

The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East

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Reading Group Guide

The tale of a simple act of faith between two young people – one Israeli, one Palestinian - that symbolizes the hope for peace in the Middle East.

Description: In 1967, not long after the Six-Day War, three young Arab men ventured into the town of Ramle, in what is now Jewish Israel. They were cousins, on a pilgrimage to see their childhood homes; their families had been driven out of Palestine nearly twenty years earlier. One cousin had a door slammed in his face, and another found his old house had been converted into a school. But the third, Bashir Al-Khairi, was met at the door by a young woman called Dalia, who invited them in.

This poignant encounter is the starting point for a true story of a remarkable relationship between two families, one Arab, one Jewish, amid the fraught modern history of the region. In his childhood home, in the lemon tree his father planted in the backyard, Bashir sees dispossession and occupation; Dalia, who arrived as an infant in 1948 with her family from Bulgaria, sees hope for a people devastated by the Holocaust. Both are swept up in the fates of their people, and their lives form a personal microcosm of more than half a century of Israeli-Palestinian history.

What began with a simple act of faith between two young people grew into a dialogue of four decades that represents the region's hope for peace and self-determination. *The Lemon Tree* is a reminder of all that is at stake and of all that is still possible.

Note: These 25 questions form a loose guide to what could evolve into prolonged and open-ended discussion. You are encouraged to adopt the attitudes of Dalia and Bashir, the two main characters, even to role-play with verbatim readings from the extensive quotes within the book. You might do something similar with other characters, such as Ahmad Khairi, Solia Eshkenazi, Israel Gefen, Michail Fanous, or Metropolitan Stephen, the leader of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

At the heart of this guide lies the central goal of the book: to encourage mutual witness, and empathy, for the story of the "other."

Questions for discussion:

1. Dalia's very existence, and her arrival as an infant to Israel in November 1948, is the result of remarkable circumstances that combined to save some 47,000 Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust. How much importance would you put on the actions of Dimitur Peshev, the parliamentarian, or Bishops Kiril and Stephan – and how much to other factors? Finally, the book (p. 43) describes Dalia as carrying "an extraordinary legacy" with her to Israel in 1948. What was that legacy?

2. The Arab-Israeli war of 1948 is known as the "War of Independence" to Israelis, and the "Nakba," or "Catastrophe," to Palestinians. Chapter Four describes how Bashir's family, and Dalia's cousin, Yitzhak Yitzkaki, experienced the war. Take the point of view of Bashir, during the first several months of 1948, and tell the group how you experienced those times. Now, do the same with Yitzhaki.
3. Dalia was born three days after the United Nations voted, on November 29, 1947, to partition Palestine into two states – one for the Arabs, and one for the Jews. Eleven months later, she and her parents boarded the *Pan York*, bound for Israel. In this sense Dalia is truly a child of Israel. Describe through Dalia's eyes a young and growing Israel – both in terms of the excitement her family felt to be literally building a new state and of the trauma so many immigrants brought with them, and Dalia's efforts to empathize with them. How might this empathy have prepared her to meet Bashir years later?
4. Bashir and his family kept their focus on the "right of return," as promised by U.N. Resolution 194, as their exile extended into the 1950s, and then the 1960s. Why was this such a singular focus for Palestinians during this time? If it were you who had been displaced, would you also demand to return home, or would you, at some point, decide it would be easier to live in peace, if also in exile? Whatever your answer, what does it say about Bashir and the Palestinians that they remained focused on the right of return?
5. Dalia describes herself as growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust (pp. 112-115). Even though her family, along with their fellow 47,000 Bulgarians, escaped these atrocities, she nevertheless experienced a young Israel as deeply traumatized. At the same time she grew up among a new community of Jews who were trying to re-form their identity. On pp. 118-120 a discussion of the *Sabra*, or "New Israeli Man," describes a desire among many Israelis to "wash off that old Jew" and "stand tall for the first time." How much of a role do you think the Holocaust, and reaction to it through the crafting of a *Sabra* identity, played in the formation of Israel's national psyche? How great a role have these factors played in determining the attitudes of Israel's citizens, its soldiers, and its leaders?
6. The Six-Day War is universally considered Israel's greatest victory and the most devastating defeat in the history of the entire Arab world. Dalia described it as nothing short of a miracle; Bashir had the horrifying feeling of history repeating itself. Imagine first that you are Dalia in early June, 1967; then that you are Bashir. Can you describe the emotional state of each of them, as word of Israel's victory came? (See especially pp. 137-141.)
7. After the Six-Day War, Bashir and his cousins arrived at the doorstep of Bashir's old home (pp. 144-48), where Dalia and her parents now lived. Imagine that you are Dalia when you hear the bell and come to the gate, to see three Arab men – the enemy – staring at you from across the gate. They ask you for permission to visit the home. What do you do, and why? Now imagine that you are Bashir, in the moment when you are waiting for Dalia's reply, after you've asked her to see inside your childhood home. What is going through your mind? Walking around the house, seeing your old room, seeing the lemon tree – how do you imagine this experience?

8. A few months later, Dalia repaid the visit of Bashir by visiting him in Ramallah. Describe the journey, both physically and emotionally, that Dalia took as she rode into the West Bank and then walked up the steps into Bashir's home. What must it have taken to get her into that place?
9. Describe the encounter between Bashir and Dalia in Ramallah (pp. 154-63). If you like, two people in the discussion group can role-play, reading verbatim from their conversation (especially pp. 158-163). In either case, describe the respective positions both young people stake out – Bashir, in the injustice of his family's dispossession; Dalia's, in the love for Zion and the need for the Jews to have a safe haven.
10. The emerging trust between Dalia and Bashir was shattered in February, 1969, when a bomb exploded in a Jerusalem supermarket, killing three people. Bashir would later be convicted of complicity in the bombing and sentenced to fifteen years. Is your own view of Bashir transformed by the description of these events? How is this tempered, if at all, by the accounts of his torture and imprisonment? In the meantime, Dalia cuts off all contact with the family. Describe her state of mind during this time, and her own ambivalence about contacting Bashir.
11. After Dalia's parents died, and Bashir got out of prison, Dalia did indeed get in touch with Bashir. Why? Describe her evolution from being "zealous in the defense of Israel" (p. 180) to meeting Bashir at the home of a Christian minister in Ramallah. At that meeting, Dalia offered to share the home in Ramla. What is the meaning of this gesture? What is the meaning of the agreement Dalia and Bashir forged that day?
12. In 1988, near the beginning of the *intifada*, Bashir was deported to Lebanon. On the eve of his deportation, Dalia wrote an open letter to Bashir that was published in the *Jerusalem Post* (pp. 200-203). Weeks later, Bashir replied (pp. 216-220). Describe your reaction to both letters. If you like, two people from the group could read the letters aloud.
13. Bashir and Dalia finally meet again, in the midst of rising violence and political tensions, in Ramallah in 2004 (256-262). They find that their political differences are as great as ever, but that their personal relations are as warm as ever. How does one explain that?
14. Near the end of the book (p. 262) Dalia says, "Our enemy is the only partner we have." What does she mean by that?