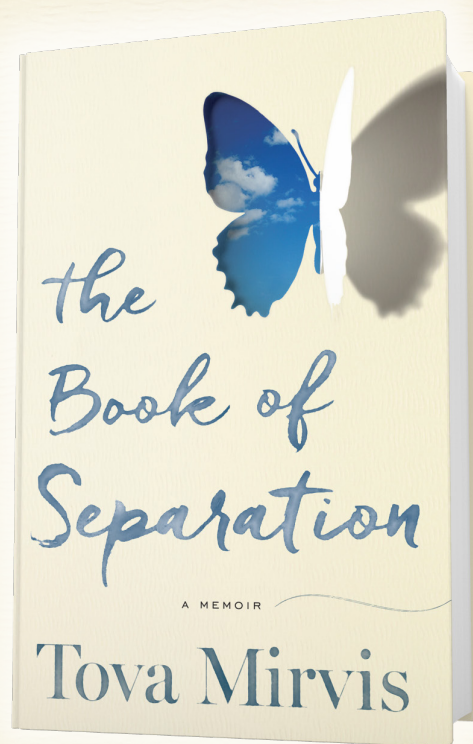


The Book of Separation

READING GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, Tova Mirvis wrote an essay that appeared in the *New York Times* about receiving a get—a Jewish bill of divorce—and recognizing that this religious ceremony marked not just the end of her marriage, but also her belonging to the Orthodox Jewish world in which she was raised. Mirvis received hundreds of emails from readers—men and women, young and old, of all religious backgrounds—who wanted to share their own stories of change and personal transformation. This experience inspired her to write *The Book of Separation*.

In this memoir, Mirvis explores how to leave a world that has shaped her and enter a new way of living—where so much is unmapped. How do you maintain a sense of tradition and remain close with family members who might believe differently than you do? And above all, how do you overcome fear and learn to heed your own voice? These questions that Mirvis addresses in her memoir have prompted discussion and reflection on universal themes that affect so many of her readers, including: motherhood, being a woman, finding home, defining freedom, and more. The following pages contain discussion questions that can spark a conversation among readers, as well as workshop questions that may be used individually or as a group to prompt writing exercises, greater reflection, or deeper analysis about one's own experiences—and how we relate to Mirvis's story and to each other.

If you are interested in having Tova Mirvis join your book discussion via Skype, please visit TovaMirvis.com for more information.

ON FEAR:

“If you left, you were in danger of losing everyone you loved. If you left, you could fall off the edge of the world.”

“Every day, before class, I had to remind myself of what one of my favorite writers Eudora Welty had written: ‘A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within.’”

“Until now, I had relied on others telling me what to do: the rules weren’t just a prison but a reprieve. I hadn’t needed to know what I really believed. I hadn’t needed to make the hardest of choices on my own. But to leave, I knew, was to have to decide for myself what I wanted and who I would be.”

Discussion Question:

In overcoming her fear of driving, how does Mirvis express overcoming other fears? What are her other fears?

Workshop Question:

Write or talk about a time when you faced a fear. What did that fear come from? Was it a reflection of a familial, social, or other pressure? Can you share the steps you took or what you had to overcome or reconcile to face that fear?



ON LEAVING:

“In the years in which I’d lain awake plotting escapes, I’d imagined some dramatic moment of departure. But sometimes leaving happens more quietly, not with any grand proclamations, but with a single, still action.”

“And this, I understand anew, is why it’s so hard to leave. Leaving wasn’t just about engaging in a set of once-forbidden actions. It’s changing the family story of who we are.”

“When you’re inside, good is a word that automatically belongs to you. When you leave, it’s a word you surrender at the gate. Despite the very meaning of my name, being good is something to which I can no longer lay claim.”

Discussion Question:

What does being “good” mean to Mirvis? How has “leaving” made her question or redefine this term and her identity?

“To leave a marriage, to leave a religion, you never go just once. You have to leave again and again.”

Workshop Question:

Have you experienced this in your own life? Write about or consider the different ways that you have had to leave something or someone.

ON WRITING:

“One sentence sets free another sentence.”

“More than anything, I wanted to write bravely. I wanted to speak openly. I wanted to live freely.”

“Anything that did not uphold or affirm—could you think it? Could you say it? . . . Even worse, did you dare write it? Yet being a writer, I was learning, required a willingness to cast aside these restrictions. To write was to enter an underground that was rich and teeming . . . a house with corners and hallways, passageways to follow and explore.”

