



**The Betrayers**  
**By David Bezmozgis**

**Reading Group Guide**

**Questions and Topics for Discussion**

1. One of the novel's opening epigraphs is the following quote from David Raziel: "There can be no struggle for national liberation without sacrifices and repression, death in battle and the execution of martyrs. And nothing on earth can withstand the power of self-sacrifice." Are there martyrs in this novel? If so, who and why?
2. At the beginning of the novel, Baruch has the opportunity to protect his family from the public embarrassment of his affair by withdrawing his opposition to the Prime Minister's plan regarding the West Bank settlements. But Baruch refuses to yield to blackmail. He explains his decision to his daughter, Dafna, by saying that "there are matters of principle where you cannot compromise. Under any circumstances. If I'd compromised it would have been worse." Do you agree with Baruch's decision to remain loyal to his moral ideals over his family? Why do you think he made that decision? Would you have done the same? Discuss.

3. Discuss the relationship between Baruch and Leora. How does their relationship evolve throughout the novel?
4. Discuss the female characters in *The Betrayers*, such as Leora, Svetlana, Miriam, and Nina Semonovna. Do you resonate with any in particular? How are they different from one another? Similar?
5. What role does decision-making play in the characters' lives? What do their decisions (for example, Tankilevich's decision to betray Baruch, Benzion's decision to go against orders) demonstrate about the importance of retaining a sense of independence and self during times of difficulty? Discuss the difficult decisions made throughout the novel and how/why the characters make decisions.
6. While speaking to Benzion, Baruch says, "If you think there's no choice, look harder. There is always a choice. A third way if not a fourth. Whether we have the strength to take those choices is another matter." Do you agree that we always have a choice? Did Tankilevich have a choice? Did Baruch?
7. Discuss the role of fate in *The Betrayers*. Do you believe in fate? Is the reunion between Baruch and Tankilevich an instance of fate or coincidence?
8. Throughout his political life, Baruch has remained steadfastly loyal to the Jewish community. But when his affair with Leora is exposed, he becomes something of a joke to the Israeli citizens he serves. Do you think this is just? Should the personal lives of politicians play a role in how we judge them? Discuss how the exposure affected Baruch and Leora. How does each character react to the situation?
9. Discuss Tankilevich. Does your perception of him change throughout the novel? Do you think he has paid for his sins? If so, does this mean that Baruch is obligated to forgive him? What does a person gain from withholding (or granting) forgiveness?
10. Baruch asserts that Tankilevich is not a villain, stating, "I don't blame him. He is an ordinary man who was ensnared in a villainous system." Do you blame Tankilevich? Is there a danger in asserting that ordinary people who become ensnared in villainous systems should not be blamed? What other "villainous systems" throughout history have ensnared ordinary people? Do you think these people are blameless, or should they be held morally responsible? Discuss.
11. Baruch believes that one cannot change his or her character, and that "just as there are people in this world who are imparted with physical or intellectual gifts, there are those who are imparted with moral gifts. People who are inherently moral. People who have a clear sense of justice and cannot, under any circumstances, subvert it." Do you agree that certain people are inherently moral? Are others inherently immoral? Have Baruch's actions demonstrated that he is inherently moral?

**A conversation with David Bezmozgis**

**1. You were born in Latvia but have spent most of your life in Canada, emigrating at the age of six. Have you returned to Latvia as an adult? If so, were Baruch's reactions to the Crimea of his childhood influenced by your own experiences returning to Latvia?**

I returned to Latvia only once, in 2003. Unlike Kotler, I returned with my parents, who acted as my guides. In fact, my experience and Kotler's are very different in that he was not only a boy in the former Soviet Union but grew to adulthood there, studied there, worked there, and ultimately was imprisoned there. So his frame of reference, not only for Crimea, but the country as a whole, is substantially different from mine. My experience of returning to Latvia was one of actively trying to remember something, to tease out some memory of my life there. But what is common between my experience of Latvia and Kotler's of Crimea is that both trips were taken in the summer and they were both to the seashore. When I returned, it was to the resort town of Jurmala on the Bay of Riga where my family and I used to spend our summers. A few of those impressions filtered into the novel.

**2. What books or authors have been pivotal for you in your trajectory as a writer?**

I've written before about my admiration for the late American writer Leonard Michaels. I discovered him in my middle twenties and have been reading and re-reading his stories, essays and novels ever since. But for *The Betrayers*, the novels that were most instructive were Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and, to a lesser extent, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. All of these are relatively short books and I used *The Ghost Writer* in particular as a conceptual model: four people in a house—two men, two women.

