

**AN INTERVIEW WITH EHUD HAVAZELET  
INTERVIEWED BY ERIC WASSERMAN  
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Ehud Havazelet is among the newest emerging generation of Jewish-American writers. Unlike the Jewish writers of the post war cannon, Havazelet has defined a vision that avoids sentimentality for the past and replaces it with respect and a critical eye. Born in Israel but raised among the Jewish orthodox community of New York City, Havazelet continues the tradition of such storytellers as Bernard Malamud by searching for the meaning of religious and cultural roots through distance and rediscovery. What separates Havazelet's work from his contemporaries is its accessibility to a wider audience through the universal themes of love, betrayal, reconciliation, and the individual search for a sense of place and belonging that are devoid of pretentiousness and self-justification.

A graduate of Columbia University and the prestigious University of Iowa Writers Workshop, Havazelet has been hailed by Rosellen Brown as one who writes with "grace and humor and, finally, such brutal honesty about families, history, and the complex burdens of tradition." His first collection of stories, "What Is It Then Between Us?" was hailed by such literary master Tim O'Brien, and won "Best Work of Fiction by a California Writer." Havazelet is now the director of the graduate writing program at the University of Oregon, and his second collection, "Like Never Before," solidifies his place as one of the new voices in contemporary Jewish fiction to be reckoned with. In 1998 the collection was distinguished by both The Los Angeles Times and The New York Times Book Review a Notable Book of the Year. Havazelet's work has not only won praise, but has twice received the Pushcart Prize for "Distinguished Story," warranted a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University, where he was a Jones Lecturer, and garnered a fellowship at the Cite International de Arts in Paris, France.

Havazlet possesses the rare gift of being able to acknowledge the collision of the past with present lives, but conveys a hope for the future that looks beyond damaged hearts. Even more impressive in "Like Never Before," he is able to present the perspectives of conflicting generations of one Jewish family without holding allegiances to any of them. When I sat down with Ehud Havazelet, he refused to shy away from the fact that his work is a rebuttal the sentimentalized, "oi vey" school of Jewish fiction.

**WASSERMAN:** *Eight Rabbis on the Roof*, the final story in *Like Never Before*, seems to gravitate towards the magical realism one finds in writers such as Mikhail Bulgakov and Salman Rushdie. There is a necessity for the reader to accept that anything is possible. What inspired this story and why was it that you decided to utilize a magical-realist approach to composing it when your fiction is primarily grounded in the everyday experience?

**HAVAZELET:** I'm very interested in questions of form and how stories are put together. To me, each story is a challenge, not only in terms of what events I want to cover or what characters I want to approach, but how I'm going to put it together. I don't have an allegiance to

straightforward narrative, versus a fractured narrative, versus a magical realist tack. While it's the only story that has an overt, otherworldly aspect, it's doing some of the same things some of the other stories do, where similar events recur and you're not sure which ones are real. In terms of form, although I agree with you that the ending clearly takes off that way, you could ground this in reality and say the guy's in bed dying. In a sense, what started this story was the cliché of your life flashing before your eyes. I intimate during the story that he may be having a heart attack, he may be dying, one way or another, and that these events just happen to him. Or, the other extreme is he goes downstairs and there are actually angels sitting in his kitchen.

To me, it was more a matter of how you put the story together and focus on this character's last night and how things might happen. It's a pretty downer book in a lot of ways. I wanted to have something at the end that could tie all the stories together. While the majority are about the difficulty and the fracturing of relationships, especially between a father and his son, I wanted the last story to be a coming together of all of them.

More mundanely, the only thing I still have from my grandfather in Israel is a Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) card he sent me when I was a kid. It had a picture of these Hassidim with arms around each other singing and that image led to the story in some ways.

**WASSERMAN:** Is this a style that you had considered exploring for a while or one that you thought fit this story in particular?

**HAVAZELET:** Mostly this story. I could talk equally about some of the more mundane-seeming stories, about how structure and form intrigued me. I don't set out and say, 'I want to write a magical realism story or I want to write a straight, linear, traditional narrative.' I think of how to approach the character. For instance, in this story and in the story about the mother dying, I just had this notion of someone at the end of his or her life looking back and things recurring, changing. Ruth's Story, to me, is very similar in structure to *Eight Rabbis*, although you could say the tonality of Ruth's Story is more realistic. It's a matter of how you get at the character, ultimately, and sometimes it occurs to me in a straight line and sometimes as these recurring, cyclical passes.

