



*Through  
women's eyes*

Yochi Brandes, one of Israel's top novelists, writes about Jewish biblical events involving upheaval

# Best-selling author Yochi Brandes blends the modern and traditional in her unique biblical narratives

By Hannah Hochner

**YOCHI BRANDES** has been one of my favorite authors since her first novel, “Gmar Tov,” was published in 1997. I read every book she wrote as they were published and I was fascinated by the complex female Jewish protagonists that appeared in each novel. But a startling change took place when she wrote her sixth book, *The Secret Book of Kings*, which has been translated into English. Brandes began interweaving biblical and Talmudic lore into her novels in order to tell the stories of Jewish women who lived in ancient times. Her latest book, “Adele” (available only in Hebrew), tells the story of the Baal Shem Tov through the eyes of his daughter.

Brandes, 59, was born in Haifa to a Hasidic family of *admors* (revered scholars) and grew up in a Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) neighborhood of Petah Tikva. A mother of four, Brandes began writing after her now 23-year-old daughter was born. She has since published 10 books, all of them best-sellers in Israel. She holds degrees in both biblical studies and Judaic studies, and is a sought-after lecturer on the Bible and Jewish cultural topics.

I met Brandes in her home in Kfar Saba on a Friday morning to discuss her latest historical novel, her writing process and her Haredi roots. As we sat in the living room, aromas of the Shabbat delicacies simmering on the stove wafted toward us.

**Yochi, what was it like for your kids growing up with a mother who was a famous writer?**

When they were little, they didn't really notice. They knew I was a writer, but in the same way that their friends' moms worked in computers. The only difference was that sometimes when we'd be out and about, a person might recognize me and stop to say hello. It's not like I was a rock star or anything. But my kids weren't interested in reading my books when they were little. In fact, the first one they read was “The Or-

chard,” which was published in 2012.

For my latest book, “Adele,” however, all my kids read the first draft, and they also critiqued chapters throughout the entire writing process. We spent a month camping together a few years ago, and during the evenings, we would talk about the book, which was a tremendous help.

When I write, I don't always have a clear idea in my mind how I want the plot to develop, and my kids came up with fantastic suggestions for how to connect the different stories.

The way I structure my books is first I take a number of distinct biblical stories that deal with a specific subject and then I weave them together to create a narrative. I write about real individuals mentioned in Tanach [the Old Testament] and add my own descriptions in order to develop a well-rounded character. Next, I add colors, scents, and events, which bring all these anecdotes together to form a cohesive story. This is no easy task, and my children and husband were a huge help when I was working on Adele.

Sometimes the stories naturally flow together, but most of the time I have to formulate a connection. I determine the chronology of events, and ponder how the characters' personalities should develop as the novel progresses.

**Are any of your children writers, too?**

One is a scientist. My second child also works in the field of science, but is interested in literature, too. My third child is an educator in the IDF and she loves fantasy fiction. She teaches Arabic and writes posts on Facebook about literature. So, two out of four are following in my footsteps to some extent.

**How did growing up in a Haredi family influence your writing?**

There's no doubt that I would never have written the books I wrote had I not grown

up in the Haredi world. Granted, many authors write about the Tanach and biblical figures, but very few write novels – I wish more would. There are numerous researchers and teachers who've written academic and pedagogical works, but very few novelists focus on these topics. When I began writing, I didn't know of any other writers like myself, but now there are a few.

One element that distinguishes me from other writers is that I am open about my intentions. In other words, it's extremely important to me to write the highest quality literature possible. I stick to a very specific ideology, which is absolutely connected to how I grew up.

My goal is to describe Jewish culture, which is extremely deep and complex, and practically unknown to a large portion of Israelis. And now that two of my books have been translated into English and other languages, Jews living around the world can also delve into Jewish culture through reading fiction. I aim to write literature that's as readable and simple as possible. I take Jewish ideas that are deep and complex and try to simplify them so that everyone can learn about them.

Another goal that is extremely important to me – if I'm not able to fulfill this goal, I just don't write about the subject – is connected with the Haredi world in which I grew up. I learned about Judaism in an extremely closed-minded environment. There was only one acceptable way to view everything, and we were forbidden to suggest alternative ideas. As a young girl, I was very curious and I asked difficult questions. Adults were constantly reprimanding me, telling me, “Yocheved, that is not what Rashi is trying to say in this commentary.”

