

# To Be / Yoav Avni

## A Book synopsis

Chong Levi was born in Israel to a foreign worker from China and a Jewish plumber from Jerusalem. "I'm an Israeli!" he says in almost any encounter with others.

When he was eight, both parents died in a car accident. Chong is sent to live with his relatives but he is too much trouble and soon he is sent to a foster family - the Moskowitzes.

Above his new bed, he hangs the photo of Abraham Maslow – a famous psychologist who developed a behavioral model of a pyramid with five floors. Chong's mother told him about this pyramid a few months before she died, and described each floor in the hierarchy of needs. The first is about food, the second about shelter and the top floor - the fifth floor - is about being. Who ever reached this floor, said his mother with her Chinese accent, knows how to be. And this is what Chong wants to do with his life: climb on this pyramid. Reach the top floor.

While growing up with the Moskowitzes, Chong falls deeply in love with his step sister – Yaara. And when he reaches the age of eighteen, he is drafted to the army like any other Israeli. There, something horrible happens. Something related to the talent he inherited from his late mother – the ability to handle shadows and silhouettes.

Five years later Chong owns a small Café in Tel-Aviv. His sister isolates herself from the world in a distant University campus, trying to find a solution to the biggest problem ever: what went wrong?

Why aren't we happy? They speak over the phone each Friday, once a week, at midnight.

One Friday during jogging a black Jeep stops besides Chong, and two men takes him to an inquiry that turns into a strange interview. From that point Chong is drawn to a secret project located in Weitzman institute. There, he meets a person who claims that the world is a fragment of his imagination, and no one – Chong, His Café, And his beloved step sister does not exist.

The novel takes place in Israel 2017, and sketches a fascinating view of Israel in the near future. It's a futuristic love story between two young individuals: one holds a fantastic secret from the past the other tries to solve the world's biggest problem. The book got great reviews and is nominated for the Israel Geffen award 2010.

#### Selected Reviews:

The laughs are really funny. The wisecracks are really wise. An intriguing smart author.

Ran bin-nun, Yedioth Ahronoth

To Be is one of the smartest and enjoying reads I had lately, Yoav Avni's voice is unique – intelligent and efficient. You are more than welocom to discover it yourselves.

Ariel Shoal, Makor Rishon

I enjoyed every minute. A moving love story and very funny to read.

Liad Mudrik, Galey Tzahal

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### Translation sample (Prolog)

**Translation sample by: Ira Moskowitz**

The first time you heard about the pyramid, you were eight years old.

Your mother waited patiently until the fourth cup of wine and then, whenever someone at the Levy family's holiday table mentioned the Egyptians, she placed another piece of the matzo-meal egg roll – which your father loved so much – on a paper plate, creating a triangle five stories high.

"That's what Abraham Maslow discovered about pyramids," she whispered to you when she finished. "A very wise man, a psychologist." She worked as a cleaning lady twice a week at the Beit Ariela library and would return home with old books in Hebrew and topics for conversion, but her accent bothered you. She also called your father 'Abraham.' Something kept you from understanding then that a foreign accent signifies, most of all, the knowledge of another language.

"Do you see?" She moved the plate closer and served you a piece of dough she tore from the base of the pyramid. "Maslow knew that at first people think about food." All of your father's brothers – there are nine of them – scratched their white silk yarmulkes, interwoven with gold and purple thread, and mumbled impatiently. The women fell silent and the children stopped kicking each other under the holiday tablecloth and listened curiously.

"Next is safety," she continued. "That you have your own place, closed and protected. But then" – she paused, making sure you were listening – "then the big climb begins." She tapped a skinny finger on the third level of the pyramid and you watched the clear

track of oil the fingernail left in the soft egg roll. "Now, aftel eating and feeling safe, Ablaham Maslow discoveled that people also want to be loved." Your mother lifted her head from the plate, brushed the curtain of black hair from her slanted eyes and smiled, and for the first time in your life you saw your father blush. A venerable majority of six brothers out of nine, began to chuckle and their children burst into laughter, so your mother had to raise her voice a bit.

"And then ... and then they want people to appleciate them, to feel important," she said. And the brothers lowered their eyes, browsing the Haggadah or examining the celery. "Finally," she said, focusing attention on you again and holding your hand above the uppermost layer, the fifth, "at the top of the pylamid – high, high above, in the most impoltant place – Ablaham Maslow said that people want to fulfill themselves. That's a nice word – fulfill – light?" Your mother's Hebrew is even better than the prime minister's – that's what your father asserted at every opportunity. "To fulfill," she repeated. Do you know what it means to fulfill, Shiyau Chong?"

You were not sure. Two of your cousins reached for their cups, filled with grape juice, and your mother gave each of them a dismissive look. "It ... uh..." She froze for a moment and her eyes wandered. (This always happened when she was hunting for a word.) "To fulfill yourself is ... to be. Now, look:" She drew her fingers to her mouth and blew softly, and a quiver of elbow nudges, generating a domino effect of excitement, passed through the cousins, who had been waited for this all evening. She spread her hands, released two nimble ring fingers and folded a thumb. And as the extended family watched in astonishment, a sparkling shadow of a buoyant crown appeared on the wall – and she carefully placed the crown upon your head.