**WASSERMAN:** Many writers drawn to magical realism are also intrigued by religion. Rushdie comes to mind again. Something that I found interesting about this story is that, while it seems to embody a magical realism perspective and style, of all the stories in the collection this one doesn't seem to be as concerned with religion as the others.

**HAVAZELET:** I come at religion from the side because I grew up in a religious atmosphere. I spent most of my life running from it, rebelling. And now I find things bubbling up in terms of my experience and my relationship to the past and my relationship to my family. The father in this story is religious, but it's not the religious aspect of it that interests me. If I'm interested in religion for the stories, it's how it affects people and offers to some a chance for transcendence or escape or purpose, and to others a curtailment of those things, the notion of somebody's values being forced upon you. It's another way that people look for meaning and look for control and look for verification of their view of things by having support from others.

But I am intrigued by the notion of belief: it has tremendous power. If you believe things they can happen. They don't necessarily happen the way you want them to, however. The end of *Eight Rabbis* is not the way Birnbaum would have choreographed his reunion. There's no

handholding, no sense of 'it's going to be fun now.' But there is inclusion, which I think on a deeper sense is what he wants.

**WASSERMAN:** *Eight Rabbis on the Roof* is certainly one of the more playful pieces in the collection where you address the confrontation between the past and the present. Much of the fiction on Jewish themes found today seems almost obsessed with the past, particularly a surface-level anti-Semitism and nostalgia for an immigrant experience that no longer exists. Your characters in this collection, with the exception of those in the story *Lyon*, seem to be more concerned with the present than the past. Rather than fighting anti-Semitism, they are at war with themselves. Do you find that this approach has been well received or criticized by readers?

**HAVAZELET:** I think that's smart, interesting. I don't think anyone has actually discussed that. What interests me is the collision of the past with the present, and I think just to be Jewish is to carry a lot of baggage of memory and past. It's what religion is sociologically and culturally based on: how long we've been around and what we've gone through. History is a real weight. I didn't grow up a Protestant kid in New Jersey. I figure that has other baggage, but it's not five thousand years and the Holocaust and the rest. I think to be Jewish in a way heightens the questions everybody has: where do I fit in? where do the people who led to me fit into my life? how do I carry on what they did or escape from what they did? It's just more pointed in being Jewish. But you're right, I'm not nostalgic. At least not in my fiction. To me, it's really a matter of how to live now.

As the book moves along, I hope there's an accumulation of baggage for the characters, their private histories. When the son comes to put up the gravestone for his father, there's the baggage he has accumulated over the rest of his life and the rest of the stories so that history functions in a personal way. And you're right, that interests me more than hearkening back to a more simple past that I don't really believe ever existed. At least not the way people would hope it did.

**WASSERMAN:** The Israeli writer Amos Oz and his contemporaries seem to have tackled that issue beginning several decades ago; discussing the present in terms of where the past has led rather than being perpetually submerged in the events of those who came before us. Jewish-American authors, with some exceptions, and I consider you one, tend to revisit the past almost obsessively. Did you ever consider not including the story *Lyon* in the book, being that most of the stories are thematically situated in the present or are coming to terms with it rather than the past?

**HAVAZELET:** I had an idea of the structure of the book as a wheel with the central issues and questions at the hub and the stories as spokes that attach to this family and them to each other. It was that kind of organization, where stories, rather than developing along a linear axis, would be more spatially arrayed, looping back, refracting one on another. And I had a notion that I would have a long story punctuated by a short story about one of the minor characters or a minor event. It's kind of the way *In Our Time* (Hemingway) is put together.

A couple of things ended up subverting this scheme. Some of these short stories ended up quite long. *Leah*, the longest story in the book, originally was conceived as three of four pages. *Lyon* was originally not about the father, Birnbaum, it was about Schteiner, the father's friend in the title story, *Like Never Before*. And it was only when my editor and I were trying to put this

book together, spending several months juggling it and looking at different ways to set it up, that it occurred to me that to make the whole thing inclusive was to make *Lyon* about the father. And then I went back and had more resources for the other stories.

In terms of your question about the past, again, while I certainly would say that the important battlefield is now, as I said before I think you carry the weight of the past. In my conception of the book, it's crucial that we understand something of the father's burden. What's very clear, maybe too clear, is that the son can be a shit and doesn't know what to do with his anger and doesn't know where it comes from. I try to resolve that. A couple of critics said I didn't do it as well as I should have. They may be right. But we have some sense of what he had to go through to get here--whether he's justified or not is up to every reader. It seemed important to me, if we're talking about the weight being passed from one generation to the next, that we have some sense of where the father's came from. A lot can be implied, but that story nails it. It made him more specific to me as a character; he's not just an old Jewish guy whose dreams didn't work out and who's lived in the shadow of his father. He had this experience that could easily have altered everything that came afterwards. In that sense, the past functions in the present for him, it's never simply past.

