

My Hearth Is Lit

How does one establish a home in the modern State of Israel? For an avid reader and book lover, it is by shipping, organizing and shelving her vast library.

By **Ilana Kurshan**

I bought new bookcases the same week I officially made *aliya*, which may not be a coincidence. While I could not feel rooted in a place until all my books were properly organized and displayed, I was not ready to invest in solid hardwood bookcases until I felt committed to calling Israel my home. ♡ So, after three years of lugging awkward and misshapen wicker shelving (originally salvaged from a street corner)

from one Jerusalem apartment to another, I have finally erected two wooden bookcases and nailed them to the floor of my apartment—establishing my roots, as it were, in the land of Israel.

UN TIL VERY RECENTLY, I NEVER had enough space for my books. I would pile them in my closet, in my kitchen cupboards, under my bed and along the windowsills, but inevitably there were at least four or five boxes tucked away in the corners of the various apartments in which I have lived.

This led to a fair amount of disorder. Each time I needed to find a particular volume—to read an Edna St. Vincent Millay sonnet to a girlfriend crying on the telephone or to quote Elaine Scarry in a *d'var Torah*—I would empty several boxes quickly and haphazardly. And so most of my collection was strewn across open boxes and overflowing onto the floor.

I considered giving away some of my books, but I write in most of them, so the thought of parting is unbearable. Every volume of Talmud I have studied is marked up in pencil with the date scrawled on top, a summary of each section jotted in the



margins, important cross-references circled and favorite lines underlined. My poetry books contain notes like “devouring lover with eyes,” “no second chance” and “death of hope,” which I rely on to help me choose the right poem to match (or challenge) the various emotional states of myself and my friends.

And in my novels, my favorite passages are marked in pen and often indexed by page number in the back. While I could give away my copy of, say, Ian McEwan’s *The Child in Time*

(Anchor) and perhaps buy a new one someday, it would be frustrating to have to search through the whole book for that gorgeous passage about what it means to come to know a loved one’s habits. (I have cited that paragraph so many times that when I pull my copy off the shelf, it opens right to that page.) This is true, too, of the descriptions of unrequited love in Alexander McCall Smith’s *The Sunday Philosophy Club* (Pantheon) and the Costco section of Dara Horn’s *In the Image* (W.W. Norton).

ANTHONY FORONDA

Moreover, the more time passes, the more books seem to accumulate. For a little while after moving to Israel, I worried that it would be difficult to find novels in English. I even had nightmares during my last few months in New York about endless Shabbat afternoons in the Holy Land with absolutely nothing to read. To ward off disaster, I raided the book room of Random House, where I was working, and mailed two boxes of books to Jerusalem, hoping these would sustain me until a visiting friend or family member would bring reinforcements.

FORTUNATELY, MY CURRENT JOB AS a foreign rights agent selling translation rights to publish books in Hebrew leaves me with no shortage of reading material. Each week, my colleagues and I receive deliveries from major American pub-

lishing houses. Any book we cannot sell to Israeli publishers ends up in my home. In my two years in this job, the Israeli branch of my personal library has nearly doubled.

For a while right after moving to Israel, I worried about not being able to find novels in English to read.

And so has my need for real bookcases. When I moved into a new apartment three months ago, I was pleased to discover a little alcove beyond the kitchen, which was just the right size for two wooden bookcases.

In a spurt of materialism, I spent a series of Saturday nights wandering

from store to store in the industrial area of Talpiot comparing models. I finally found what I was looking for at Ace Kneh U'veneh, a store whose rhyming name (especially when compared to its alliterative English equivalent "buy and build") I loved almost as much as its furniture. The bookcases were made of a material that the store catalog referred to as "book-eetsa," Hebrew for elm. Perfect for someone who sells translation rights! So I bought and built (along with two friends and their trusty tool kits) and then began the profoundly pleasurable activity of setting my books on my shelves.

Arranging my library was daunting, not unlike the project of arranging the order of my days here. Like most of my friends in Jerusalem (and unlike most of my friends in New York), I work a few jobs: I also serve as the books editor for an American

"I laughed, I cried, I learned, I made new friends. I was fully alive. Awesome!" —Sonia Beker, New York

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Jewish magazine and write study guides to Israeli fiction for the Jewish Agency for Israel. Beyond my professional commitments, I also study Talmud intensely and read Torah regularly in a local egalitarian minyan. In addition, I jog all over Jerusalem, exploring new neighborhoods with my feet in the early morning.

