

In Search of Yitzhaq Shami

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HEBRON, OCTOBER, 2007. It is Friday, 'Id al-fitr, the Muslim holiday that marks the happy end of the month of Ramadan-fasting, and when the tour bus pulls up before the Cave of the Patriarchs and we get off, festive music blares—as if in greeting—from loudspeakers affixed to the roof of the Gutnick Center, a Judaica gift shop and kosher restaurant. “*Daaaa-vid, Melech Yisroeeeeeeel*,” David, King of Israel. Dozens of Israeli soldiers and their jeeps guard an otherwise empty square, flooded this morning with wedding-hall schmaltz: it takes an act of serious imagination to fathom that we are standing at the heart of what was, until just a few years ago, a bustling Palestinian city.

An even stronger dose of historical fancy is needed to believe that this was, too, the hometown of the hugely gifted, utterly tortured, now mostly forgotten Hebrew writer Yitzhaq Shami. Born here in 1888 to a religious Jewish family, Shami grew up speaking Arabic and Ladino, studied in a *heder* and then at a yeshiva, wore a traditional Palestinian *qumbaz* (belted robe), and considered himself a son of this place, at one and the same time Jew and Arab—a Palestinian through and through. His father, Eliahu Sarvi, was a Syrian Jewish silk merchant who was known to the locals as “ash-Shami”—the Damascene—a sobriquet that Yitzhaq would eventually adopt as his own name. Despite being foreign and Jewish, the father carried himself as a Palestinian peasant: he slept on the floor, ate with his hands, spoke Arabic to his children, and bartered his fabrics and thread for crops in the nearby villages. His much younger third wife, Yitzhaq’s mother, was a refined and depressive aristocrat from one of the older Sephardic families in Hebron.

Although Yitzhaq Shami died within a year of Israel’s founding, I cannot help but wonder what he would think if he could somehow surface now and take this tour along with me, wandering the forcibly

deserted streets of what is known today as H2, the Israeli-controlled part of Hebron. Would he even recognize the town that his close friend, the writer Yehuda Burla, described in 1924 as a place “where Arab life is . . . mixed with the Jewish street like nowhere else in the Land of Israel”? In the name of protecting a small group of aggressive and often violent Jewish settlers who, since 1979, have thrust themselves like a fist into the collective gut of the tens of thousands of Palestinians who live here (at the time of the signing of the 1997 Hebron agreement that divided the town, there were 35,000 Palestinians and 500 settlers in H2), the army has adopted a policy of what it calls *sterilizatzia*, or sterilization. They have forbidden Arabs from setting foot on many of the main streets, imposed on them months and months of curfew, closed down thousands of shops, welded shut the doors of Palestinian dwellings so that the few residents who do remain are forced to clamber from roof to roof in order to get out the back way. This policy was conceived, ironically enough, in the wake of the 1994 massacre of twenty-nine Muslim worshippers by the Brooklyn-born Jewish doctor Baruch Goldstein in the Cave of the Patriarchs. Since then, Arab life in this part of the city has become almost impossible, and only an estimated few thousand Palestinians have managed to cling on. The streets are eerily silent.

Yitzhaq Shami was no utopian. He witnessed plenty of violent interethnic strife in his day and was profoundly troubled by it, as he was by his own love-hate feelings toward his Muslim neighbors—and, indeed, toward himself. His relationship to Hebron was also deeply ambivalent. As a teenager he fled it; as a grown man he returned and lived there again—and again escaped it just a few years before the riots that would result in the brutal murder of sixty-seven Jewish residents of the town in 1929. Later he would declare in a letter that his dream was to write “a whole book that would describe the life of Hebron. It would need to be a volume of at least a thousand pages.” That dream was never realized, and however complex and neurotic Shami’s bond to his birthplace was, it is safe to assume that he would be shocked by the changes that recent decades have brought both to Hebron and to the Hebrew language he loved and

in which he chose to write. The imported lexical item, *sterilizatzia*, would probably horrify him, as if the once-vibrant, crowded Palestinian town—Shami's town—were a wound that needed iodine and a bandage.



You could take Shami out of Hebron but you couldn't, it seems, take Hebron out of Shami. When he left home—driven from the local yeshiva for asking too many provocative questions—he was eighteen years old, and bound for the Ezra Teacher's College in Jerusalem. There he learned German, befriended a group of young secular intellectuals (including the budding novelist Burla and future president of Israel Yitzhaq Ben-Zvi), and swapped his *qumbaz* for Western clothes.