I heard Lawrence Langer talk at OSU (Oregon State University), and he said something about Holocaust victims which I thought was really smart. He said that people live in both chronological time and durational time. For you and me, he says, things happen and we move onto other things. That's chronological time. But Holocaust survivors, because everything stopped then, live in one unending durational moment which never ends. They keep reliving the moment, never move beyond it. That really struck me. If an event like that happened, if you had to choose between your life and your brother's, I don't think you could just leave it behind. It is part of the present in the sense that it's there informing and infusing every action that he does afterwards. It interests me in terms of the character rather than past verses present.

**WASSERMAN:** As an audience, American Jews tend to gravitate towards film and literature on Jewish themes that perpetuate an old-world nostalgia we were just discussing, and in many ways tell us what we already know. Cinema seems to especially shy away from tackling contemporary Jewish themes on a sophisticated level. Why do you feel this continues and is accepted? Do you see this artistic trend changing anytime soon?

**HVAZELET:** No. I think most people read to be consoled, they want what's familiar. That's why we like TV--you know the characters, you know the plot. Even the surprises are predictable. People read to be entertained, which is why romance novels and thrillers are so popular, because the form is already understood and the trajectory is mapped out. I think like any other group, a lot of people who read Jewish fiction are looking for the consolation that 'look, my history matters,' 'my way of life--whether I've held onto it or turned my back on it--has interest, has meaning.' The consolation of the familiar.

Most serious writing, while it certainly explores the familiar, is about moving beyond it. Art doesn't aim to entertain, it aims to disturb. I'd much rather have somebody read my book and not be able to get it out of his head and be concerned about it than love it and say, 'oh, this makes me feel all warm inside.' In that sense, popular Jewish fiction just mirrors what's true about all fiction. I haven't read Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. Assuming it's a wonderful book, I think it's safe to say the books that follow it will be tapping into this nostalgic, sepia-toned version of Irish history, because people respond to it.

That's not necessarily something to scorn. I'm glad I can tap into a place, some people, it makes the work authentic. On the other hand it's not what I'm mainly concerned with. The Jewish writers I admire are the ones who have the weight to move beyond their antecedents.

There's going to be a core of people who come to fiction because of its familiarity. And while I would love those people to buy my books and enjoy them, I can't say I'm writing for them.

**WASSERMAN:** When *Schindler's List* was released, people who criticized the book and the movie received a great backlash. There seemed to be a need in the Jewish community at large to hold up this story for all to see and that criticizing it was almost taboo at the time.

**HAVAZELET:** It's complicated. What's undeniable about *Schindler's List* and the mini-series *Holocaust*, which came out in the Seventies when I was in college, is they're popular, they reach millions of people, and they bring the question of the Holocaust and the Jewish angle on history to people who didn't know or didn't care about it. That certainly can have its benefits. I don't think you can be fully alive in this world and not have some sense of the Holocaust. Not just the Jewish Holocaust, the Armenian Holocaust, what's gone on in Kosovo, Rwanda. Again, looking for comfort, people want to deny and want to not pay attention. So, on the one hand, it's important, useful.

I did feel a kind of thrill of vindication when I saw *Schindler's List*. Part of me said, 'that's my story, that's my people and it's up there. It's up there on the big screen and millions of people are watching it.' On the other hand it's popular culture. It can demean the issue. It's like anything else that is sacred to people. You want everyone to be involved and to be cognizant of it, but you don't want to let it go. It's yours. The other question is how good is it? Is it art or friendly propaganda (this time)? And that's a real complicated question for me. I realize that I responded emotionally to *Schindler's List* in a way that I didn't to *The Color Purple*.

**WASSERMAN:** Analyzing *Schindler's List* artistically is very different when you detach that emotion.

**HAVAZELET:** Exactly. After I came out of *The Color Purple* and denounced it right and left as sentimental and obvious, I was sure that I was responding the right way, that my aesthetics were leading my emotions and that's the way it should be. I had a talk with a friend of mine, Michael Ryan, at the Warren Wilson program where I also teach, and he denounced *Schindler's List* as Hollywood and trite and basely manipulative. It was an interesting talk because I said that I came out of *Schindler's List* with my emotions leading me. I was manipulated, no complaints. So suddenly I'm like one of those readers we were talking about before who just responds saying, 'oh it's the old family, it's the *shtetl*.' The *oy vey* approach to literature. And it made me remember again how powerful that is. If we don't tap into people's emotions, if we just address their intellects, their aesthetic codes, we're going to lose them. That's not to say you just concede and go for the sentimental and that *Schindler's List* is a great work of art because it's an important story. I don't think it's a great work of art but I think it's an important movie, and it was an important event for our culture. The fact that it led to Spielberg doing his Holocaust archive project and that documentary movie--I haven't seen it--is admirable.

