

The ideal woman myth

Lihi Lapid writes of the slow, painful relinquishing of the dream of perfection **By Janice Weizman**

EVERY SOCIETY has its cherished vision of “the ideal woman.” For Jews, this vision is clearly delineated in the traditional Friday-night chant from the book of Proverbs, *eshet hayil* (woman of valor).

Modern Israelis are at liberty to reject the tenets outlined in the verses, but its values provide a cultural backdrop, a deep-rooted portrayal of what the ideal Jewish woman ought to be; her duties, her priorities and the reward she can expect should she fulfill them. These values, however limited they may sound to 21st-century ears, hover like stealthy shadows over the lives of modern Israeli women, powerful reminders of social expectations and the immutable wisdom of old.

It is telling that “Woman of Valor” is the title Lihi Lapid (wife of Minister of Finance Yair Lapid) has given her memoir. The book was first published in Hebrew in 2008, and has just come out in English (finely translated by Amit Pardes).

Lapid grew up in a secular household and community, and her ideal vision of womanhood does not involve the nurturing of a Jewish family in the original *eshet hayil* sense. Rather, by interspersing her story with the tale of a fictional, idealized princess destined to live out the fantasy of a modern superwoman who enjoys a successful career while managing her household with grace and ease, “Woman of Valor” portrays the tension between this optimistic vision and the actual difficulty of living up to it. Opening with her first meeting, at the age of 20, with her future husband, Lapid details the succession of marriage, pregnancy and motherhood, giving voice to the gap between expectations born of the idealized vision and the far less idyllic reality.

This is a theme that is all too familiar to any couple with young children, and there is little that is new or surprising about the tensions and dilemmas that Lapid describes. Even the fact that the lives of the characters play out in an Israeli setting is almost irrelevant in terms of the focus of the book. It is, quite simply, an honest, if somewhat grim, depiction of what

people who become parents live out in the daily routine of their lives.

Lapid, however, is not the average Israeli woman. Her husband was “only” a major media celebrity when the book was written and published. Her father-in-law, Tommy Lapid, had been the general director of Israel’s (then) sole TV station, and editor in chief of Maariv before becoming a Member of Knesset as head of the Shinui party and minister of justice. Her mother-in-law, Shulamit Lapid, is an acclaimed novelist. And Lapid herself, who worked as a photographer for the Maariv and Haaretz Hebrew dailies, had already authored a best-selling novel and written a popular column in Yedioth Ahronoth for the past 10 years.

LAPID DID not write this book because of her family’s achievements, but in spite of them. Clearly, her aim was to explore the feelings of inadequacy, the sense of failure that comes from the impossibility of “having it all” and the slow, painful relinquishing of the dream of perfection.

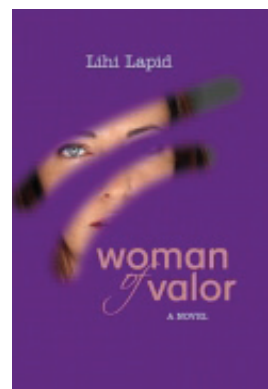
If nothing else, she is to be commended for writing about the unpleasant but rarely spoken truths about motherhood: That it is relentlessly demanding. That the work involved in motherhood is largely unacknowledged and unappreciated. That this stage in a family’s life can put a severe strain on a marriage. That as a new mother, you may feel yourself to be constantly judged by others. That there may be occasions when you will fail to live up to societal expectations. That you may, at times, have to make painful choices between your need for self-actualization and your children’s need for their mother.

Lapid describes these feelings with courage and candor, particularly where she talks about the anguish, and the added stresses and demands, after the second of her two children was diagnosed with autism. She describes the slow but sure descent into exhaustion, despair, and bitterness, to the point where it threatened to break up her marriage. The memoir is augmented

by letters written to Lapid (by way of her column at Yedioth) by women telling of their own difficulties as they struggle to find their way through the challenges of dating, marriage, motherhood and maintaining a career.

Of course, Lapid herself is her harshest judge and her severest critic. The arduous emotional journey she makes in order to understand that dynamic is very well portrayed. As a reader, I sensed that it was Lapid’s impossibly perfectionist standards and self-generated anxiety that accounted for much of the emotional pressure and crises she experienced as a mother of young children. Though she does a good job of describing the “lows” of motherhood, she makes too little mention of the “highs,” which often more than compensate for the difficulties.

Nonetheless, this book could be both beneficial and eye-opening for new mothers, new fathers, and even new grandparents. It provides an unflinching account of the challenges, so quotidian yet so momentous, faced by anyone who makes the radical transition from the promise and freedom of a childless life into the overwhelming responsibilities of parenthood. ■



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