
Vidal's sketches
call me Vidal
the diary of Vidal
Call Me Vidal
appelle moi Vidal
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Vidal's Sketch Book

Our father was one of the most infuriating, fascinating, complicated and loving people we've known. He was an engineer by trade, and an artist and painter by all accounts. He had an ease with languages. He spoke Hebrew, French and Arabic fluently. He picked up Yiddish and German in the camps. He knew some Italian.

He loved well-tailored clothing. He walked with a strut. Women adored him and he adored them. He left his home and his family in Tiberius, in British Mandate Palestine to follow a friend to Paris, then married his friend's sister, Sylvie. He lived like a bon vivant in Paris, painting and experiencing life to the fullest until World War II started. Then he found himself trapped, unable to leave or stay. He was part of the resistance until he was caught and eventually, he was sent to Auschwitz.

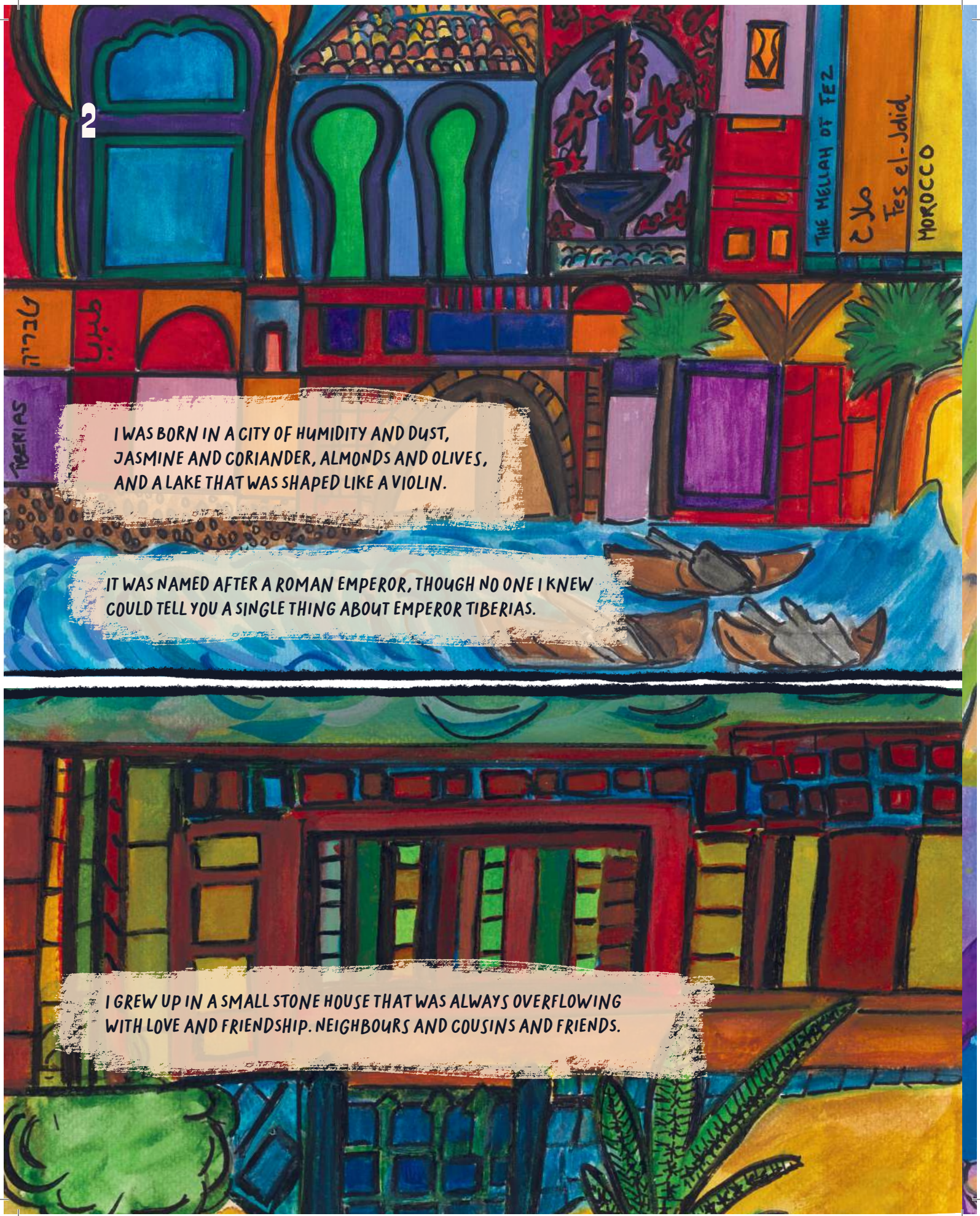
Our father hated the term survivor. He defined himself as so much more than those horrible years. But before he died, he gifted us with his journals and sketches from those years, notebook and sketchbooks that he'd labelled for us, and piles of drawings and paintings. We knew we wanted to publish them, and finally, towards the end of his life, he consented.