**WASSERMAN:** I have seen the documentary, it's called *The Last Days*.

**HAVAZELET:** Really, how is it?

**WASSERMAN:** I enjoyed it far more than *Schindler's List*, and I think when you do have a chance to see it you're going to be surprised to find *Lyon* in the movie. There's plenty of stories like that, I'm sure.

**HAVAZELET:** I based *Lyon* on a true story, it really did happen.

**WASSERMAN:** The one topic in contemporary Jewish society that popular culture tends to avoid is romantic involvement between Jews and non-Jews. It's generally reduced to a sound bite or a one-liner in a sit-com. I don't know about you, but I have never found a film that has completely submerged me into the psychology that some of the fiction on interfaith romantic themes has achieved. More recently, Allegra Goodman's *The Family Markowitz*, while a book I very much enjoyed, never showed me that Goodman herself possessed personal comprehension to ground her depiction of interfaith relationships in. Your stories in *Like Never Before* that address interfaith relationships are extremely real.

**HAVAZELET:** Part of it comes from what type of person you are. Generations have their overall impulses, trends. Allegra Goodman is hugely talented. I've only read her first collection and parts of the second. I have her novel, I haven't read it yet. I don't think you can necessarily expect everybody to go out and have the same experiences. There is a movement of writers, probably spearheaded by Cynthia Ozick, that is proudly embracing traditional Jewish life and not trying to turn their back on what's contemporary but saying 'this has been shunted aside and we want to embrace it and make it central.' That's a value in the hands of writers like Allegra Goodman to make terrific art out of. It can also be sentimentalized. All I have is my take on the world. If I were to write a story about somebody embracing traditional Orthodox ways, it wouldn't be authentic. For Goodman, Ozick, it is. We all have our own stories. The other part of it is what we were talking about before. Many readers read to have their values affirmed, not to have them challenged. That's why Philip Roth has pissed off so many people from the start. I think all great writing has to challenge. Great writers can affirm beliefs at the same time that they challenge aspects or consequences of those beliefs, as when belief gets turned into edict. Malamud did that, Singer did that.

**WASSERMAN:** Saul Bellow comes to mind as well.

**HAVAZELET:** Right. It's what you do with the material. I don't look at Allegra Goodman and say 'I'm not interested because she's writing from a traditional slant.' I am interested because she's a terrific writer; her material is her material. Based on her abilities I'm interested in anything she writes.

**WASSERMAN:** I've enjoyed Allegra Goodman's writing tremendously, yet I read passages about interfaith relationships in her work and draw the sense that the beliefs conveyed are hers and not necessarily the natural choices of her characters. The characters in those predicaments did not come alive and literally follow me to the dinner table after I set the book down the way her other characters had so brilliantly done. I didn't receive that impression from *Like Never*

*Before*, particularly with the central character, David, and his relationship to his second wife, Janine. There is a great deal of empathy and understanding in that character, traits that the Jewish characters in the book are struggling to discover in themselves. What choices did you make in constructing Janine's character in relation to David's family and his first wife, Maura?

**HAVAZELET:** Structurally, in terms of putting together the book, I wanted David to start having a little luck in his own small, battered way, and to deserve it. You bring on your luck, largely, your fate. I thought of that part of the story as a forgiving time. I conceived of Janine as someone who was going to help David finally make a home and family of his own. It wasn't the idea that a non-Jewish woman would be doing this. To me, David and his father and sister--and all the characters in this book, and all the ones I write about, for that matter--don't know who they are, don't have what we're all just supposed to be born with, this absolute rock-solid identity; 'this is where I came from, this is what I do.' And I don't know that anybody has it, really. Think of the Kennedys. Who knows more about who they are than the Kennedys? But then you look at how each individual Kennedy struggles with it.