Yet the stories that he began to write and publish at that time returned again and again to the human and physical landscapes that he knew from his youth: his first published work, "The Barren Wife," is a short, painful tale of a childless Jewish woman forced to wait on guests at her husband's wedding to a younger, presumably more fecund second bride. "The Ransom," his next (still shorter and more painful) work, concerns the aftermath of a botched circumcision. Both were originally published in 1907 in the important Jaffa literary magazine *Ha-Omer* under the heading "From the Life of the Sephardim," and while each is full of finely observed social details (of food, dress, speech, and so on), what is immediately striking about these stories is that the ethnicity of his characters seems to matter much less to Shami than do their fraught inner lives. On that score he is an equal-opportunity creator: his characters suffer without regard to race, creed, or color.

And it was in fact Shami's fascination with the non-Jewish milieu and Judean countryside he'd observed and absorbed as a child that would eventually lead him to write his most powerful work. As he took his restless leave of Jerusalem and began to wander, moving from the Palestinian Jewish settlements of Gadera and Ekron to Damascus to Phillippoli in Bulgaria, then back to Hebron,

Tiberias, and finally Haifa—always working as a Hebrew teacher and sometimes dabbling in Jewish communal affairs and in journalism (he wrote about education and contemporary Arabic literature, among other things)—he was also pushing his imagination past the literal and figurative walls of *Harrat al-Yahud*, Hebron’s Jewish quarter. In Damascus, he wrote one of his finest stories, “Hamamah: A Tale of the Arabian Desert,” an elemental and oddly stirring account of the relationship—a kind of tragic love story—between a Bedouin tribesman and his exquisite white mare. So far as I know, Shami never actually laid eyes on the Arabian Desert, but the story has a limpid immediacy that derives both from his almost animistic feeling for the natural world and from the bold dramatic torque of the action, which calls to mind the popular Arabic epics that he must have read or heard recited as a young Hebronite. (“They are tall, and their eyes are large and clear,” writes Shami of the prize horses of the Bani Laith tribe. “They carry their heads erect, their nostrils are wide, and their neigh strikes terror into every breast. Their neck is like a mountain goat’s who has caught the scent of water.” One can almost hear the storyteller’s voice rising and falling in these lines.) This first foray into the world of the Bedouin would lead him later to write about the Palestinian peasants with whom he’d grown up.

While it has been convenient for literary critics to cast Shami as an ethnographic writer—whether to praise him in Orientalist terms for his ability to “penetrate . . . the Arab mind,” or to criticize him in more understandable if politically correct fashion for his “problematic” approach to “Arabs as objects of representation”—neither of these scholarly strategies takes Shami on his own more intriguing and complicated terms. Never, for instance, does he step back and call his characters “Bedouins” or “Palestinian peasants.” Like his Sephardic protagonists, they are individuals, not types or symbols, and he seems to have seen himself in each of them. Shami’s identification with such a wide array of characters—Jewish, Muslim, male, female, old, young—was often nearly polymorphous. In many of his stories the point of view will shift from sentence to sentence, as though the author were simply overflowing with wounded empathy for one and

all, and couldn't bear to confine himself to a single, limiting perspective. Even the horses and dogs in his stories have rich inner lives; the mules think hard before they kick. The eyes of one especially angry beast of burden flash with "a sharp vicious glint" as the animal "calculated its spring and the exact spot where it would strike."

This abundant negative capability—his Keatsian knack for "being in uncertainties"—is what made Shami a sometimes-great writer. It's also what made him a wreck as a man, and it is the aspect of his personality that apparently rendered it harder and harder for him to continue to write, especially as history closed in. The various selves that had once been integrated easily within him (Arab and Jew, traditionalist and iconoclast) were with time and by others deemed irreconcilable. British Mandatory Palestine was no country for uncertain men.

The Vengeance of the Fathers, the novella for which Shami is best known, has secured him an enduring place in what might be known as the Hebrew countercanon, a loose and shifting hodgepodge of works that are treasured as essential by serious readers of the literature but who—for reasons stylistic, political, or otherwise—remain largely unknown to the broader public both in Israel and abroad. Yet Shami's contribution is formidable: in 1951, a few years after his death, the editor Asher Barash declared his output "light" only in terms of quantity, but from the point of view of quality—its weight is great, and deserving of a place of honor on the shelf of the new Hebrew prose." And with the 2000 publication of *Hebron Stories*, an English translation (by various hands) of Shami's fiction, the novelist Anton Shammas wrote that he "brought into the scene of modern Hebrew literature some seventy years ago a local, Palestinian validity that hasn't been matched or challenged," and declared *Vengeance* "the only novel in Hebrew literature whose characters, landscapes and narrative voice are all Palestinian." It was also the only one of Shami's works to be published in book form during his life—it appeared in 1928—and it took him many years and much anguish to compose. "I erase and write, and erase again," he explained in a letter to Barash, who was patiently waiting for the manuscript, "and

the words sound insipid and cannot possibly convey the depth of the grief that dwells in me.”

