

Synopsis of *Blessings from the Dead*

by Richard S. Ellis

My novel depicts the year spent in Jerusalem by a Jewish-American mathematician, David Salem, and his family. As the novel opens, David is in turmoil, fearing that his recently published book on entropy contains an error which renders his entire life's work a house of cards. Hoping to solve his emotional troubles, David takes his family to Jerusalem, his spiritual homeland. His grandmother Ma, an eccentric, articulate, angry woman who raised him, objects strongly to their departure.

David's crossing of the ocean from Boston to Jerusalem parallels the crossing of the ocean by his mother Sarah in 1937 from Boston, where she grew up, to Vilna, a center of Jewish culture and learning so vibrant that it was known as Jerusalem of Lithuania. There she joined her uncle Shlomo in order to discover a more authentic life and became caught in the Holocaust. She lived with Shlomo in the woods as a partisan, separated from him in September 1943 under mysterious circumstances, became pregnant with David right after the war, and returned to Boston in 1946, where soon after giving birth to David she died. Ma holds Shlomo responsible for Sarah's death. Two days after David and his family arrive in Jerusalem, Ma urges David to locate Shlomo and to extract from him whatever information he can about the mother he never knew.

David throws himself into the task of finding Shlomo, who, Ma is convinced, lives in Israel. But his efforts are fruitless. Eager to become involved in something more focused, David enrolls in a course at a Torah institute, where his reputation as a mathematician precedes him. At the institute, a Chassidic computer whiz implores David to participate in a project based on entropy and Bible codes. David overcomes his initial reluctance when he realizes that the project could enable him to make a mathematical contribution of earthshaking impact: the construction of a proof that God

wrote the Torah. But the project fails grandly. Finally accepting his limitations, David opens up to the beauty of his life and to the love with which his family surrounds him.

Meanwhile, David's entropy book has become a success. When he receives an invitation to lecture on the book in Vilna, David intensifies his efforts to locate Shlomo. They eventually meet, but Shlomo refuses to talk about what happened during the war. After a series of confrontations, partial discoveries, and occasional dead ends, David unearths the truth about his mother, a truth that fundamentally alters David's understanding of his entire life.