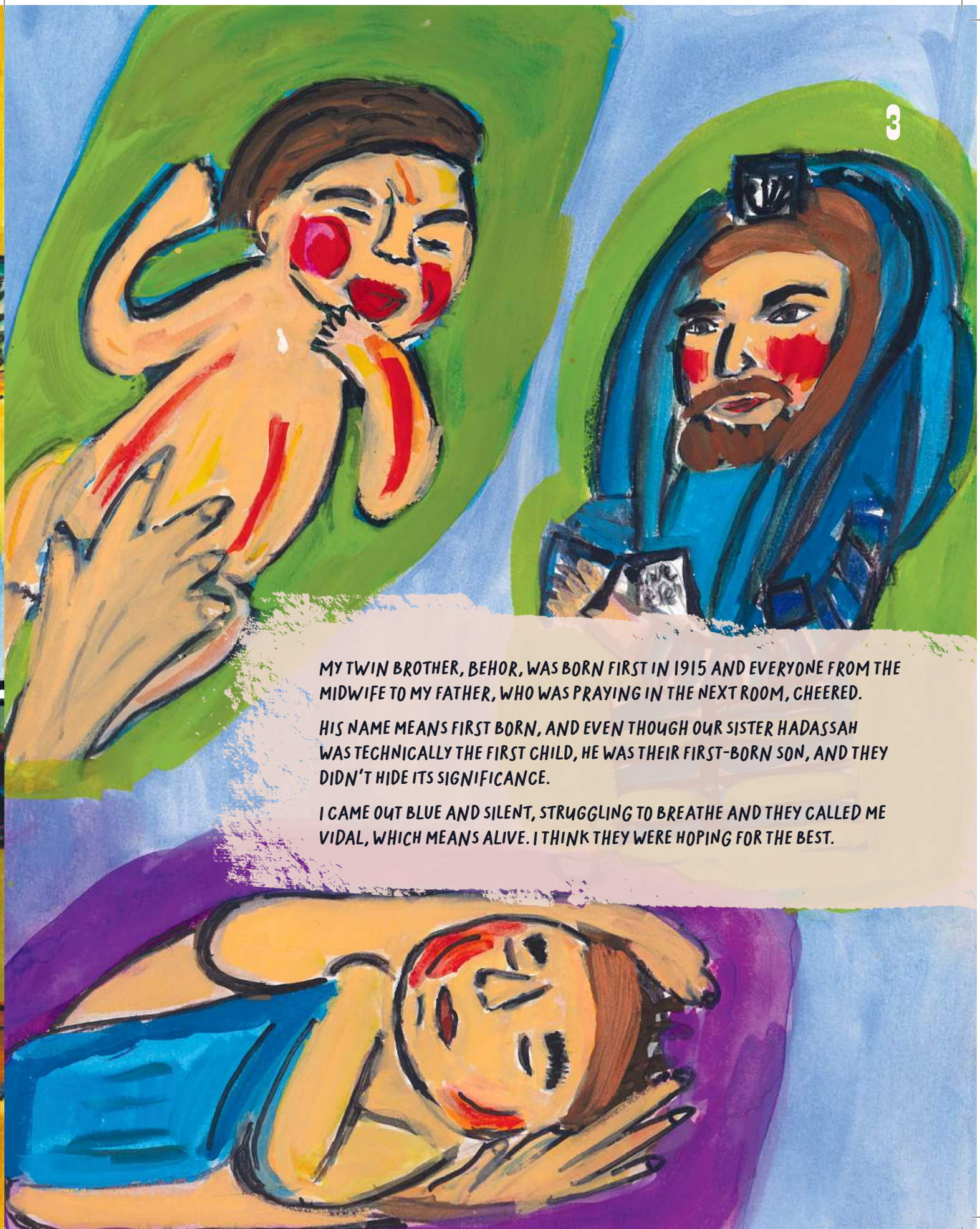
Our father loved taking risks. He was a lifelong smoker. He was always in search of love, and adventure. He loved travel, and good food, especially the Moroccan Jewish food of his childhood. Growing up, my sister Odette and I often wanted a more typical dad. He was haunted by the disappearance of our mother, Sylvie, and by the horrors he witnessed in his life after. We often wanted an easier life, a life free of sadness and trauma. But today, we see what a gift his personality was. And we want to share it.