Your mother taught you almost everything you know about shadows. succeed



Abraham Maslow did not intend for a small child to succeed in climbing his pyramid so quickly, but that's precisely what you did. When the Passover seder was over, they offered to drive you home, but your father insisted that this was unnecessary and that you would take a taxi to Allenby Street. From there – you also realized – there was no reason to waste more money and it was possible to reach Ussishkin Street by walking the length of Ben-Yehuda Street. After showering, you lay in bed on your back, with your hands under your head. Tomorrow, you decided, you would wear the Adidas pants. (They told you in class that they were fake – they should have three stripes instead of four, but you didn't care.) And Tom Cruise and his Mission Impossible 2 would play the starring role on your shirt. You counted in your mind all of the things you ate that evening and your stomach purred like a contented cat. You heard your father lock the front door and you saw the shadow of your mother. You knew that she would soon come and whisper "good night" to you. Through the half-opened window in the living room, you listened to the reeds telling the river where to flow and you smelled a mocha-vanilla breeze blowing in from the ice cream parlors on Yermiyahu Street. You were glad you had a home of your own, and that it was in Tel Aviv. (In Netanya, for example, your mother informed you the next day – there was a horrible terror attack in one of the hotels.)

You were satiated, felt completely protected and loved, and had a sense of belonging and importance, and most of all, you knew that this is what you wanted to do when you grew up: to climb Maslow's pyramid, to reach the fifth story – to be.

Two days later, you accompanied your mother to work and you managed to acquire – in a way that was not quite legal – a picture of Maslow from one of the books on the Psychology shelf in the municipal library. (You sneezed with all your might as you ripped out the page.) In the picture, the professor is smiling at you, wearing an old sweater, with hair that looks like an open bundle of steel wool and with a matching moustache. You taped the picture on the wall, alongside your bed.

That same morning, the Defensive Shield operation began. The television and radio mobilized lots of reservists and a week later you found your father sitting in the kitchen together with your mother, who didn't stop weeping. The big black bag (on which she had embroidered "A. Levy Plumbing, Inc.") contained clothes this time instead of work tools.

"At least let me take you," she pleaded with him. "Let me take you, Ablaham!" When she saw you, she gathered you into her arms, and her fingers blurred your senses. "I'll leturn soon Shiyau Chong," she promised. "And in the molning we'll plactice some mole, okay?" That is the last real memory you have of them – the kitchen, early evening, with the planes thundering outside.

Your father stood up, lifted the bag onto his back and told her: "I'll drive." His lips were sealed tightly as he left. He passed by you with his head lowered and did not utter another word.



The fat neighbor from the third floor had looked after you in the past, but never like this.

Her smell was the opposite of your mother's – too strong, too big and, before you managed to protest, you awoke to a stifling and mumbling embrace: "My poor child, woe is me, My poor child."

Her poor child? Never. If your mother were there, you would have caught a scolding for your impolite facial expression. But what could you have done? Your face was pressed against the puree belly of the strange woman and, even before you knew exactly what had happened, the notion that you would be the poor child of someone else seemed illogical to you. Despite being unable to express the lonely feeling in words, you felt that you were very close to declaring your independence and recognizing that you are the center of gravity of your world – that there is no one else to whom you could complain or feel the need to thank.

Afterwards, someone from the municipality came and composed a stuttering sentence from the words: “come,” “sweetie,” “both of them” and “at least without pain.” And you felt as if someone had sprayed bathroom freshener in your eyes and you slid down the five stories of the pyramid.

You remained alone. Nobody's poor child.

And it was his fault. He drove.

The people from the municipality claimed that you were not really alone. After all, you had a large family. One of your uncles, Haim – the one who had convinced everyone to invite you and your parents to the family seder, the one who was the least angry at father for marrying a non-Jew – agreed to take you. You lived in Holon for a year, at 5 Great Rift Valley Street, but it was clear to you that it would be very difficult to resume climbing the pyramid from there. You did not get along there, or at Meir's home in Rishon Lezion, or at Yossi's in Azur. You quarreled with your cousins. You made Lucky, the obnoxious dog, dart into the street in hot pursuit of a shadow of a ball. You did not intend for him to get hurt. Your schoolwork suffered. You ran away from home one night and slept in a public park. Another time, you managed to get as far as the

Yarkon River on your own. You lasted for less than a month at Uncle Reuven's – you were in fifth grade, and when you raised your hand at the end of the lesson and asked the teacher why there is no difference in Hebrew between the words "non-Jewish woman" (goya) and "corpse" (gviya), they decided to call in the guidance counselor, who recommended a foster family.

That's how you arrived at the Moskowitzes.

The first evening, when you ate an omelet, dark bread, cottage cheese and salad, you kept quiet. (Here again, there was no rice.)

The mother tried very hard, and the pretty girl too: Every few minutes they asked you if everything was okay.

"Yes."

You hung Maslow as usual – next to the bed.

You folded and hid the "1908-1970" at the bottom of the picture, and for years the Moskowitzes assumed that the man with the steel wool hair, old sweater and moustache – was your father.

You did not correct them. Your name is Chong Levy, not Harry Potter – there is no reason for your scars to be written on your forehead.