And so now, as a novelist, it's always important for me to offer the most alternative and divergent opinions held by Jewish thinkers and scholars. Throughout Jewish history, there have always been individuals or schools of thought with differing

opinions. For example, in my book, "The Orchard," Rabbi Akiva's character falls within the conventional wisdom. But you'll notice that I also give ample space to the opposing school of thought, that of Beit Shamai. In Talmudic times, Beit Shamai's opinions were not accepted, whereas Beit Hillel's were. I've also included in the book quite a lot of information about the first Christians (who were born Jewish) who, of course, have never been referred to in any Jewish text. I make a conscious effort to include all of these views, especially since I was denied access to them as a child."

**Have you read any books by Maggie Anton, Anita Diamant or Naomi Ragen, who write about historical Jewish women, such as Rashi's daughters and Dina, or modern fictional Jewish women?**

Yes, of course. But Naomi Ragen writes about the Haredi community, not about Judaism per se. I write about Judaism and Jewish history. Anita Diamant wrote about Dina, but I think she gives herself more freedom in her writing, whereas I feel a huge responsibility to stay as close as possible to biblical sources. I know that if I'm strict in this way, my work will be considered on a higher level. Granted, no one truly knows what happened in ancient times, but everything I write is based on written commentaries.

Whenever readers ask me how close my novels adhere to the sources, I tell them that the more powerful the story, the closer I adhered to the sources. It's very important to me that my novels be based on sources so that people can use them as a source for learning about Jewish history. That's the main difference between my works and those written by other fiction writers.

One writer whose style I do think is very similar to mine is Milton Steinberg, the author of "As A Driven Leaf," based on the life of Elisha ben Abuyah. Our writing style is not exactly the same, but we both based our stories on the sources in a similar fashion. And yet, despite this, our books

are so different from each other. One of the most amazing aspects of Judaism is that our heritage is so full of treasures that we are constantly discovering new facets.

In contrast with other writers, I focus more on contemporary issues. For example, toward the end of "The Orchard," I touch on the Shoah and Zionism. It's extremely important to me that my readers find the characters and storylines of my books relevant to their lives. If I can't figure out a way to make a specific subject or event relevant for my readers, I don't include it in my books. This connection to modern times is not always obvious, but I make sure that the similarity can be understood.

**How has your writing changed over the years?**

To date, I've written 10 books in all, and I think they can be categorized into two groups. I wrote the first five books on the history of Zionism. In each of these stories, the protagonist is a normative modern-day woman who discovers a family relation who'd lived 50, 60 or even 80 years previously. This discovery alters her life in ways that she couldn't have imagined previously. I followed this model in my first five books.

From the start, I wanted to write about biblical characters, but I didn't have the courage yet in my early writing years. I was more comfortable focusing on Zionism, which is also connected to Judaism. Only after I'd written the first five books did I gain enough courage to begin writing about Jewish biblical characters – King David, Moshe, Miriam, Rabbi Akiva and the Baal Shem Tov. I don't think I'll go back to the earlier formula, since during this period I was gaining experience as a writer and learning how to become a novelist. Once I felt more secure, I was able to move on to writing the stories I felt I was meant to write. What I most love is taking a biblical narrative and focusing on the mysteries and vicissitudes discussed in Jewish writings.

**How do you pick which characters to base your novels on?**

I'm always searching for stories that involve upheaval. For example, during the early years of the northern Kingdom of Israel, there was lots of turbulence surrounding King David, King Saul and Yerovam [Jeroboam]. And Rabbi Akiva encounters many struggles. I probably won't write about Rashi, though I might write a book about the Rambam [Maimonides].

**Now that "Adele" has been published, have you begun thinking about your next venture?**

Sure, I'm always searching for new ideas and formulating possible storylines in the back of my mind. I start with a specific incident or time period that was full of upheaval. I read lots and lots of books on that subject, and then slowly I mull over in my mind which character I should choose as the catalyst for change. For example, in "The Orchard," I wasn't sure at first if I should focus on Akiva or someone else. For a while, I considered focusing on Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, or Hillel and Shamai. In the end, it became clear that Rabbi Akiva must be the main character since he had the most impact.