Because *The Betrayers* depends a great deal on dialogue and because its central conflict is a moral one, I also read some plays of Arthur Miller's; *Incident at Vichy* made the strongest impression.

Eugenia Ginzburg's *Journey into the Whirlwind* and Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*, two classic memoirs of Stalin's Gulag, were also very valuable. And perhaps most valuable of all were the memoirs written by a number of Prisoners of Zion, Yosef Mendeleovich's *Unbroken Spirit*, Ida Nudel's *A Hand in the Darkness*, Hillel Butman's *From Leningrad to Jerusalem*, and Natan Sharansky's *Fear No Evil*—as well as his political treatises.

**3. You've written novels and short stories. Which do you prefer to write? To read?**

There was a time when I didn't think I could write anything other than stories and writing them was the only ambition I had. I still think that, on balance, the works of fiction that have meant the most to me have been stories. I am thinking here of some stories by Isaac Babel, Denis Johnson, Grace Paley, and Leonard Michaels. (The list of excellent individual stories by other writers is even longer.) But since publishing my collection of stories, *Natasha*, in 2004, I've written very few stories and have instead written two novels. I still don't think the novel form feels native to me, because by temperament I'm not an expansive writer. My greatest pleasure

is in compression, in finding the shortest, most aphoristic way of saying something. But since what one writes is dictated by ideas, for some reason I've had fewer and fewer ideas over the last ten years that have lent themselves to stories. I can't explain why that is. Maybe my brain has undergone some kind of transformation brought about by novel writing or by being repeatedly told that the short story is not a commercially viable form.

#### **4. How did the idea for *The Betrayers* originate? What was the germ?**

In late 2004, I was invited to write an obituary for the *New York Times* about a man named Alexander Lerner. Lerner was one of the most prominent Zionist dissidents of the Soviet period, a scientist with an international reputation. (I knew none of this before I started researching my piece on him.) In the process of researching the piece, I came across a detail about Lerner's life that intrigued me. He had been among several Zionist dissidents and *refuseniks* who were betrayed, ostensibly, by one of their own. As a prelude to a show trial, a man named Sanya Lipavsky had published an open letter denouncing Lerner and others in the Communist party newspaper, *Izvestia*. The person who became the focus of the trial was ultimately not Lerner but a much younger scientist named Anatoly Sharansky. Sharansky, Lerner and the other people implicated in this trial all suffered because of it in one form or another, but later all won their freedom and enjoyed some measure of renown. But I was curious about what happened to Lipavsky. I wondered what his fate had been after the trial and, ultimately, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I wanted to know why he had betrayed his comrades and I wondered what it might have meant to commit a betrayal for a seemingly indomitable regime that then ceased to exist. Companion to this was the question about Lipavsky's opposite, the virtuous man who sacrifices everything for the sake of an ideal, and who later, quite inevitably, discovers that the ideal does not quite correspond to reality. I wanted to bring these two men together again, at a moment when both are acutely feeling the consequences of their youthful decisions, and, through them, to explore the concepts of morality and forgiveness.

#### **5. You did considerable in-the-field research for this novel. What did that consist of?**

I made two major trips to research the novel. One trip was to Israel. I was there in the fall of 2012, when I was already rather far along into the book. I was there just before the start of the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, and, mostly by coincidence, I spent a lot of my time in the south, driving in my little rental car around the southern coastal towns and in the Negev. I wanted to get an up-to-date, first-hand impression of the country—or as much of one as I could in a circumscribed amount of time. I met with as broad a cross-section of Israeli society as I could: politicians on the left and the right, kibbutzniks, activists, Israeli Arabs, Russian immigrants, and, most vitally for me, a number of former Prisoners of Zion who now live in Israel.

