Never Forget, Never Forgive in Feudal Japan
Not a comic social commentary
n image often has the power to transcend words. With beautiful, bold, black brush stroke sketches, graphic novelist Rami Efal screams out universal truths in his work *Never Forgive, Never Forget*, a recent nominee for the Ignatz Award, a comic book industry standard. Set in feudal Japan, the book is the story of a bitter homecoming in the midst of a long and bloody clan war.

The descendant of Holocaust survivors, Efal heard the words that later formed the title of his book, uttered over and over again while growing up in Israel. “Never forgive, never forget” he explains was a common mantra of the time among survivors and family. Efal firmly states however that this type of thinking “clouds our judgement”. He explains that unfortunately the title led to a misreading of the book as *Never Forget, Never Forgive* was not meant as the conclusion, but was rather meant to lead the reader to ask, “how do we go beyond it?” The newly expanded and revised edition was actually renamed *The Lantern and the Wave*. Efal explains that the second edition accounts for growth and a bit of extra dimensionality to the characters so that they are able to move beyond the original motif of the refusal to forgive. According to Efal, “the new title of *The Lantern and the Wave* felt vaster, all-inclusive and mythical, and hits the right chord.”

How is it that Efal, the descendant of Holocaust survivors, is able to move past the concept this title represents while
others cling to it? Efal explains, “Not forgiving means giving up on asking ‘how did this happen?’ The Jewish people have a deep and intimate tie with the Germans, as we do with the Palestinians. We are bound by our shared histories.” He points to sincere efforts on the part of the Germans to face their past and is clear that it is his duty to acknowledge that effort. He resents any discourse of limitations on the so-called “right to forgive” as he sees forgiveness as a collective duty that we all have to do in order to effect real change. He emphasizes, though, that forgiveness does not mean forgetting.

Where does post-Holocaust-type discourse find its way into a book that is set in feudal Japan one might question? Again, Efal would argue that this is a human story, not one confined to any one group or time. He refers to feudal Japan as his fantasy never-never land but says he also considered placing the story in present-day Israel. But for Efal, the remote and foreign historical setting actually, “allows a safe distance to work with the personal experiences of growing up in war, with grief and with loneliness.”

Even with that safe distance, pieces of Efal and people close to him live within the characters. Initially, for example, he explains that his character Oda seemed to grow out of his father’s essential nature. He describes Oda as, “the embodiment of repression, of contained anger, a time bomb about to go off. He has a loving heart layered with frustration...” He later admits that as the character evolved, through the creative
process, he began to see what he explains as aspects of his own psychology. In fact Efal found that there were several “disowned aspects of me that I ignored or suppressed. I externalized the voices and let them acknowledge and just be in the presence of each other, all the while I watch, learn and feel. It was extremely transformative.”

As to why Efal felt his story was home in feudal Japan, quite frankly it seems as though Efal is a bit of a self-defined Japanophile, “I loved Japanese animation as a child; I practiced Karate, like most of my friends. For Purim I’d dress up as a ninja. Later, I was struck by the Japanese expressive, spontaneous ink paintings and calligraphy which was something fresh and unhindered and so different from the Western art I was exposed to. I traveled in Japan for seven weeks while researching the book to take the spirit in.” The research for the book, as well as a personal quest to work through a number of existential questions, further led him on a journey to explore Zen Buddhism. He lived in the Fire Lotus Temple at NYC’s Zen Center and took part in a two year comprehensive residential program that included meditation as well as communal living and study.

Though the work is a blend of many styles, the genre of manga, which Efal relies on heavily, is likewise a Japanese craft. Manga, or Japanese for comics, is, as Efal explains, “more visually driven than the American comics, and emphasizes moment-by-moment depiction of action and less usage of words or captions to describe it. It allows a lot of space in the mind as you read or watch it.” The technique focuses on small details and frozen single moments rather than American comics’ action-packed frames. It is almost devoid of words, relying instead on sketched emotion. The loud silence in Efal’s work appears in only shades of black and white with the exception of the blood red on the cover. The effect is haunting.

Overall Efal indicates that his work was heavily influenced by “Lone Wolf and Cub” and “Crying Freeman,” both written by Kazuo Koike and illustrated by Goseki Kojima and Ryuichi Ikegami. Likewise, speaking to the strong Asian influence in his work, Efal has strong memories of watching Chinese movies on television in Israel on Friday afternoons when the pre-Shabbat quiet began to set in. Israeli TV channels seemed to favor martial arts-type movies as well as historical dramas. Efal draws heavily on these influences and cites directly dramas like “Farewell My Concubine” and “Raise the Red Lanterns”. Both of these drew on the theme of “a female protagonist opposing an oppressive tradition, and I identified with it, which definitely comes across in The Lantern and the Wave,” Efal explains.

In very much his own style, Efal also incorporates quiet animal scenes throughout the narrative. The animals are boldly drawn and carry with them a sense of peacefulness and strength. They stand alone and quite separate from the human conflict in the novel and seem to break through the action and drama and disrupt the chaos. To Efal they serve almost in judgment. “Animals, trees and the land observe our odd and unnecessary tendency to create pain for ourselves and other humans, as well as the planet,” he suggests. The animals are detached from the central action and are able to give a silent social commentary in very much the same way that Efal, the artist, is able to do about clan wars in feudal Japan standing at a safe distance.

Efal’s commentary extends far beyond feudal Japan. The connection to the Holocaust is clear but Efal further suggests that this is a timeless commentary. Contemporary society is not immune. He references the formal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, economic wars, gender inequality and racism.

“There is only one wound, we are all bleeding from it,” concludes Efal.

This is a powerful statement, effusing a unique worldview. This is no ordinary comic book.