When our father met someone, he'd introduce himself by saying: "Call me Vidal." So let us introduce him to you. Vidal Ben Soussan was charming and memorable. His art was beautiful, and his world-view was always interesting. Now, at this time in history, we want to share his story. All anyone wants is to be remembered. Our dad was full of colour, just like his paintings. Remember him, and remember what we knew of our mother, Sylvie Levy. Remember our family's story.

Aline Ben Soussan-Cohen and
Odette Ben Soussan- Oziel, Toronto, 2024


EXERCISE BOOK
اتصل بي فيدال
Call Me Vidal
A DIARY
NOTEBOOK #1


2
THE MELLAH OF FEZ
Fes el-Jdid
MOROCCO
TIBERIAS
I WAS BORN IN A CITY OF HUMIDITY AND DUST, JASMINE AND CORIANDER, ALMONDS AND OLIVES, AND A LAKE THAT WAS SHAPED LIKE A VIOLIN.
IT WAS NAMED AFTER A ROMAN EMPEROR, THOUGH NO ONE I KNEW COULD TELL YOU A SINGLE THING ABOUT EMPEROR TIBERIAS.
I GREW UP IN A SMALL STONE HOUSE THAT WAS ALWAYS OVERFLOWING WITH LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP. NEIGHBOURS AND COUSINS AND FRIENDS.



MY TWIN BROTHER, BEHOR, WAS BORN FIRST IN 1915 AND EVERYONE FROM THE MIDWIFE TO MY FATHER, WHO WAS PRAYING IN THE NEXT ROOM, CHEERED.

HIS NAME MEANS FIRST BORN, AND EVEN THOUGH OUR SISTER HADASSAH WAS TECHNICALLY THE FIRST CHILD, HE WAS THEIR FIRST-BORN SON, AND THEY DIDN'T HIDE ITS SIGNIFICANCE.

I CAME OUT BLUE AND SILENT, STRUGGLING TO BREATHE AND THEY CALLED ME VIDAL, WHICH MEANS ALIVE. I THINK THEY WERE HOPING FOR THE BEST.



TIBERIAS WAS KNOWN FOR ITS SCORCHING HEAT. IT WAS OFTEN FORTY DEGREES DAY AND NIGHT. IN THE SUMMERS, WE'D HANG COLD WET TOWELS ON OUR WINDOWS, TO GET SOME COOL AIR BLOWING IN FROM THE HOT BREATH ON THE BACK OF YOUR NECK FEELING OF THE HAMSIN.

WE SPENT A LOT OF SUMMER NIGHTS SLEEPING ON OUR ROOF. THE SKY SPARKLED WITH STARS, AND WE ALL CLIMBED THE LADDER TOGETHER, HOLDING HANDS UNTIL WE FELL ASLEEP. SOMETIMES WE COULD HEAR THE DISTANT LAPPING OF LAKE KINNERET AGAINST THE ROCKS ON THE SHORE. IT WAS A SOOTHING SOUND. WHEN IT GOT HOT ENOUGH TO FRY AN EGG ON THE SIDEWALK, WE STAYED AT OUR AUNT AND UNCLE'S IN TZFAT. THE MOUNTAIN AIR WAS MUCH COOLER.