A year before that, in the summer of 2011, I traveled to Crimea. I'd never been there before. Given that I'd never been there before, I should probably explain why I chose Crimea, and

specifically Yalta, as the setting for the novel. This was dictated by the fact that I imagined all of the characters somehow under the same roof. This would need to happen in a place where Kotler and Leora would consider fleeing to—a place that was something of a romantic getaway but also a place where they were unlikely to be recognized. In Soviet times, there were really only a handful of popular resort locations. There were the destinations on the Baltic coast, primarily in Latvia and Lithuania, and there were the towns along the Black Sea coast—Sochi in Russia, Sokhumi in Georgia, and a number of towns in Crimea, Yalta being the largest and most prominent. The more I read about Yalta and Crimea, the more appropriate it seemed. There were some esoteric literary facts about Crimea that appealed to me—Tolstoy had served there during the Crimean War and his dispatches from the war brought him his first writerly recognition; Yalta had been Chekhov’s home in his final years and the setting for one of the greatest short stories of all time, “The Lady with the Little Dog”; and Yalta had also been the place from which Nabokov and his family sailed into exile during the Russian Civil War. But more than this, it was the discovery of Crimea’s long and peculiar Jewish history—particularly the fact that it had twice been considered as an autonomous Jewish republic—that convinced me that, contextually, it was the right place to set the novel.

#### **6. What was the biggest challenge you faced when writing this novel?**

The greatest challenge for all books is the same: writing good sentences. But having said that, every book also presents unique challenges. I’ll list some related to *The Betrayers*.

A significant challenge was granting myself the permission to center a book around a character who was empirically more courageous and principled than I am. I had to reach a point where I felt that I clearly understood his moral precepts, the rationale that guided his actions.

Along the same lines, there was also the challenge of proposing an answer to what I consider to be the most important philosophical question: What is the nature of morality? The challenge was not only to come up with an answer that was satisfying to me but also to introduce it into the book in a way that was not didactic.

Philip Roth once wrote about the futility of writing novels that are about the present moment. This was definitely an issue for *The Betrayers*. The political situation in Israel is a paradox: it is at once frustratingly static and constantly evolving. A prime consideration for the book was that the inciting conflict between Kotler and the prime minister needed to be both prescient and oblique. Ideally, the events described in the novel should not have happened yet. But given the length of time it takes to write a book—three years in the case of *The Betrayers*—coupled with the amount of time it takes to prepare it for publication—another year—it felt almost inevitable that events in the real world would outstrip the action of the novel.

Finally, *The Betrayers* is a novel modeled after real people. In this instance, a writer faces the competing demands of retaining the factual elements that inspired the book while also

departing from the facts so as to steer the story where it needs to go dramatically—all the while being mindful not to dishonor the people from whose lives you have borrowed.

**7. In addition to being a novelist and story writer, you're also a filmmaker. What influence does your knowledge as a filmmaker have on the way you tell a story in a novel? What pleasures does being a filmmaker offer that being a novelist does not, and vice versa?**

I don't know if I would write any differently if I hadn't trained as a filmmaker. I believe that the real influence on my writing has come from books. However, the idea of economy is much prized in film. (It used to be even more prized when people were shooting on actual film stock, which is expensive.) One injunction from film school that stuck with me was: "Get in late; get out early." The implication is that a scene or a shot or a line of dialogue should be no longer than absolutely necessary. The same applies to a piece of writing.

As for the pleasures of filmmaking compared against those of prose writing, some of the pleasures are obvious. One rarely makes a film all alone. Filmmaking is highly collaborative and highly social. For that reason, it can be much more fun day to day. Writing is solitary, but it also grants almost total autonomy. I think it is true that the range of subject matter and the potential for complexity and experimentation remains greater in books than in movies. Even as the publishing business consolidates and becomes more corporate, the cost of publishing a book is still usually cheaper than the cost of producing a movie, and for that reason publishers are more liable to take risks. And, ultimately, the two are different forms. There is a certain pleasure to be derived from watching a film that is unlike any other pleasure. And there is a pleasure to be derived from a novel or a story—that intimacy between the mind of the reader and the writer—that is also unlike anything else.

**8. Intrinsic to Baruch's identity is his role as a father. As a father yourself, how do you judge Baruch's interactions with his family and with his children? Is Baruch a good father in your estimation?**

I think it's clear that he loves his children and cares about them. And even if he is exceptionally lucid about what is morally correct and unapologetic about acting according to his principles, he realizes, as any parent realizes, that his children will be affected by his decisions. This realization might cause another man—or most other men—to be more pliant. But if Kotler had reconsidered, if he'd accepted the devil's bargain Amnon offered him, would that have made him a better father? I think this is the question all parents end up asking themselves: What is my obligation to my children? Is it to live my life in a morally consistent way so as to set a good example for them, or is it to make various compromises—large and small—to shield them from discomfort and pain? And is there an absolute answer to this question?

