

Jewish Christmas Stories: Inspirations from the Indie Scene

LARRY CONSTANTINE
Special to the Journal

Editor's Note: This is part one of a three-part series.

It's that wonderful time of the year when shop windows are brightly lit with strings of blue and white lights; giant, floodlit menorahs and six-pointed stars appear on every lawn; and Muzak renditions of "Ma-oz Tzur" and "Chanukah, O Chanukah" blare from loudspeakers in shopping malls. (Not.)

The winter holidays can be a season of mixed emotions among Jews, who may feel assaulted from every angle by the images and sounds of Christmas. The holidays can be particularly challenging for the growing number of interfaith families.

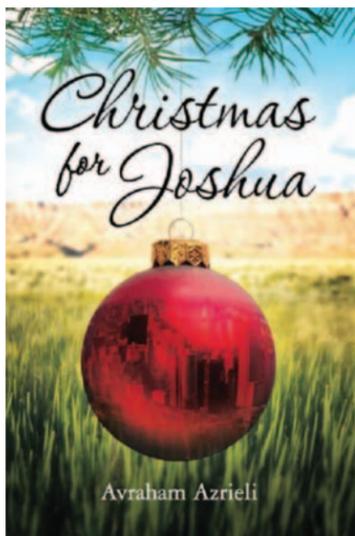
I will be examining the problems of the season from the perspective of Jewish writers within



Richard Dalcin
Author Avraham Azrieli

the mushrooming independent authors' and publishers' movement. Bypassing the gatekeepers of traditional publishing, indie writers are tackling new subjects and old dilemmas from fresh, sometimes provocative, ways.

Avraham Azrieli is best



Christmas for Joshua
Avraham Azrieli
CreateSpace, 2011

known for his heart-pounding, meticulously researched historical thrillers that interweave fictional characters from the shadowy world of spies and counter-spies with real events, such as the Six Day War ("The Jerusalem Inception") and the

assassination of Yitzhak Rabin ("The Jerusalem Assassin"). His latest book, "Christmas for Joshua," is a radical departure — a family drama that touches on conversion, interfaith relations and the pulls of competing backgrounds.

It follows the story of Rusty Dinwall, a convert to Judaism and synagogue president at a Reform temple, who struggles to hold on to both his personal heritage and new faith. He is a sympathetic and believable character whose sometimes inept sincerity can be both painful and inspiring. His heartfelt but muddled attempts at a Jewish Christmas tree, and his awkward outreach to a neighboring Catholic church, are painfully funny. In its own gentle way, the book is as much a page-turner as Azrieli's thrillers — pulling the reader into complex personal and familial conflicts that have no simple resolution.

I spoke with Azrieli from his home in a Washington, D.C. suburb. A lawyer recently transplanted from Phoenix, Azrieli now writes full-time. He was raised in an observant Modern Orthodox family in Israel. Although no longer strictly observant, he describes himself as "very Jewish in outlook and values, and immensely proud of our heritage and history."

I started with the most obvious question — what inspired an Israeli-American Jew to write a novel about Christmas?

