

BOOK CLUB KIT



SONGS  
FOR THE  
BROKEN-  
HEARTED

AYELET TSABARI



# A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

**DEAR READER,**

I wrote *Songs for the Brokenhearted* as a love letter (a love song, perhaps?) to my Jewish Yemeni community. It was also my way of rectifying my childhood experience: as a child growing up in a Yemeni neighborhood in Israel, I never read a book with Yemeni characters or one written by a Yemeni author. Like Zohara (in different circumstances), as I grew older, I distanced myself from my heritage and moved away from my home for years. So writing an entire novel about Yemeni Jews, a novel that told our stories, described our food, our songs and music, detailed our traditions and history, gave voice to our sorrows and pain, felt political, subversive. It also felt like a return. I wanted to celebrate us, to grant my community a place in literature, and to complicate and broaden the notion of Jewish and Israeli identity as it is mostly known in North America.

I said the book was a love song to my community, but, more specifically, I wrote it for the women of my community. On one hand, in the patriarchal society they had been raised in, the voices of women were often silenced, which is why they found an outlet in singing. But growing up, it was the women in my family who were the loudest, who took up the most space. I admired their strength and resilience, and the sense of sisterhood that I witnessed in that older generation and wished to belong to.

The inspiration for the novel came out of that admiration, and of my fascination with our oral traditions and my desire to integrate the rhythm and cadence of women's songs into my art. This is a novel about voice and voicelessness, about traditions lost and found, and about the unbreakable bonds between mothers and daughters.

Over the years I wrote this book, Zohara and Saida began to feel like family to me. I grew to love them and the cast of characters that surrounded them deeply. They seem so real to me that at times I'm almost surprised by their being fictional.


I hope you will grow to love these characters as much as I do.

**AYELET**





# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Zohara's identity change depending on where she is—Tel Aviv, New York, Thailand?
  2. "What an entirely different experience it was to be a boy in this culture," Ayelet Tsabari writes. Why do you think the Yemeni women's songs are not as respected as men's poetry? Similarly, do you think cultures with mostly oral histories are less respected than those written histories? Where do you see misogynist or bigoted biases like this playing out in your life or culture?
  3. How does *Songs for the Brokenhearted* tell a different story about Israel and Jewish identity than we've read before? What did you know about the Yemeni Israeli experience before reading this novel?
  4. What do we gain by hearing stories from marginalized voices? How can we elevate and amplify these stories when we hear them?
  5. Discuss the shame and inferiority Zohara feels—and has been made to feel—about her Yemeni Jewish identity. Where does this shame originate? How does she begin to dissolve it?
  6. If you are comfortable sharing, are there any aspects of your identity that you were made to be ashamed of? Where do you think these feelings originated? How can you combat them? Discuss, as a reading group, different strategies for finding pride in one's identity or heritage.
  7. How do the recordings—and later, Zohara's own singing—help her feel closer to her mother? How do these traditions help Zohara through her grief?
  8. What factors contribute to Yoni's slippery sense of self? Do you think he would have struggled in the same way if he hadn't lost his grandmother? Discuss.
  9. Many countries are built on founding myths—including the United States. What founding myths does the novel tell about Israel? What truths does it tell about Israel? How do the characters, especially Zohara, reconcile the grey areas between the myth and the truth?
  10. How does Zohara feel when she learns the truth about her parents' marriage?
  11. What traditions have been passed down in your family? How can you pass them to the next generation?
  12. What did you think of the ending of the novel?
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# PLAYLIST

Listen to a playlist inspired by *Songs of the Brokenhearted*,  
curated by Ayelet Tsabari, on Spotify

**IM NIN'ALU**

Ofra Haza

**HABIB GALBI**

A-WA

**מַסְכִּין יָא נַאֵס (MASKIN YA NAS)**

Bracha (Cohen) Ovadia

**JAT MAHIBATHI**

Yemen Blues

**YA MEHIJA**

Gulaza

**קוֹל לִלְחַבִּיב (KOL LILHABIB)**

Gila Beshari

**אֵיילת חֵן (AYELET HEN)**

Daklon, Rami Danoch

**GALBI**

Ofra Haza

**יָא גִ'מַעָה (YA JAMA'A)**

Zion Golan

**YA BANAT AL YEMEN**

SHIRAN

**UM MIN AL YAMAN**

Yemen Blues

**THIRTEEN PROPORTIONS**

The Diwan Project

**HANA MASH HU AL YAMAN**

A-WA

# BRURIA'S DATE COOKIES



## INGREDIENTS

### FOR THE DOUGH:

- 3.5 cups white flour (or 500 grams)
- 1 package margarine (200 grams) + ½ cup oil
- 2 packets vanilla sugar
- 1 packet baking powder (10 grams)
- ½ cup soda water (carbonated water)