When I first came to Israel and saw how many activities were competing for my attention, I panicked. With time, though, I have developed a schedule that allows me to do some learning, some work and some exercise almost every day—with room to see friends and occasionally get a good night's sleep.

MY BOOKS REFLECT MY LIFE here, since I acquired most of them after moving to Israel. On one shelf there are four spi-

ral notebooks filled with my notes on a weekly *parasha* class given by Avivah Zornberg, who has transformed my writing and thinking about Torah and literature. (I feel constantly grateful that I live in a place where the bulletin boards lining every street are posted with notices about Talmud classes, lectures on *halakha* and panel discussions about Jewish philosophy.)

Several volumes of poetry in Hebrew have made their way into my collection—not just Yehuda Amichai and Dorit Rabinyan, but also e.e. cummings translated into a language that knows no capitals and no vowels.

Once a week, I meet a friend in a local café and we read poetry aloud, a different poet each week, sometimes in English, sometimes in Hebrew. It is a relief that even in Jerusalem, William Wordsworth and Alfred

Lord Tennyson are still important parts of my life.

TWO SHELVES DEVOTED TO ISRAELI writers are below my poetry section. Many of their works take place in Jerusalem, and I enjoy reading books set in the neighborhoods I walk through each day. Batya Gur and David Grossman are reminders that the literature of Jerusalem, which is as old as King David, continues to be written in each generation, a palimpsest like the notes pressed one upon another into the crevices of the *Kotel*.

Glorying in a late-night bout of shelving, I had a moment of panic. My *siddurim*, *mahzorim* and *benchers* were grouped together with my Everyman poetry anthologies simply because they were all the same height.

It brought to mind my favorite part of Amos Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Harvest), one of several books that I own both in Hebrew and English. The author relates how, at the age of 6, his father, the scholar Arieh Klausner, cleared a space for him on a bookcase to arrange his own books.

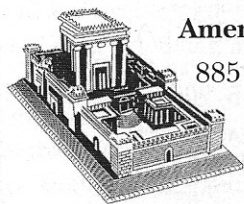
"It was an initiation right," Oz writes, "a coming of age: Anyone whose books were standing upright is no longer a child, he is a man."

Oz describes how, in an effort to conserve space, he arranged his books by height. That night, he was made aware of his error:

Father came home from work, cast a shocked glance toward my bookshelf, and then, in total silence, gave me a long hard look that I shall never forget: It was a look of contempt, of bitter disappointment beyond anything that could be expressed in words, almost a look of utter genetic despair.

Finally he hissed at me with pursed lips: 'Have you gone com-

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pletely crazy? Arranging your books by height? Have you mistaken your books for soldiers?

I felt as if Klausner was glaring down at me from his position on the top shelf—had I gone completely crazy?

Still, I knew there was rhyme and reason to the organization of my poetry and nonfiction and no shortage of imagination when it came to the fiction.

At the bottom of my bookcase, I have left two empty shelves for all the volumes that still clutter my office at work. These shelves remind me that there is another bookcase, too, that is waiting to be bought and built. This is the bookcase that someday, God willing, I will fill with the 12 gigantic boxes of books that are sitting in the basement of my parents' home on Long Island.

These include classics from childhood and high school: the complete works of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, all the Norton poetry and literature anthologies, the novels of Madeleine L'Engle. There, too, are the rest of the books I took when I left Random House *be-rekhus gadol*—each one with the Knopf rough trim and the handsome Borzoi imprinted on the spine.

I MISS ALL OF THESE BOOKS, LIKE dear long-distance friends. How often I have ached to reach for one of them—to find a marginal note I once jotted or to reread delicious final paragraphs that send shivers up my spine each time afresh. The reality of my longing in all its poignancy, much like the corners of a wall left unpainted in religious homes, carries with it an important reminder.

Although I am the proud owner of two beautiful new bookcases in the Jewish homeland, all the exiles have not yet been ingathered and our world has still not been redeemed. **H**

Israel has achieved so many great things—from its flourishing economy to peace with Egypt. But its most important achievement continues to be the formation of an independent, democratic sanctuary for millions of refugees. No other nation in the Middle East has embraced a diverse array of oppressed peoples.

—Rep. Judy Biggett (R-IL)

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