Discussion Question:

How does writing help Mirvis find her way?

Workshop Question:

In your opinion, what are the goals of writing? How might they sometimes be at odds, if at all, with other frameworks? How might writing help counter—or reconcile—living within a specific set of rules for living?



ON BEING A WOMAN:

“Listen to the men recite the prayers, make the sermons, make the rules.”

“We were always subject to inspection, our bodies divided and measured and mapped.”

“The rules had always cloaked me like the long skirts I was supposed to wear, but by getting married, they were poised to enter my body as well.” (135)

“If someone were to ask why I covered my hair, I could explain why this ritual felt meaningful to other people, but the truth was that I did it because I wanted to be seen by my community as the type of woman who covered her hair.” (157)

Discussion Question:

Why did Mirvis initially strive to follow the rules for being an Orthodox woman, including her decision to wear a “fall”? What, do you think, was the moment, or series of moments, that led to her decision to stop following these rules?

Workshop Question:

Consider ways that your gender limits you, is policed, or even frees you. Do you think that it is appropriate for there to be different cultural, religious, or political laws or rules for different genders? Write about a time that your actions, options, or appearance was limited or scrutinized because of your gender. How did that make you feel? Do you agree or disagree with this scrutiny or rule?

ON FINDING HOME:

“No longer part of this community, any sense of home feels tenuous, irreparably broken. I stumble over the word home every time I say it, not sure that I can still lay claim to its comforts.”

“After the divorce, I’d let myself believe that there was only one kind of home and that ours was irreparably broken. But on this night, in this quiet house, home doesn’t need those solid unbreachable walls. It feels more like a small nest you could build for yourself and for those whom you love.” (273)

“I didn’t know until this year that there is comfort to be derived from being inside not just a community of people, but a body of water and a ring of trees. I didn’t know that you could belong to a lake, to a forest, to an expansive vista. Is beauty enough of an alternative? Can you trade the rules of so many books for the green of so many trees?” (285)

Discussion Question:

How did Mirvis define home within the Orthodox community? How did that definition change once she left?

Workshop Question:

How do you define home? Have you ever had to forge your own home after leaving a home into which you were born or were already accepted? What were the challenges? What were the rewards?



ON BEING A MOTHER:

“In motherhood, all of you is demanded, but sometimes that means giving your children the parts of you that are uncertain and unresolved.”

“My daughter slept and she woke and she continued to nurse. Be happy, I whispered in her small soft ear. Be free.”

“Oh Josh,’ I say, and as I look into his brown eyes, I feel my heart breaking open. Even at his young age, he knows the price to be paid for not following the rules.”

“This, more than anything, was the iron bar across the exit door—love was what tied you and kept you inside. Love was what you risked losing if you wanted to choose for yourself.” (154)

Discussion Question:

What are some of the ways that Mirvis redefined her role as a mother when she decided to leave the Orthodox community? How did this change her relationship with her children, if at all?

Workshop Question:

How have you reconciled freedom versus structure with your child [or parent]? In what ways are these two ideas intertwined? In what ways are they at odds?

FREEDOM

“I keep going, each word a tiny key unlocking one more tiny door. I had once thought that others could unlock these doors for you, but over this year, I’ve come to realize that no one can offer freedom to you. It’s yours to choose and claim.” (255)

“To be free, I’m learning, is to allow others to be free as well.” (248)

“In this moment, it feels clear to me: I still want to participate in this tradition with my children. Surely freeing yourself means being able to choose what to let go of as well as what to keep. By leaving, I don’t have to leave at all.” (244)

“I wanted freedom, and here it is—not the freedom of escape, not the freedom of fantasy, but a freedom that is confusing and daunting and complicated. In this freedom, there are no preordained questions, no easy answers, no ready definitions. No assurances of truth, no endless castigations about badness, but also no ready promises of goodness.” (207)

Discussion Question:

How did Mirvis’s definition of freedom change as she continued her journey with the Orthodox community? As a partner and a mother? What were some of the moments that helped her redefine freedom?

Workshop Question:

What is your definition of freedom? Have you changed that definition at any point in your life? How do you see your definition of freedom evolving as you age or your roles change? Do you define freedom differently within different situations or relationships?