In this emotionally moving memoir, author Shelly Spilka, an eighth generation sabra, provides readers with important insight into the human struggle to construct an identity that balances religion, culture, and gender with human desire and personal experience. As an academic, Spilka is equipped with the critical consciousness and self awareness necessary to analyze such struggle. As a bilingual who has moved between Israel and America, she has the authority necessary to speak to the difficulties inherent to reconciling a conflicted and divided identity.

Chapter one sets up the reality of split identity as readers are introduced to Haya, Spilka’s childhood self who was left for an uncertain amount of time at an Israeli orphanage. Whether the reason for this separation from her parents at an early age is because of her father’s desire for her religious training or because of her mother’s need for employment remains somewhat unclear (although as told in the final chapter, it is probably the former). But what is clear is that this early experience left Spilka with a feeling of disbelonging and homelessness that has followed her well into her adult life and certainly contributed to her later decisions to study a new language and seek a new home abroad. Chapter one also introduces readers to an important character in Spilka’s story, her stepfather, Reuven, who serves as Haya’s initial “rescuer” when he, according to the story Spilka pieces together, insisted she be brought home from the orphanage to live with himself and her mother. Although this relationship, too, is at times conflicted, he remains a touchstone in Spilka’s life.

In the second chapter, Spilka makes her first attempt to wipe out the “unruly, helpless, mute” Haya by changing her given name to Shelly; a woman she decides will be “articulate, strong, independent” (45). The change from a Hebrew name to an English one foreshadows more life changes as Spilka makes her first trans-continental move from Israel to England to immerse herself in graduate study of a new language. Although, with the absence of her ultra-conservative birth father, Spilka’s religious practice had not been a major priority in her life, she moves even further away from it in her new home and culture as she gives up her kosher diet and celebrates Christmas. The position of woman moves to the foreground as Spilka recounts a serious of sexual encounters that would later require the aid of a therapist to understand. This chapter sets up the series of divisions - Haya/Shelly, Hebrew/English, Zionist/non-Zionist, woman/object – that the rest of the book attempts to reconcile.

By the end of the third chapter, Spilka begins to realize her need to gain power over the clash of forces confusing her identity when the death of her first “rescuer,” her stepfather Reuven, leaves her without the sole source of steadfastness she had ever known.
The fourth chapter is a story within itself as the author meets, marries, and loses to cancer her first husband and second “rescuer,” Kenneth. By telling the story of how she cared for her young children while simultaneously nursing her ailing husband, Spilka shows how she slowly developed the strength and resolve to deal with the inconsistencies and feelings of displacement that infiltrated her life. By sharing her process of mourning Kenneth’s death, she shows how human experiences, particularly as they compound, impact identity and action.

As a middle-aged single mother, the urgency to settle the issues impeding on Spilka’s ability to achieve peace in her life climaxes in the fifth chapter. Necessity sends her to America and jump starts her academic career. American citizenship helps to soothe the desire for a permanent home, and her professional role aids in her negotiation as a woman in society. Reconciliation with her birth father and a reunion with traditional Judaism bring a certain amount of balance and harmony, but the reader is aware that Haya, Spilka’s childhood self, has not yet been dealt with.

The final chapter brings closure as Spilka and her second husband travel back to Israel to satisfy her longing for her birth country and her need for answers. A journey back to the orphanage allows the woman, Shelly, and the little girl, Haya, to dialogue for the first time, and questions regarding the identity and worth of each are laid to rest. Spilka’s lifelong journey and compilation of human experiences have finally equipped her with the strength, courage, intellect, and skill necessary to rescue herself from the bondage inflicted on Haya.

Shelly Spilka’s memoir compels the reader to keep turning pages as she unfolds her struggles and triumphs chronologically. During a time when the idea of woman is still being examined, Spilka complicates her story by considering “woman” along side such complex issues as religion, family, language and citizenship. She questions the construction of her own identity, and the result is permission, perhaps even urging, for readers to question their own. Spilka’s work helps to safeguard memoir from critics who question the genre’s usefulness as academic endeavor.