



Ishaq al-Shami and the Predicament of the Arab Jew in Palestine

Salim Tamari

In his retrospective personal memoirs of the 1930s and 40s, *Ta'ir Zala Sindiyannah (Bird on an Oak Tree)*, the Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi discusses two groups of Jewish companions he encountered during his student days during the French Mandate in Lebanon.¹ The first group consisted primarily of Arabic-speaking Jews from Syria and Iraq, several of whom took a prominent place in Arab nationalist, and anti-imperialist intellectual circles in the 1930s and 40s; the second he identifies as Yiddish-speaking Jews from Palestine, who exhibited marked Zionist sympathies.² While the first group blended smoothly with Arab social circles (many of them being middle class and secular in outlook), the second - recalls Salibi - kept to their own, hardly spoke any Arabic, and viewed their host environment with suspicion.³

But this assessment does not fairly reflect the complex composition of Palestinian Jews during this period. Towards the end of Ottoman rule, native Jewish communities lived in the four 'holy cities' of Palestine: Safad, Tiberius, Hebron and Jerusalem. In the first three of these communities Arabic and Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) speakers constituted a substantial proportion of the Jewish population, perhaps even a majority. Only in Jerusalem did Yiddish gain an upper hand, due to the large pietistic Ashkenazi migration from Russia and Eastern Europe.⁴

The life and writings of Ishaq Shami, described by Arnold Brand (perhaps with some exaggeration) as "one of the most significant Palestinian writers of the [twentieth century],"⁵ shed important light on one of the most contested of Levantine identities - that of the Arab Jew. Or perhaps one should use the term Jewish Arab - indicating that they were Arabs of Jewish background, in the same category of Christian Arabs.⁶ It is quite indicative that in most places today this term is considered an oxymoron. It designates a forgotten milieu of those Mashriqi Jews who identified themselves with the rising Arab national movement and its emancipatory programme, and who shared language and culture with their Muslim and Christian compatriots in greater Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, as early as the Ottoman administrative reforms of 1839. The image of the Arab Jew became more poignant, first with the struggle for Ottoman decentralization and its accompanying emphasis on Arab nationalism, and decades later when Zionism began to challenge the affinities of Jews in Arab countries in favour of a separate Jewish homeland. One recalls the Egyptian critic and satirical essayist Yaqoub Sanou' from an earlier period, and Iraqi liberal and leftist writers who immigrated to Israel and Europe (Shim'on Ballas, Sasson Somekh, Sami Michael, Nissim Rejwan, and the cineaste Ella

Shohat). Like most of those writers, Shami was never at ease with either his Jewish or Arab identity.

In Palestine, the picture was more complicated than that in neighbouring Arab countries. At least in Yemen, Iraq and Syria-Lebanon, the community was largely homogeneous in ethnic and confessional terms, with the internal social diversities that were reflected in the Christian population in the region: rural and urban, rich and poor. In Palestine, Jewish pilgrimage and European Christian colonial projects (mostly the Templars in the latter category) in the late nineteenth century brought a large number of Ashkenazi immigrants from Eastern Europe and Sephardic groups from Bulgaria, Turkey and North Africa. To these we should add the smaller number of 'native' Jews who traditionally resided in the four historic holy cities. But 'native' Jews were not necessarily of Iberian origins. They included also substantial Yiddish speaking communities who had established themselves in Palestine centuries earlier. Language must have played a crucial role in the formation of their identity. Of turn-of-the-century Hebron and Jerusalem, Robert Cooper says this about the spoken languages of the Jewish communities, relying on a report prepared by Luncz in 1882:

Leaving aside the Karaites, a small Jewish sect which rejected Talmudic Judaism, Luncz divided the Jewish population into Sephardim and Ashkenazim: the former were subdivided into Sephardim proper, who spoke Judaeo-Spanish, and Moghrabim, who spoke Arabic; the latter [Ashkenazim] differed from the Sephardim, he said, by ritual and by the fact that they spoke Judaeo-German. It is interesting to note that he found this language division to be the major distinguishing characteristic

*of the communities. According to Luncz, [in Jerusalem] there were 7,620 Sephardim, of whom 1,290 were Moghrabim, having come from the Maghreb or North Africa. As a rule, they were natives of the city, Turkish subjects, and fluent in Arabic.*⁷

What appears here is that while the majority of *native* Jews spoke Arabic, there was a preponderance of Ashkenazi residents whose mother tongue was either Yiddish or German.⁸ However in mixed cities like Safad or Hebron, Arabic was the common language between the Moghrabi, Sephardic and Ashkenazi groups, as well as their essential link to their fellow Muslim and Christian Palestinians.⁹