THE BENSOUSSAN FAMILY WAS BIG, ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING THE SIZE OF OUR HOUSE. MY BROTHER AND I SHARED ONE BEDROOM, AND MY FOUR SISTERS SHARED THE OTHER.



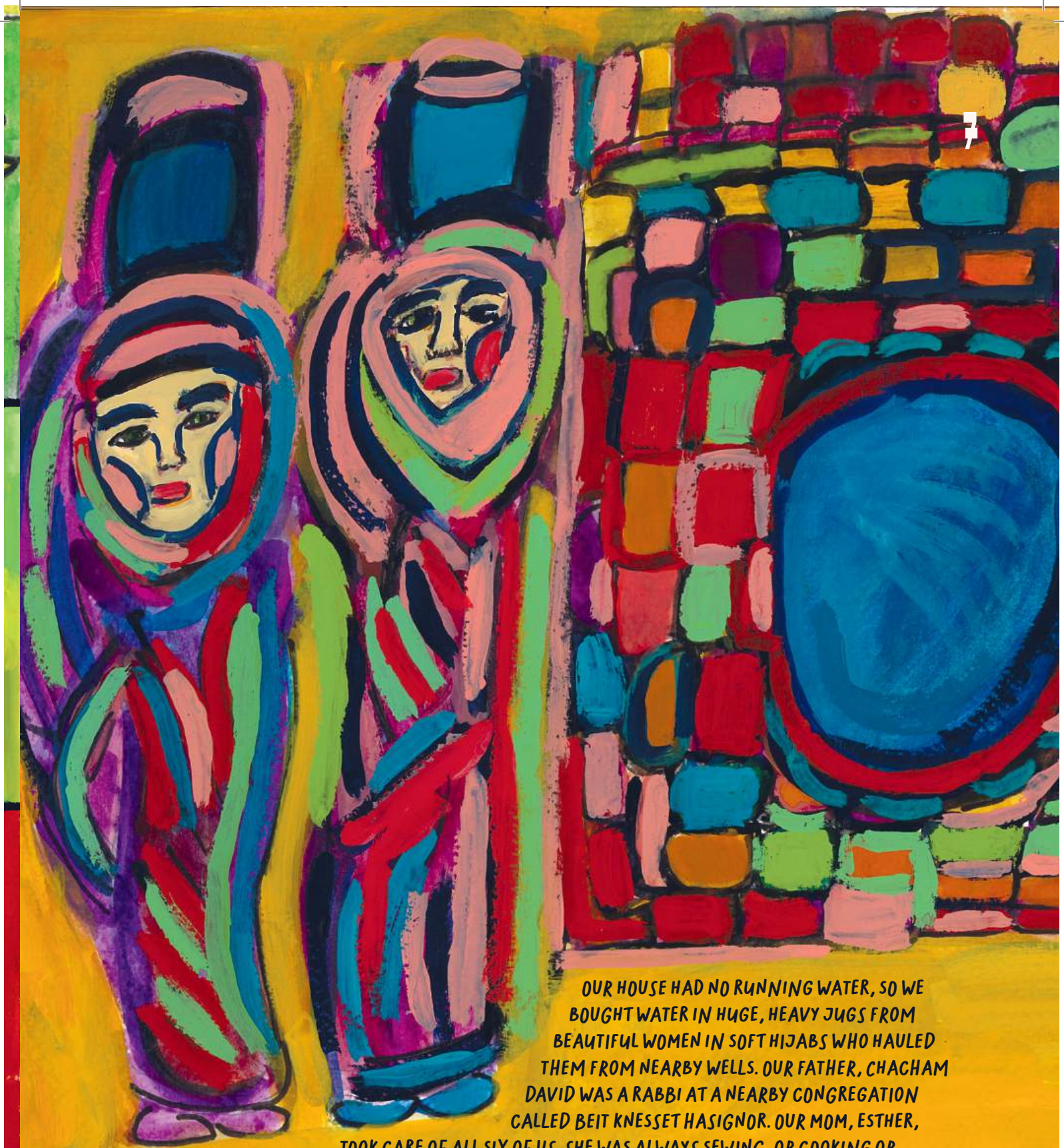
THROUGH THE WALL WE COULD HEAR OUR SISTERS LAUGHING OR FIGHTING. OUR PARENTS CONVERTED PART OF THE PANTRY INTO THEIR BEDROOM. OUR KITCHEN WAS ALWAYS FULL OF CUMIN, CINNAMON AND GARLIC, FLOUR AND SUGAR AND PICKLED LEMONS AND OLIVE OIL FROM OUR NEIGHBOUR'S GROVES.