**WASSERMAN:** And with the same struggles it seems as well, generation to generation.

**HAVAZELET:** Yeah. Nobody has it. And that's why the traditional certainties are so alluring. If you know, 'I'm a Jewish man and I behave this way,' you're supposed to have that solid identity. I don't. I never did. I don't believe most people do. To me, it was a matter of David, in a small and a very inglorious way—this is somebody who had intelligence and talent and ambitions living in a pretty shitty little house in Oregon and working on cars—being literally grounded. He's working in the land, he's a landscaper, he's got two kids and he's trying. He's still carrying the weight of the anger that he's had all along. And that's what Janine meant to me--forgiveness. Another chance. Part of it is biographical. I've been married to two women who aren't Jewish, so I know about it. I know something about the tension built into how you make that work. But thematically what interests me is exile. That's what I take as the central Jewish experience, starting with Adam and Eve. You're tossed. David bounced around the country and bounced from his family to other families and has never known where he fits. Same thing for the father. To him, everything made sense, or had the potential of making sense, until the war. In *Lyon* he says, back in Poland he would have been in Gymnasium (high school) now, looking at girls. Instead where is he? He doesn't know what he's doing. And to me, that's a central experience this century for many people. Salman Rushdie has written about it. Exiles are all over the place. We don't think of that as often as we should. I wanted David to find a home and it would likely not be with somebody who is Jewish or traditional because he's moved so far from where he started, those options aren't there anymore. Geographically—and I think of this in myself sometimes—he's slid all the way from New York to Oregon. If you don't hold on there, there's the ocean, the end. He's digging in here, making his stand. I'm glad you responded that way to Janine, because I like her a lot, too.

**WASSERMAN:** As far as this idea of exile is concerned, it seems that the farther your characters move geographically from the ones they love, the closer they are to them. Do you feel that physical distance really moves people closer spiritually and emotionally?

**HAVAZELET:** That's a good insight. I think it's a more common human experience or emotion than perhaps we recognize. Malamud said he wasn't able to write about New York until he moved to Oregon. Part of it is what we were discussing earlier about nostalgia. It's a hugely powerful emotion, and you don't necessarily value what you have until you lose it. The flip side is you can't stand what you have until you're away from it, and then you try to figure it out. When it's surrounding you it's tumultuous and you don't even know how to value it, you need to fight or acquiesce or get away from it. Exile is an elemental experience for many people.

**WASSERMAN:** It can be a rewarding experience as well.

**HAVAZELET:** It's got a long tradition in our literature. Ishmael has to get on a boat out in the middle of nowhere to find any sense of meaning. Hawthorne writes about Young Goodman Brown having to leave Salem; all his characters are trapped. The Scarlet Letter is about exile. Huck Finn in the Territories, that's the only place he can find meaning. I think that's something that is essentially true, going back to the biblical story of the prodigal son. He wouldn't have been what he ended up being had he stayed home and been the good kid. He would have been the unprodigal brother that we don't even hear about who stayed home, took over the business, did what everyone wanted him to do. Growth is often tied to exile. That's why age is so important. As much as in many ways I lament getting older, I value it because I have lost certain things and there are opportunities that won't come back, and there are people I won't see again. What's taken away enriches me, which is the opposite of what I felt when I was young and felt I had to have everything at once. You don't even know what to do with what you do have. Exile is mirrored in our country, as well. I remember reading a statistic that for my parents' generation a person would live in two point something houses, have one point something jobs, and for my generation, let alone yours, it's like eight point something jobs and twelve point something houses. Well, that's what's happening.

**WASSERMAN:** Moving back to the book, one of my favorite stories, which you mentioned earlier, is *Leah*. What has been the reaction to this story having been written in the first person from a woman's perspective? Have female readers had a problem with that?

**HAVAZELET:** No. It's been very nice. Anybody who's responded to it, at least to my face, has responded well. Again, formally it was very important to me. Another thematic in this book is the whole notion of narrative, of story, and the idea that someone who tells a story owns it. A story is something you give somebody. And that suggests you have it to give, some sense of proprietorship. That's something I challenge. In *To Live In Tiflis in the Springtime* David, in a sense, caps what the whole book's about. At the Oregon Book Awards they asked me to come up with a paragraph to be read, so I picked the one that says 'stories are everywhere, you don't know your own story and he didn't understand his own story, maybe his parents, now that they were dead, understood theirs.' A lot of the book is about 'what is my story, how do I tell this story.' And characters are consistently getting in over their heads, they don't know what it is.