**9. From the opening epigraphs onward, the theme of exile is prevalent throughout *The Betrayers*, and it's a condition that your first two books are preoccupied with as well. What does the idea of home mean for you?**

I suppose the idea of home is more complicated for me, as it is for most people who have been uprooted or have uprooted themselves. For good or ill, I can't say with full conviction that any one place is home to me. I have lived most of my life in Canada. I am a citizen of the country and I proudly carry its passport, but I was born in Latvia, and my family's past is there. However, as a Jew, I understood that my family and I were not entirely welcome in the land of our birth. One of my few memories of Riga was of being told by a neighborhood friend, a Russian boy, that I should go to Israel. I've since been to Israel, and even though I do feel a kinship with the country, I know I am not of the place either. So multiple places have claims on my heart. I expect it will always be this way for me. I don't see it as a happy condition. I think it is healthier and more natural for a person to feel himself at home in one place. For some reason, this identification is something all people crave, which is why the experience of exile is painful.

**10. Historically there is a relationship between Jewish identity and exile. Do you think exile will continue to play a strong role in Jewish identity in the future? How do you think Jewish identity and its portrayal in literature is changing?**

Technically speaking, the age of Jewish exile is over. It ended, if not precisely with the establishment of the state of Israel, then with the collapse of the Soviet Union, when practically any Jew in the world could live in Israel if he so chose. If exile continues to play a role in current Jewish identity, it is because the experience of two thousand years of exile was firmly imprinted on the culture. Also, this experience is still part of living memory. The end of historical exile happened very recently and people haven't fully come to terms with it. Perhaps wisely, they have not yet accepted that it will not recur. And with Israel perpetually embroiled in one conflict or another—external and internal—it isn't impossible to imagine that another dispersion might happen. But there is no denying that the existence of Israel and the generally hospitable nature of diasporic Jewish life—especially in North America where the majority of diaspora Jews now live—has affected the way Jewish identity is portrayed in literature. Exile as a phenomenon now haunts from the shadows. Maybe what we see now is a kind of struggle to shed the psychological trappings of exile. And it is a struggle because exile has become a defining Jewish condition. So even if it was in many ways a wretched condition, it was familiar. And because it is familiar, one can't help but mourn it a little.

**11. In the experience of writing your three books to date, is there anything consistent in what makes an idea take root for you?**

I would draw a distinction between my first two books and *The Betrayers*. I felt I *had* to write my first two books, and particularly my first book, *Natasha*. My desire to write was inextricable from my desire to write about the experience of Soviet Jewish immigrants to Toronto—or, more broadly speaking, to North America. As ideas went, I didn't have any others. My first novel, *The Free World*, I saw as a continuation and complement to *Natasha*. While undeniably fictional, both books were informed by my own and by my family's experiences. In a fundamental sense, I felt that it was my only purpose on earth to write those books.



But although I've made a distinction between *The Betrayers* and my first two books, I'd nevertheless add that I see them as a sort of trilogy, or triptych. The stories in *Natasha* covered the period, roughly, from 1980–2000; *The Free World* described events from 1917–1978; *The Betrayers*, meanwhile, was meant to be fully contemporary. In the novel, I wanted to show where the ex-Soviet Jews had had their greatest impact. The answer to that was in Israel—where they transformed the country by their massive influx—and in the countries of the former Soviet Union, where, to a significant extent, they transformed those countries by their absence.

*The Betrayers* is different. Nobody could confuse Baruch Kotler with me, nor Kotler's experiences with mine. In fact, if I were to analyze the three books, I would say that they increasingly depart from my own experience. Each book is also a reaction to the one that preceded it. One wants to avoid repeating oneself and one desires a new challenge.

As for *The Betrayers*, after spending seven years writing what I considered a long novel, I wanted to write a short one. I was also nearing forty and I wanted to tackle, more overtly, some of the bigger concerns that preoccupied me. I don't know if I spend a disproportionate amount of time thinking about the nature of good and evil or what makes some people honest and others duplicitous, but I felt that I'd arrived at the point in my life when I needed to engage with these questions. In his essay "Why I Write," George Orwell gives four reasons for why he—or anyone—writes. The last two are "historical impulse" ("Desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity") and "political purpose" ("Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter people's idea of the kind of society they should strive after"). More than my previous two books, *The Betrayers* was motivated by these desires. It feels both presumptuous and scary to write a book whose design it is to present to the world "true facts" and also "to push the world in a certain direction," but that is one of the purposes of literature and of art, and if one fears doing it—if one fears controversy or the public shaming of being exposed as insufficiently smart—then one should get out of the game.