The first step is to choose a subject, and then after that, I focus on the main characters. I read numerous books and articles until I have a really good understanding of the material. Once I pick the protagonist, I go out and buy more books about that specific individual. For example, in preparation for writing "Adele," I read 150 books. For "The Orchard," I read about 80. I also speak with researchers. I don't just read their articles – I prefer to meet with them face to face because I like to ask them questions in person. Only then do I sit down to plan the synopsis of my book.

But I don't force myself to stick to my original plan. I do, however, usually keep my initial opening and conclusion. In "The Orchard," for example, before I began writing, I tried to solve the conundrum of why





Brandes's latest book in English published by Gefen Publishing House

Rabbi Akiva helped lead the Bar Kochba Revolt. How can it be that someone so smart and so carefully planned the revolt? I also solved the extremely problematic question of why he left his wife, Rachel, all alone. The moment I figured out how he would lead the revolt, I was ready to start writing.

### Do you make changes while you're writing?

Yes, in fact, I think I erase much more than I write. I probably wouldn't have been a successful writer before the age of computers. I'm constantly writing a sentence and then erasing it. When I've finished a first draft, before I send it off to my editor, I read it through again and make even more changes. I even remove entire sections. I would say I usually cut out up to a quarter of what I've written. It's an extremely painful process because I pour my heart and soul into each sentence. And yet, this is a necessary step. I would estimate that I write each sentence around 20 or 30 times before I find the exact right formula. Many times, I read a sentence out loud to hear how the words flow.

### How do you deal with negative criticism of your books?

Naturally, there are individuals in the right-wing religious community who criticize my works. Criticism is always good, though. I can't say it makes me feel good, but criticism is healthy.

### Did your parents or siblings read any of your novels?

My mother, who has passed away, read my books. My father was an *admor* – a respected Hasidic leader. He never read any of my books, but at some point he did begin to respect my writing. One time when I was visiting with him in the hospital, he heard someone approach me and talk to me about one of my books. Afterward, he told me something that moved me so deeply. He said, "You know, Yocheved, in some ways you are continuing the long chain of Hasidic scholars in our family." I told him, no, I left Hasidism.

He continued, saying, "Do you know what Hasidism is? It's taking Judaism and turning it into a simple story that everyone can enjoy." This was the first and last time he ever said anything on this subject. I was so taken aback by what he told me. I think, in part, this is one of the reasons I began working on *Adele*.

One of my sisters who identifies with the national religious community reads my books, and one of my brothers, who's also an *admor*, but is very accepting of people with different views, has also read my books.

### What Jewish rituals did you engage in when your children were young?

At first, I identified with the Conservative and then Reform movements, but later I realized that I didn't really fit in any of these boxes. So, I took a little from here and a little from there and put together my own creative mix. I guess you could say I'm traditional. When the kids were little, we'd always have Shabbat dinner as a family and make *Kiddush*, and we always fasted on Yom Kippur. Our home is kosher, but we drive on Shabbat, and everyone was allowed to choose what she or he ate outside of the home.

Now that my kids are grown and have their own families, sometimes they send me pictures of their table set for Shabbat, with the beautiful *challah* covers I bought them. My husband and I never pressured them to keep Shabbat, but all of them have

wonderful memories from when they were young and they are continuing these traditions with their own families each in their own way.

### Do all of your books have a female protagonist?

Yes. As I said before, my main goal is to transform Judaism into a story that everyone can read. My second goal is to offer alternative views and perspectives. I want the reader to react to my books and think, "Wow – is that really true? Does Jewish tradition actually say that? This is incredible!" My third goal is to take female characters from the Bible who'd been marginalized, and to place them in center stage. For thousands of years, Jewish culture has been patriarchal, just as the entire world was and still is, and so women were not given a voice. My goal is to find these women's voices that have been hidden for so long and to present them in the center of the stage, and show that they played a major role in Jewish history.

If it had been up to me, I would have called my books "Rachel's Orchard" and "Melachot Gimel" instead of "Melachim Gimel" (referring to "Queens" in the book whose English title is "The Secret Book of Kings"). It's important for me to show that women played a vital role in the revolution. In my book "Seven Women," obviously the women are the focus, but in the novels, although the main characters are usually men, I also show how without the participation of the women, the rebellions would not have succeeded. And entire sections are described from a woman's point of view. For example, Rachel does not appear in the scenes in the study hall, since women did not go inside, but I show how Rabbi Akiva would not have been able to achieve what he did without Rachel's help, and then all the scholars who came after him would also not have existed. It's also easier for me to write from the point of view of a woman. It's harder for me to imagine how a man feels and thinks.