*Leah*, which as I said started as one of these little pieces, just blossomed and I had a lot of fun writing it. Aside from falling in love with the narrator—I really like her and the voice—what I reveled in was the notion that here was a woman finally having the voice. I'm very interested, politically, in women's role in the world I grew up in. My mother wouldn't agree, my sisters



either, but at least in my take on how we grew up, so much of traditional, Orthodox observance is based on the man's role, the man's obligation, the *mitzvot* he has to perform. There are three *mitzvot* that a woman is supposed to do and hundreds for a man. Leah shows one of the women characters asserting herself and telling her story.

At the same time, because I need to undercut whatever I set up, she doesn't have control of her own story, it's not Rachel's story. It's Leah's story. Rachel appears on the outskirts, she introduces herself, then she disappears. Like the other characters, she would like to say 'this is who I am, this is my story, this is the beginning, the middle and the end and it ended happily,' instead she is trying to figure it out and trying to say 'well, my story is located somehow in my cousin's story, refracted by it perhaps.' That was the essential thing that drew me to it. You didn't ask this specifically, but perhaps it's one of the things you're getting at, that any writer has the right and the obligation to write from whatever point of view he can animate and make real. If you can't do it then you shouldn't, and you don't have a right to do it. I feel at home with a woman's perspective. I have three sisters. A lot of the writers most important to me are women, though that's a different issue. If you were to ask me what's the greatest turn or the greatest development we've seen in our literature in the last thirty or forty years, I'd say it's the emergence of women writers, that there are people like Alice Munro and Grace Paley, Flannery O'Connor and Katherine Anne Porter who are giving their version of the world to counter the Faulkner, Hemingway--especially Hemingway--notion of how the world is put together. And I think I come at the world from their angle. The defining moments aren't, finally, warfare and heroism and seduction.

**WASSERMAN:** Or killing a bull?

**HAVAZELET:** Right. The important questions are who will keep the family together or who is going to be responsible for it falling apart. I don't mean to suggest that women are stuck solely to the traditional roles, but that they have perhaps an innate way of looking at the world that is more organic, has more of a sense of something that needs to be held together, as opposed to something that needs to be ripped to pieces. That's what I respond to, in any case. Women writers have us leaning in that direction, and it's about time.

**WASSERMAN:** Many ethnic writers are offended when outsiders who have only an observational perspective attempt to write about their people. How would you feel about a non-Jew writing from a Jewish perspective?

**HAVAZELET:** As to a non-Jew writing from a Jewish perspective, I feel basically the same way as what we discussed about a man writing from a woman's point of view: if the voice can be inhabited, made alive and authentic, it's fair game for any writer. The question a writer has to ask himself is whether he can do these things; if he can't, he should stay away.

**WASSERMAN:** There's a tremendous theme of invisibility in the book. The two characters in Leah seem to exemplify that. Each cannot help feeling absent from the world they live in, that the other has something precious they do not possess themselves.

**HAVAZELET:** Women are often invisible in Orthodox culture. They do the stuff that makes the man's world go, and that's supposed to be enough. I know there are people who would

dispute it, and I don't mean that it is this way in every family, but that is the way I look at the world I grew up in. Then there's the sense we've been discussing of NOBODY knowing where they are and of trying to find each other. What interests me in this particular story is that there's no one answer. There's people who read the story and said at the end Leah is the happy one and she's the traditional one and the moral is that if you stay within the tradition you'll find your place. She's got a wonderful marriage, I think. I'm very happy for her at the end with her boys and with her husband. In one way, Rachel is the unhappiest character in the book. On the other hand, that's not what I felt at all. Rachel couldn't have stayed, it was never an option for her. She's someone who needs to explore, needs to stretch boundaries. To me, it's Keats's notion of negative capability, it's not simply one way or the other. What might work for Leah wouldn't work for Rachel, certainly wouldn't work for David. The most important moment in the book is when Leah tells Rachel 'nothing was ever enough for you.' And Rachel doesn't know what to do with that information, but she needs to hear it, and maybe the next relationship she has will last. In that sense, if you knew who you were and you knew where you stood and you knew all the things you're supposed to know about yourself, you could take on an imminence and undeniability. But since most of these characters don't, they see themselves in others, in what they are not able to be. The father sees himself in the reflection of his father and of his dead brother. David sees himself in the reflection of his father and is constantly moving away from what he's supposed to be. Rachel defines herself by her cousin. The mother, when she tells her story before she dies, in a similar way, can't just tell it straight out, it's in fragments. It's not chronological because it's not something she could just assert control over. They learn what they need to about themselves only by what's reflected in other people.

**WASSERMAN:** In the United States, Judaism is usually viewed from a Conservative or Reform viewpoint. Many American Jews, particularly women, have difficulty in Orthodox environments. The irony of course is that the bloodline of the Jewish people is passed through the mother in the context of a male-dominated world.

