says

This would be a 3.5 if half stars were possible. I guess I'm in a festive Chanukkah mood so I'm rounding up. At first I found the author's tone annoying, thinking that she was criticizing frumsters for being closed minded and modern Orthos for being too insincere. But as I got into the story it really got me thinking about whether its possible to be modern Orthodox and pass our values on to our children, without them moving too far to the right or the left. It's not great literature but it is a readable story that raises some important questions. And I have to say that Mirvis dealt fairly well with the task of explaining Jewish customs enough so that her readers who aren't familiar with them will understand without going overboard and boring her readers who are familiar with them.

Kathryn says

This was a great book! It manages to deal with religion and family relationships in a tender and entertaining way that is never disrespectful. I found it fascinating to learn more about modern Orthodox Jewish culture and beliefs, but most of all I was pulled in by the very real and multidimensional characters and the pain and joy they experience as families. It may be about Jewish families but the themes of fitting in, guilt, discovering truth for yourself and not comparing your spirituality to others, are universal! Just note that if you read the book description, it sounds like it is all about Tzippy getting married, but it is actually about two sets of families struggling, growing and changing.