**What's your opinion of organizations like Mavoi Satum?** [an NGO helping women with their religious legal status in cases where the husband won't grant them a divorce]

I'm an active member and a big supporter of Mavoi Satum. I've given lectures there a number of times. I also deal with the issue of *agunot* [chained woman] in my writing, such as in "Seven Women," when I wrote about Tamar. According to Halacha, Tamar was an *aguna*, and yet she didn't agree with the establishment and so went on to have children. She is still considered one of Judaism's revered ancestors. I think that by writing stories about women in Tanach, I'm helping Mavoi Satum in my own way. The religious establishment has never been a good thing – not in ancient times and not today. It's coercive and damaging.

**In 2014, you published "The Judaism We Didn't Know"** (which is only available in Hebrew), a book about modern issues that Jewish scholars have been discussing for centuries. What inspired you to create this work?

I began writing a column for Israel Hayom [a daily Hebrew newspaper] about political issues and how Judaism deals with these topics. Whatever was happening in current affairs that week, I would show how Jewish texts had at some point dealt with that same issue. If the topic was the Pride Parade or cannabis, I would quote Jewish scholars and show how oftentimes, the Jewish view was not what most people expected it to be. After a year, when I stopped writing the column, I had covered 56 separate topics, so I took the columns and edited them into book form. Of course, just as when these ideas were printed in the newspaper, some people loved them while others reacted angrily.

**Have you found that the general Israeli public is becoming more or less interested in learning about Judaism, Tanach and Jewish sages?**

I think secular Israelis are much more interested than they were 20, 30 or even 40 years ago. I've been a novelist for 20 years, but I began teaching Tanach 40 years ago. I'm very optimistic that people are showing more interest these days and are becoming more pluralistic.

It's very important to me to teach about the sages who were involved in the writing of the Mishna and the Talmud. I want people to notice how all the other ancient peoples in history have died out, and the Jews are the only people who've survived. How did our sages enable Jewish teachings, people and culture to persevere? My understanding is that they relied on two opposing forces: preservation and renewal. This is what the Jewish oral tradition teaches us.

I think this is still relevant in the modern era. We need to preserve Jewish tradition while at the same time remain open to change. Some communities in Israeli society want to keep everything static, while others would rather throw everything away. Our sages teach us, however, that in order to hold onto our unique culture we must combine both preservation and renewal.

Why did Rabbi Akiva carry out the rebellion? Even then they knew that it would fail. So I began thinking about Akiva in the orchard and the mystical vision. I combined a few different stories to create my own unique version. When Rabbi Akiva and his friends enter the orchard, each one sees the future of the people of Israel. One dies, another loses his mind and a third becomes an apostate. But Rabbi Akiva decides to lead a rebellion. Why? He sees the fate of Israel and declares: If we sit here and do nothing, we'll suffer the Crusades, the inquisition, pogroms, blood libel and the Shoah.

If we want to survive, Rabbi Akiva says, we need to teach the Jewish people to be proactive. And then he says the famous maxim: "Everything is foreseen and permission is granted." In other words, we must face our fate in an active manner. If you want to be saved, you must take action to save yourself. Don't be passive. But the



IRIS NESHET

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results were the opposite. In this respect, Rabbi Akiva is a bit like the hero of a Greek tragedy. His goal was to make the people of Israel more active, but the result of the Bar Kochba Rebellion was that in the end, the Jews ended up becoming more passive.

**What drives you to write these books?**

I'm an ideological writer and it's extremely important to me to write the highest quality literature possible. I have four main goals: The first is to make Judaism more accessible to secular Jews. The second is to introduce unconventional ideas and opinions that are not often brought to light. The third is to give a strong voice to women in the Bible and lastly, I want to show how Judaism is still relevant in this day and age.

I write mainly for the secular community, people who don't have an in-depth background in bible studies. Of course, I'm always more than thrilled when religious Jews read my books, too.

Much to my delight, all of my books have been bestsellers in Israel. And so far, two of my books have been translated into English and other languages. The fact that I'm one of the most successful authors in Israel gives me faith that Israelis are truly interested in learning about Judaism and yearn for it to be a significant part of their consciousness. ■