Selective Memory: Review of Dara Horn's Novel, "A Guide for the Perplexed"

Michael Crichton's *Timeline* led a thousand novelists down wormholes, which seem to have replaced amnesia as a favorite literary crutch. Fortunately, Dara Horn, in her new novel, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, does not lean heavily on her vaguely suggested millennial wormhole.

The novel's ambitious structure rests on pedestrian prose. No one will mistake it for Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* or *Prague Cemetery*, its sources of inspiration. Still, I mostly enjoyed the book, whose sum is greater than its parts. After all, its most obvious inspiration, Maimonides' *Guide*, was for the benefit of all brows, low, middle or high, and I favor whatever inspires return to Rambam. It's fascinating to see Maimonides as a fictional character, even in a "supporting" role.

The central story meditates on sibling rivalry, redemption from guilt, and the uses of memory. The struggle between Josie and Judith Ashkenazi, a software designer and her bitterly envious sister, replays the tragedy and redemption of Joseph and his brothers: Josie standing in for Yosef, Judith for Yehuda. Due to her own hubris and her sister's manipulation, Josie finds herself in Egypt. During a stint organizing the computers of the new Alexandrian Library in Egypt, she is kidnapped. When her greedy jihadi captors find that her successful software (called "*Geniza*"--a mash-up of Facebook and Evernote on steroids) is not yet profitable, they give her out as dead.

Troweled over this foundation are several historical twins and doppelgangers. These include Solomon Schechter, who uncovered the Cairo *Geniza* from a millennium of dust, and his twin, Srulig, an Israeli pioneer. We also meet the so-called Westminster Twins, Margaret Gibson and Agnes Lewis, the discoverers of the "Lewis Codex," who introduced Schechter to the Hebrew *Ben Sira* fragment that led him to the ancient Ben Ezra Synagogue's *Geniza* storehouse of forgotten lore. These women provide comic relief, but also give the author the opportunity to introduce her readers to philological *termini technici*, such as palimpsests and *hapax legomena*. Below this early 20th century layer, in the 12th century, we meet Moses Ben Maimon and his brother David. In each case (except for the Westminster Twins), a sibling must repent and redeem an injury to a sibling.

The most interesting character was not a person at all, but a location, the "City of the Dead" in Cairo. Horn vividly portrays this immense cemetery, larger than many cities, thick with over four million impoverished Egyptians. The Egyptians have always built houses and rooms so that mourners could commune with their dead. People now live in this necropolis, despite the lack of roads, sewage, running water or electricity. You can see this crowded no-man's land on YouTube. The thug fanatics holding Josie Ashkenazi keep her chained in a horrid cell here, complete with its own sarcophagus.

The main story comes to its exciting conclusion relentlessly pushing its main theme, the need to "structure" memory to allow forgiveness. In other words, if we recall every detail of people's actions, like Josie's "*Geniza*" program does, we could never forgive them or forgive ourselves.

The Solomon Schechter story relives his penetration of the *Geniza*. What we do not see from the usual photos of Schechter working on the manuscripts is that the *Geniza* room is actually two stories high. Schechter had to enter by ladder from above, since the congregants of the synagogue had, over a thousand years, piled the entire first floor with parchment. Schechter wades through it, parchment centuries underfoot, parchment dust gagging him. Horn makes the *Geniza* a vivid character whose history and inner life weave dramatically through her yarn.

That brings us to the novel's Maimonides layer. Horn's Maimonides account made me question the literary fiction that welds him to her theme.

What happens is that her Saladin has undiagnosed asthma (an affliction many suffer in the novel). Maimonides saves the Sultan from a frightening asthmatic fit with a jolt of caffeine. Saladin then asks for a cure and Maimonides describes, at length, the regimen of moderation of his *On Asthma*. In one of her book's funnier moments, Saladin begs Maimonides to stop explaining, as he was "boring," and demands instead a complete cure for asthma.

When Maimonides learns from his younger brother David of an Indian herb with anti-asthmatic properties (ephedra), he forcefully prevails on his sibling to make the dangerous voyage to obtain it. David never returns from his shipwreck.

Overwhelmed by grief and guilt, Maimonides buries himself in writing the *Guide of the Perplexed*. He structures his self-reproach into his analysis of God's system of providence.

Horn does a good job of explaining the *Guide's* teaching. We have free will, and so does God, but those volitions cohere in a ramified justice system, which only God comprehends. The system is rational, but, in a sense, super-rational, since it negotiates infinite data points.

This conception saves both moral rationality and man's completely undetermined will. We are not victims, but agents responsible for our own actions, our Torah responsibilities, and the consequences of our dereliction of duty. So while Maimonides had no control over the roiling seas, he was liable, in this account, for urging his dutiful brother to make the disastrous trip. This is stark but liberating. Maimonides sublimates his guilt by perfecting this doctrine.

Could this story have been true? In an *Author's Note* appended to her novel, Horn admits to constructing this clever fiction linking Maimonides, David and Saladin.

The idea that Maimonides was Saladin's doctor is one that I used to chalk up to legend. Now I'm not so sure. Joel Kraemer seems convinced that Maimonides was one of Saladin's (many) doctors, while Herbert Davidson remains skeptical. I doubt that the asthmatic attack portrayed by Dara Horn could have happened at the height of Saladin's career, but something like it could conceivably have happened earlier, during his rise in Egypt. Maimonides did write several books for Saladin's eldest son al-Afdal (the *Regimen of Health*, and the *Causes of Symptoms*), so there was a strong connection between The Great Eagle and the Ayyubid Dynasty. Al-Afdal suffered from depression, hemorrhoids and some kind of cardiac problem, but not, apparently, from asthma.

Though Saladin died of an unspecified "fever," I saw no indication that he was an asthmatic, and I wonder if that could have been true. Maimonides wrote his book, *On Asthma*, for an unnamed Alexandrian nobleman. We do not know when he wrote it. Both Fred Rosner and Davidson consider that the term "asthma," as used in the book, does not apply to what doctors call asthma nowadays, but to some other respiratory difficulty. *On Asthma* goes into enormous (indeed, boring) detail setting up a regimen for daily life, including diet, bathing, exercise, as well as the use of enemas, emetics, *et cetera*. Maimonides even prescribe chicken soup.

I also know of no reason to think that Maimonides or his brother David knew of the herb Ephedra Sinica (*ma huang* – banned in the U.S.), or that it opens up the bronchial tubes.

So it is unlikely that a quest for anti-asthmatics could have precipitated David's untimely death. My understanding, rather, is that Maimonides' depression and guilt at the loss of his brother was the more general kind, not the effect of importuning David to shop for drugs in faraway isles. This reality, and not any forced rationale, is more poignant.

Nonetheless, apart from these quibbles, and some tedious passages about the family life of Josie Ashkenazi, I liked the book, and hope that it might introduce more people to the gift of Maimonides' theological and philosophical writings.