### FOR THE SPREAD:

- 1 tub (450 grams) date paste
- Optional: 1 teaspoon cinnamon, 1 cup walnuts chopped

### GARNISH:

- Powdered sugar

## INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat an oven to 170°C (340°F) and prepare a baking sheet with parchment paper.
2. Roll dough with your hands, adding flour if needed, until you get a smooth dough texture that doesn't stick to your hands.
3. Form the dough into a ball and place it in a bowl covered with saran wrap. Let the dough rest in the fridge for at least an hour.
4. Remove the bowl from the fridge. Divide into two balls, return one to the fridge, and roll the first one with a rolling pin on floured baking paper into a rectangle, about 1/2 cm thick (straighten with a knife to get straight edges).
5. Spread an even layer of the date paste on top of the dough.
6. Optional: Sprinkle the cinnamon on top and chopped walnuts.
7. Gently roll out the dough from the long end of the rectangle. Repeat with the second ball. Transfer both rolls onto the baking sheet.
8. Mark even 1-inch thick slices, by cutting halfway into the roll (but don't slice them completely until they're baked).
9. Bake the cookies in the preheated oven for about 25–35 minutes.
10. Remove the cookies from the oven and let cool completely. Slice, sprinkle with powdered sugar, and serve.

# BRURIA'S DATE COOKIES



## SUBSTITUTES AND NOTES:

- If you can't find date paste, you can make it yourself easily! Pit 500 grams of medjool dates and soak them in warm water for two hours. Drain them but save the water. In a food processor blend the soaked, pitted dates with about 1 cup of the water they'd been soaked in and blend until smooth and in the consistency of a paste. You can keep in the fridge for about two months.
- The original recipe is non-dairy for kosher reasons. If you don't mind dairy, substitute oil and margarine for 300 grams softened butter.
- If you can't find vanilla sugar you can add 2-3 tablespoons sugar and 1 tsp. vanilla extract instead
- My mom insists that the soda water is essential, but I've seen other recipes that call for warm water.
- NOTE: In the book, the cookies are made as squares. The rolls are an easier version. If you want to make them as squares, just place one half of the dough into the bottom of the pan, spread a generous helping of the date spread and toppings and then cover with the second rolled dough on top. You can mark the squares in the same way as you would with the rolls. Once it's baked and cooled cut into squares.

# BRURIA'S SAVOURY KA'ADID COOKIES

(TRADITIONAL YEMENI COOKIES)

## INGREDIENTS

- 3.5 cups white flour (or 500 grams)
- 1 packets of baking flour (10 grams)
- ¼ cup sugar
- Nigella seeds, also known as black cumin (about 1 tbsp.)
- ½ to 1 tsp. table salt
- ¼ cup oil + 50 grams softened margarine (or ½ cup olive oil)
- 1 ½ cups water

## INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Mix everything together until you get a smooth dough. You can use a mixer or mix by hand (but make sure it's well blended).
2. Roll with a rolling pin on a flour dusted surface to about 1 centimeter thickness.
3. Create circular shapes with a cup (I used one that was 6.5 cm diameter).
4. 180°C (350°F) in the oven for about 45 minutes, until golden brown.
5. They should be hard and goldened, and, once cooled, crumbly and only mildly sweet (you can play with the savoriness and sweetness ratio according to your liking).



*All recipes courtesy of my mom, Yona.*

# SCHUG OR BISBAS (YONA'S RECIPE)

Schug is a condiment, kind of like pesto. It a bit spicy (but doesn't have to be too spicy) and makes a nice dip for bread or pitas.

## INGREDIENTS

- 1 bunch fresh washed cilantro (with stems)
- A quarter head of garlic, peeled
- ½ a handful of dry red chili (fresh is okay too, but might be spicier)
- ¼ tsp. ground cumin
- Salt

**My brother also adds: lemon juice, some olive oil, and cardamom. Feel free to try—but don't tell my mom.**

## INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Grind/blend cilantro, garlic, and chili in food processor or a meat grinder.
2. Once blended, add cumin and salt with a spoon.



*All recipes courtesy of my mom, Yona.*