WE HAD A TALL DATE PALM TREE NEAR TO OUR BLUE METAL GATE, AND CACTUSES GREW WILD AROUND OUR FENCE. OUR BACK YARD WAS LARGE, AND OFTEN FULL OF DAMP, FLAPPING LAUNDRY. WE HAD A SMALL PORCH OUTSIDE OUR KITCHEN WHERE MY DAD LIKED TO DAVEN SHACHARIT IN THE MORNINGS.





OUR HOUSE HAD NO RUNNING WATER, SO WE BOUGHT WATER IN HUGE, HEAVY JUGS FROM BEAUTIFUL WOMEN IN SOFT HIJABS WHO HAULED THEM FROM NEARBY WELLS. OUR FATHER, CHACHAM DAVID WAS A RABBI AT A NEARBY CONGREGATION CALLED BEIT KNESSET HASIGNOR. OUR MOM, ESTHER, TOOK CARE OF ALL SIX OF US. SHE WAS ALWAYS SEWING, OR COOKING OR CLEANING. SHE MADE ALL OF OUR CLOTHES. SHE WAS 4'11" BUT POWERFUL.



MY EARLIEST MEMORY IS OF WATCHING MY MOTHERS HANDS. THEY WERE SOFT AND LINED, LIGHT BROWN WITH LIGHT BLUE VEINS, ALWAYS RACING AHEAD OF HER, FULL OF PINS OR NEEDLES OR DOUGH OR DATES OR SPEARMINT FOR TEA THAT SHE GREW IN A POT ON OUR KITCHEN WINDOW SILL.

OUR PARENT'S FAMILIES WERE BOTH ORIGINALLY FROM FEZ, IN MOROCCO. THEY WERE THE FOURTH GENERATION LIVING IN TIBERIAS, WHICH MADE MY SIBLINGS AND I FIFTH GENERATION. AT HOME WE SPOKE A MIX OF ARABIC, HEBREW AND FRENCH.



APPARENTLY, MY FIRST WORDS WERE THE ARABIC ONES I HEARD HER EXCHANGE WITH MY TETA MIRIAM IN OUR KITCHEN. "KHALLAS," WHICH MEANS ENOUGH, FOLLOWED BY "ASKEED," WHICH MEANS OF COURSE. MY BROTHER'S FIRST WORDS WERE HEBREW, SHABBAT, AND AMEN. MAZAL'S FIRST WORD WAS VIDAL.



EVEN WHEN WE WERE LITTLE, I PREFERRED PLAYING WITH MAZAL, WHO WAS ONLY ONE AND A HALF YEARS YOUNGER, AND FELT LIKE MY REAL TWIN. BEHOR WAS ALWAYS SERIOUS, WANTING TO PRAY AND LEARN, AND WATCH AND TALK TO THE ADULTS.

MAZAL AND I PLAYED HIDE AND SEEK AND JUMPING GAMES AND COLLECTED PEBBLES ON THE BEACH. WHEN WE WERE LITTLE, MAZAL WAS LESS BEAUTIFUL THAN OUR OTHER SISTERS. OUR PARENTS ALWAYS BLESSED US ALL BY SAYING "MAY YOUR MAZAL," OR YOUR LUCK, "BE GREATER THAN YOUR BEAUTY."

EVEN THOUGH I BELIEVED IT TOO, I STILL ALWAYS TOLD MAZAL SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL. WHEN WE GOT OLDER, EVERYONE SAID SHE WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL OF ALL OF US.