By the turn of the century, one of the main dividing factors among the resident Jewish communities was the question of Ottoman citizenship. As long as the capitulations granted Jewish immigrants privileges as protégés of Britain and other European powers, there seems to have been few incentives for their becoming subjects of the Sultan. Two issues reversed this situation: regulations stipulating that only Ottoman subjects can purchase land, and the issue of loyalty to the regime once Istanbul went to war in Crimea, and then against Britain and France in World War I. The first issue made some of the leading Sephardic families in Jerusalem of great asset to the Zionist project since they were able to act as intermediaries in the purchase of land from Arab absentee owners to the benefit of the Jewish colonizing activities. On the second issue, loyalty to the regime, the central question that arose was service in the Ottoman army. On this, the Jewish leadership of the Yishuv was divided, with the Sephardic community favouring naturalization (and implicitly, service in the army).

“Most Ashkenazim”, wrote a prominent Sephardi leader, “regarded conscription

into the Turkish army as adequate reason to avoid naturalization and leave the country. There were rumors that the leaders of the Yishuv had bribed Turkish officials to make departure difficult and enforce naturalization, for fear that no Jews would remain in Palestine”.¹⁰ This battle for naturalization was largely lost as the ferocity of the war drove thousands of Ottoman Arabs, including Jews and Christians, to evade service.

In his autobiography, *Living with Jews*, Elie Elyachar suggests that - contrary to common perception - it was the Arabic and Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) speaking Ottoman Sephardic families in Jerusalem, and not the conservative Ashkenazim, who spearheaded the move for secular education, for living outside the city walls in new modern neighbourhoods, and who mixed and socialized freely with their Christian and Muslim neighbours.¹¹ One of the main instruments of this integration were the Alliance Israelite schools (established in 1882) which introduced Jewish, and in some cases Christian and Muslim children to secular education, and competed with Russian Orthodox, Anglican, Quaker and Catholic schools.¹² This view is confirmed by contemporary Palestinian writers such as Omar Saleh al-Barghouti who attended the Alliance school with a number of his Muslim compatriots.¹³ Another instrument was the impact of *Nizamiyyah* public schools established by the Ottoman authorities in the last third of the nineteenth century in bringing together in one classroom children who had previously attended separate Qur’anic *kuttab*, or Talmud schools (*heder*).¹⁴

How Native Jews Ceased to be Arabs

Writing several decades after the war, Elyachar has already adopted the Zionist distinction between Arabs and Jews as if they were binary ethnic identities. His family



Eliahu Elyachar with his family in Jerusalem, WWI. Source: Courtesy of Julia Elyachar.

moved to the Western suburbs from the Old City in 1902, and he had this to say about his mother tongue: “We knew Arabic and conversed freely with our Arab neighbours, but Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) was our mother tongue. Until the British occupation, many Ashkenazim, as well as Arabs, spoke Judeo-Spanish (Ladino). Hebrew, the holy tongue, was understood by Jews young and old, since it linked Ashkenazi and oriental [i.e. native] Jews in public life and business. Our teachers at the Talmud Torah schools would explain Hebrew texts by translating them into Ladino.”¹⁵

Most city residents experienced the move from the Old City to the new suburbs as a rupture, a move from the communal confinement of the walled city into the modernity of the planned neighbourhoods.¹⁶ In Elyachar’s narrative however, the opposite

seems to be the case. His family moved in 1902 from the hybrid social atmosphere of the Old City to the exclusively Jewish neighbourhood of Even Yisrael (and later to Beit Ya’akov near Mahane Yehuda).¹⁷ With the exception of the Mea Shaarim neighbourhood, which was comprised of a considerable number of Muslim families, Jewish neighbourhoods in the New City were exclusively Jewish. Jawhariyyeh, who lived in Mahallat al-Sa’diyyeh in the Old City and wrote in approximately the same period, recalls considerable socializing, cultural activities, commercial partnerships, and even political alliances (for example in the Red Crescent Society) between Muslims, Jews, and Christians.¹⁸ Elyachar is also aware of this extensive socializing, but in his retrospective consciousness it appears as a formalized ritual between confessional

groups. This is especially noticeable in his rendition of Passover ceremonials:

The beautiful custom of exchanging gifts between Jewish and Moslem families on the last day of Passover has been preserved to this day. Arabs sent their Jewish friends a siniyah - a round copper bowl - laden with fresh bread, goats' butter and honey.

