Book Notes - *Rabbi Steven Rubenstein*

The Betrayers by David Bezmozgis

I was recently listening to an interview with David Bezmozgis, author of *The Betrayers*. The novel came out in 2014 and won the National Jewish Book Award. I had the opportunity to discuss the book at one of our Sisterhood Book Club events but I'm only now writing about it here as part of my Book Notes series.

Bezmozgis is currently planning a film (he is also a filmmaker in addition to being a novelist) based on the novel. It doesn't surprise me. I remember thinking when I first read the novel that it would make a great stage play because of the intensity of the dialogue.

There is a historical kernel to the novel and we recognize the character of Anatoly/Natan Sharansky right away as we begin the novel. Reading the novel was a reminder to me of the degree to which the history of Soviet Jewry has faded from the American Jewish consciousness. Just a couple of years ago our local Jewish Family Service celebrated the tremendous work that our Jewish community as well as the world Jewish community did it its fight to free Soviet Jews. That fight is one that is not often discussed in the contemporary Jewish community, especially in the United States. In Israel, the immigration of one million Soviet Jews in the 1990's continues to reverberate in the realm of politics, culture, and beyond.

Though *The Betrayers* is a relatively brief novel, summarizing it can't be done briefly. We can say this safely—Bezmozgis isn't interested in a simple story about one betrayer; his novel is called *The Betrayers* because the betrayals are multiple, multi-faceted, and are unresolved whether they occur in the deeper history of his characters or over the few emotionally-packed days on which the narrative is focused.

At its heart, *The Betrayers* is a meditation on what it means to be a moral person in everyday ways as well as in extreme circumstances. The themes of loyalty, forgiveness, and the challenges of both create wonderful tension throughout the novel. You'll read wondering how you might act in similar situations to the characters that Bezmozgis has created.