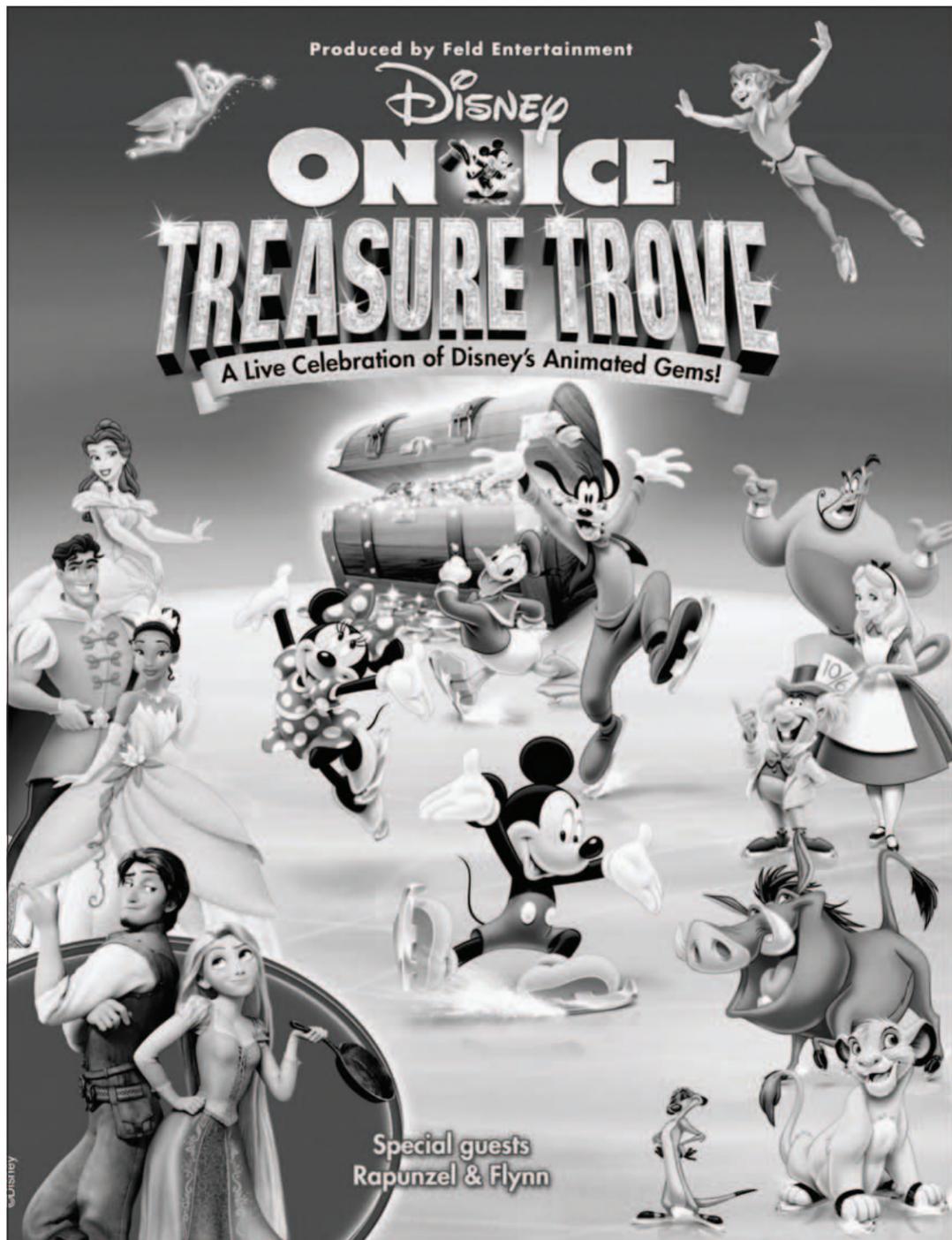
Azrieli said, "I developed an affection for Christmas, which is kind of odd for a Jew coming from Israel where it is not even celebrated. Moving to New York in my late 20s, I fell in love with

Christmas songs. Some Jews are very hostile to any celebration of Christmas. Even though I don't celebrate it, I can appreciate it, especially the music. That's what really got me into writing this story."

I also asked him about becoming a writer in the first place. "For me, being a reader led naturally into trying to write. I tinkered with stories back in Israel and started a couple of novels in Hebrew, but only after I moved to the United States and began writing in English did I really catch the bug. Even though I am equally fluent in both languages, I can't imagine writing my novels in Hebrew. There's something expressive about English that I find a lot richer, that allows more variation," he said.

"Christmas for Joshua" certainly reflects Azrieli's command of that richness. It is a sensitive, sophisticated exploration of issues that are with us all year, but come to the fore in this season. It not only looks at the canyon that can separate Christians and Jews and the connections that span that chasm, but it also confronts the troubling gaps that divide the branches of klal Yisrael. Azrieli writes with equal caring and authority about observant Orthodox and liberal Reform Jews, and about casual Christians and strict Catholics. The book is highly recommended.

Under his pen name Lior Samson, Larry Constantine is the author of four Jewish-themed novels, including "The Rosen Singularity," now available on Amazon and elsewhere.



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