This slim volume was inspired by a riot and murder that took place one year during the Muslim pilgrimage to the Nebi Musa shrine near Jericho, and it consists of two very distinct sections. The first is a precisely wrought description of the preparations for the pilgrimage festival, the selection of one Nimmer Abu al-Shawarib as the “flag-master” (the honorary leader) of the contingent from Nablus, and the event itself: these sixty pages are the most plainly documentary of Shami’s writings, and are probably the source of his mistaken reputation as an anthropological realist. One feels here that he is clearing his throat and explaining various customs for a non-Arab audience. “Since olden times,” the novella begins in a slightly booming tour-guide mode, “with the blossoming of spring, the *Moussam* has been celebrated in the hill-country of Samaria.”

Yet after the climax of the ritual, when Nimmer Abu al-Shawarib accidentally kills the leader of his Hebronite rivals, the tone shifts suddenly, and the narrative implodes. The rest of the book traces Abu al-Shawarib’s panicked flight from Palestine for Cairo (he fears the Hebronites will take revenge and kill him if he stays) and his split-second transformation from upstanding citizen to social pariah. As expository and distant as the early sections are, the later parts of *The Vengeance of the Fathers* are interior and devastating: the hero’s nosedive into poverty, drug addiction, and eventual madness are rendered with a vividness that seems to come from some excruciating place in Shami’s own psyche. Could he have been dreaming of—or maybe even reporting—his own crack-up?

One must be careful, of course, when combing a fictional work for traces of its author’s biography. Yitzhaq Shami never killed a man or escaped to Egypt; he wasn’t strung out on hashish. There are risks that come, too, with reading current events into an artist’s private angst. Shami might have been just as troubled had he lived in tenth-century Baghdad or modern-day Eilat. Still, in hundreds of letters written over the decades and addressed either individually or collectively to Burla and his childhood friend David Avissar, Shami made

his mental distress clear. “I have become so shrunken in my own eyes,” he wrote at one typically low point, “I’ve been so reduced that I am nothing but a speck of dust in the wind.” Later he began to speak openly of his “mental illness” and “madness,” and when the political situation in Palestine deteriorated, he turned it back on himself, announcing, “My entire existence has been one huge mistake.” This was a year after the 1929 massacre in Hebron, and he now declared the result of his years there “dust and death and destruction and loss. And so you have a dirty, crumpled, dusty and smudged page of life.” (The word “dust” turns up so often in these letters, it seems their author was just waiting to be swept up and tossed out.)

Shami would live another eighteen years after making this bleak declaration. In that time, he published a single story, the marvelous, heartbreaking “Jum’ah the Simpleton,” whose Hebrew title is actually Arabic, “*Jum’ah al-Ahbal*,” about a dimwitted outcast of a Palestinian shepherd. Although it was meant to be the first in a series, Shami left behind just one other fragment and never coaxed out the rest, explaining his silence differently according to circumstance. To the writer and editor Yaaqov Fichman, he offered a political explanation: “There are times when I think that in this period of rage and horror between us and our neighbors [1936, the start of the Arab Revolt against British rule in Palestine] . . . maybe it isn’t right for me to take an interest in them [the Arabs] and their lives.” But then in a letter to Avissar he seemed to ascribe his block or barrenness to a more existential crisis, and described “the long war that I’m always fighting with myself,” then returned yet again to the same refrain: “My life has been one essential mistake.”

When that life ended at age sixty, Shami’s complete works consisted of six stories, a novella, some random journalism and poetry, and many anguished letters. A sad scrap titled “My Literary Remains” was also discovered among his papers. It began:

My literary remains are meager and scant. The source of my creativity, in the wake of the events and obstacles I faced, was not a gushing spring that restored the soul, but a spring of solid rock,

which carved no way out for itself. Deep within it raged, and only on occasion, and drop by drop, did it moisten its smooth wall, before once again being swallowed back down.

He was perhaps too quick to fault himself. One of his contemporaries, writing just after Shami's death, thought it wiser to spread the blame. "I believe," he wrote,

that this writer's premature decline, the silence that overcame his work—that these were not his fault alone. We, the Hebrew readers and writers, bear much of the blame. The dismal life of the writer Yitzhaq Shami was strewn not only with spasms of creation, but also with hesitations, with bitter doubts about his very strength and abilities. The lack of certainty that his work had value, that it was necessary and vital to the Hebrew reader—that is what inflicted drought on the land of his soul, where Shami's art grew. He was *lonely* in his uncertainty, withdrew deliberately to an isolated corner, forgot himself and his work and even managed to make us forget them.

Indeed it is still so today: a recent, highly unscientific survey of half a dozen contemporary Jerusalem bookstore clerks showed that not one of them had heard of Yitzhaq Shami. A well-read, Israeli-born historian friend on sabbatical for a year in Jerusalem rented an apartment on a small street named for Shami, but didn't know who he was. And at the army checkpoints that are said to protect Hebrew life in ghostly H2, they also do not know his name.