**HAVAZELET:** Yeah. I'm not an observant Jew, so this may not be my province to have an opinion about. But I think the future of the religion, like the future of all religions, will be in the reforming movements, in inclusive, adaptive roles.

**WASSERMAN:** Some people who have studied in *yeshiva* leave because they have trouble with the idea that all the answers are put before them. Then again, some people don't have problems with that.

**HAVAZELET:** Yeah. I have a cousin. We grew up in many ways very similar, and now he lives in the Old City of Jerusalem and has a dozen kids and teaches in *yeshiva* there. And I don't mean to judge him. I haven't spoken to him in twenty years. But I do have the sense he has found the answers, he's found a place where he's safe and I think that that can't be over-estimated. After all, that's what we want to offer our children, a feeling of control, and safety, that if you do what your parents tell you you'll make it through the night and you'll be fed and bathed and have a warm place to sleep. It's scary to grow up and leave that. For some of us it's unavoidable and for others it is avoidable. I don't know that we can judge either side too harshly. At the same time I think we have to analyze what goes into the choices that are made, and certainly what goes into

the situation where people make choices for others, which is what organized religion often does, which is what culture often does.

**WASSERMAN:** From your two collections alone it appears that, for you, the answers were more embedded in secular society.

**HAVAZELET:** Part of it's biographical. I came from a long, long line of rabbis on both sides, and maybe I didn't think I could add anything. I wanted to find my own way. I also responded to what I saw around me at least as much as to what I was taught. I've always enjoyed ritual as a cultural exercise more than a theological one, though it's not where I derive my sense of spirituality.

**WASSERMAN:** I'd like to move towards writing itself. Before we started this interview we were discussing writing programs. You hold an MFA degree from the prestigious University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Many writing programs tend to emphasize the short story. Faulkner said that the short story was the closest thing to poetry.

**HAVAZELET:** Faulkner said he wanted to be a poet but it was too hard. So he wrote stories and they were almost as hard. Then he wrote novels.

**WASSERMAN:** But the short story is definitely emphasized over the novel at the majority of writing programs. You've written two very impressive collections. Are you attempting to make the transition to a longer work right now?

**HAVAZELET:** I am, as a matter of fact. I'm going to try, anyway. I've been taking notes for a longer piece for a couple of years. I'm just starting to clear out the space in my head to start working on it. I hope I will. In terms of the emphasis, there's no simple right answer. I think for many people it makes sense to start off with stories. They're manageable; you write one, you learn what you need to about point of view or about scene construction, about irony. And then you move onto something else. Whereas if you're going to write a three-hundred-page book that's going to take you a year to draft, only then can you really start addressing what you've learned. I think it makes sense in the same way you look at a sculpture. Michelangelo wouldn't immediately start on David. He'd make a bust, work on something smaller. When you look at an artist's sketchbook, they're always doing hands and fingers and noses. They don't immediately start with everything at once. As you're learning you want to take something that you can analyze. You can say, 'I've done this; what do I have? what can I learn from it? how can I bring it to the next level?' For me, that's the valid reason for emphasizing stories. Some people are born novelists. And when students of mine are determined to write novels, if I think they're learning from it that's fine. The landscape, the canvas, it's just bigger for some people. It's harder to learn, it's harder to workshop, it's harder to discuss among a group of people. It's a much longer process. Still if that's the way they want to do it, it's not my role or desire to tell them not to.

**WASSERMAN:** Then the short story is simply more conducive in the classroom environment?

**HAVAZELET:** Absolutely. It's much easier to talk about. You can read the beginning, the middle and the end. If you bring in chapter six from your novel, we don't know what happened in the first five chapters, we don't know what happens in chapter twenty-five, and it's a lot harder for you as a writer to hear what you need to hear because you're aware of things that you're trying elsewhere. If we tell you that the point of view seems to wobble over here, you might say to yourself, 'well I need that for what happens later.' What may be most valuable for you and your process is not necessarily what we can even approach talking about. Countering that, often what has been implied by the story approach is that the short story is an apprentice form, that the novel is what grown-up writers do and that short stories are what you learn on the way. People like Carver have reversed that. My favorite writers, most of them, are storywriters. It's not an apprentice form, it's a distinct form that is the equal of novels. I try to emphasize that. The short story form may be easier to study, but it is distinct. Once you're making the choice of what you want to write, that should be an option. Some of our greatest storywriters--I don't have the right to say this--but I feel if Malamud, Flannery O'Connor, Cheever, certainly Carver, who spent years on a novel he never finished--if they had been freed, perhaps, of the societal expectation that they grow up and write these other things, and also from the monetary pressure--you can make more money from a novel--we would have had how many more Flannery O'Connor stories, how many more Raymond Carver stories? To me, Malamud is a wonderful novelist, but his genius is in the stories. Nobody will ever write stories like he did. That's his crowning glory.

**WASSERMAN:** Earlier you mentioned Hemingway's *In Our Time*. When he is discussed now, critics speak of his early works as the ones that still resonate and the later ones as rightfully less impressive and often flawed. But he too had a difficult time moving from the short story to the novel in his early career. Is part of the transition a matter of organization?

**HAVAZELET:** I think so. I guess there are people out there who jump into it and figure things out as they go along. As far as how the whole process happens, I get images, or snatches of a sentence, or a piece of dialogue. And all that is to me is a suggestion of some direction to move in. As I write I get more of these and there is eventually enough of a pattern for me to follow. Often I think I know where I'm going to write and it ends up being completely different. It often takes me a year to finish a story. I'll do a couple of complete drafts and then I'll toss the ending out, or I'll toss the beginning out. There's a tremendous amount of discovery and improvisation as it happens, but I need to know something about what I'm aiming for. I don't believe you can sustain very much simply on voice, inspiration and attitude. There are some stories that do, but it's not usually enough. Robert Lewis Stevenson supposedly had a dream one night and it took him two days to write *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. I remember people talking about how that's the way writing is, it's just inspiration. No, he happened to have a dream where the whole thing was laid out, he's done the work in his head. When I'm taking notes and filling my journals and just scribbling things in the pad I carry around, or nearly killing myself driving in the car and writing something down, that's writing too. That's the part that's helping me organize what I'm going to put down on paper. And I would guess that something like that happens to other writers. Like so much stuff that's associated with Hemingway, and I don't blame him for all of it, but this notion that you fuck a lot and drink a lot, then just sit down and art will pour out of you if you're intense enough, is a lie, it's crap. It doesn't have any use for writers, it demeans what writing is about. Writing's work, it's mostly dull, mostly construction.

**WASSERMAN:** And in reality, Hemingway rewrote the first paragraph to *A Farewell to Arms* repeatedly until he got it right. But he did like to perpetuate the image that it was inspiration alone.

**HAVAZELET:** Right. He was a wonderful writer in lots of ways. He can't be held completely accountable for becoming a media entity. In Hemingway's Paris Review interview--one of the best pieces on writing I've seen--he talks about the labor of it, that he didn't get a lot of words done every day. He had to gear up to do it. That's ignored nowadays for the drinking and fishing and the bullfights and the women and all that. But when he was a writer—which I don't think he was by the end, sadly—what he did was write. And the distinction is important. When Flannery O'Connor says that 'many people want to be writers but very few people want to write,' that's what she means.

**WASSERMAN:** Your writing in general reads quite lyrically. I imagine that you would bring that same style to a longer work. Have songwriters been an influence to you? Your admiration for the Grateful Dead is no secret.

**HAVAZELET:** I used to play guitar for a long time and I wrote songs, and never got very good at it. Certainly in terms of whatever goes on in my head, music is very important, lyricists like Robert Hunter or Dylan. I can't say I ever consciously look to songs when I'm writing but it's in my head. And I try to work the language, as I think any writer does.

**WASSERMAN:** *Like Never Before* and your previous collection, *What is it Then Between Us?* are separated by ten years in publication. Have you felt the inclination or perhaps any pressure now that you have a successful follow up to your first book to produce another one more quickly this time? Has winning the Oregon Book Award placed any additional expectations on you?

**HAVAZELET:** I guess. Sure. My agent told me if I had published a book every two years after the first book that I'd have a hell of a career by now. I'd certainly like to be more efficient and I'd like to keep any momentum that may have started or restarted going. On the other hand, without making any claims for *Like Never Before*, I'm pleased with it and I hope I have the patience and perseverance that if it takes ten years to do the next one, I'll give it ten years. I'm not naive enough to suggest I live in some cloister and I'm doing something rarified and I don't need to make money and don't need to support my family, that I'm above doing the work. If there's a way for me to work faster I certainly will. At the same time I feel blessed to have the life, to have the wife and the son who've supported me so I can do the work like this. If I had had to publish this book five years earlier it wouldn't have been the same book. I've been lucky enough to have that time. I'd like to cut it down maybe to five years, that's what I'd aim for. But if it takes ten, it'll take ten.