*The Jews returned the siniyah by the same messenger, with matzot and home-made jam. My family maintains this old tradition to this day.*¹⁹

A parallel reading of Jerusalem religious ritual, during Ramadan, Easter processions, and Passover, as recorded decades later respectively by Jawhariyyeh and Elyachar, can be very illustrative of how the ideological construction of the *quotidian* is filtered through the memories of these two writers: the first, a libertarian Arab nationalist, and the second a Sephardic Zionist. Living side by side, in contiguous neighbourhoods, in the same period, and describing the same events, the same ritual - it appears as if they are talking about two different cities. In his Ottoman memoirs, by way of contrast, Jawhariyyeh noted:

There were two caves in Sheikh Jarrah next to the estates of Abu Jbein which Jews believed to be the tomb of Shimon the Just. Jewish pilgrims visited this sanctuary twice a year when they would spend the whole day in the olive groves. Most of those were Eastern Jews who kept their Arab traditions. They had a number of instrumental musical bands, of which I remember those led by Haim, the oud and violin player, and Zaki, the drummer from Aleppo. He had a beautiful voice and would sing mostly Andalusian scores. Jerusalem Christians and Muslims would share their Jewish compatriots'

*day-long activities of singing and festivities in the picnic known as the Yehudia. The slopes of Sheikh Jarrah would be teeming with participants, as well as with peddlers. My brothers and I never missed this festival.*²⁰

Living in Haret as-Sa'diyyah, one of the most traditional neighbourhoods of the Old City, the musician noted how Jewish and Christian families interspersed in the local landscape were involved in a substantial number of social and economic exchanges with their Muslim cohorts. His autobiography lists a large number of Sephardic and native Jewish (and Christian) households interspersed within the Muslim community, rather than in the designated 'Jewish quarter' of Mahallat Sharaf.²¹

Within the Jewish intelligentsia, distinctions between 'Arab' and 'Jew' as if they were perennial ethnic (and exclusive) categories, were not always self-evident, and did not go uncontested. As the position of European Zionist immigrants became privileged under the terms of the Balfour Declaration during the Mandate, many native and Sephardic Jews (in Palestine, as in neighbouring Arab countries) were placed in an untenable position. Their resistance to the imposition of Zionist identity was not primarily ideological, but cultural. The lure of Jewish nationalism was also the lure of modernity, of European liberalism, and of socialism. But these attractions also set them apart from their Arab and Levantine affinities, and pitted them against the independence movements in their own countries. Sociologist Yehouda Shenhav argues that the return to Zion meant little to them (culturally or ideologically) since they were already in Zion - in the sense of the broader Holy Land. And for those Jews who lived in Iraq and Syria, the move to Palestine (before 1948) was not seen as a move to Zion, but a move from one area of the Arab world to another, with no significant

connotations in terms of sacred geography. Even after the war, Mordechai Ben Porat, when asked to describe his relocation from Baghdad to Tel Aviv, replied, “I came from an Arab environment, and I remain in constant colloquy with the Arab environment. I also didn’t change my environment. I just moved from one place to another within it.”²²

Following the work of Amnon Raz Krakotzkin, Shenhav raises the notion of the ‘negation of the diaspora’, through which the Zionist project attempted to transcend the ‘abnormal’ condition of the exile by creating the new Hebrew culture. ‘Negation of the diaspora’ led effectively to the negation of the memory of the *galuti* (exilic, with a connotation of ‘ghetto mentality’) Jew, including the Mizrahi Jews, and simultaneously, of Palestinian memory.²³

Among Arab-Jewish writers the concept of ‘the negation of the Diaspora’, has also invited a counter-assertion of ‘primordially’ of Mizrahi Jews in Arab and other Middle Eastern cultures, thus challenging the basic Zionist tenant that the history of the Jews was ‘frozen’ in the years of exile:

*The primordially thesis obliges us to ask whether the Mizrahim [i.e. Arab Jews], whose diaspora is not negated, need to return to history at all. The answer is that they do not, because theirs has been a continuous history. The Jews of the Middle East according to this thesis did not go through the history of Europe and therefore need not return to it. This version also disassembles the uniform, shared history of all Jews (a conception that entails the denial and repression of other cultures, notably Arab culture) that is posited by Zionist historiography.*²⁴

Deserting the static paradigm of the ghettoized Jew projected from Eastern

Europe and Russia to the Middle East has significant implications, not only for transcending the duality of East and West in relating to the historic placement of Jewish communities in the Arab world, but also because such abandonment undermines the apposition of Arab and Jew as distinctive categories. In Shenhav’s view: “Acceptance of this [narrative]...shatters the (ostensible) binary polarity between Jewishness and Arabness and posits continuity instead. In other words, it proposes a historical model that is not in conflict with Arabness and that contested the de-Arabization project of Jewish nationalism.”

It is also a model that allows other voices to be heard, such as that of writer Sami Michael: “We viewed ourselves as Arabs of Jewish extraction, we felt even more Arab than Arabs....We did not feel we belonged to a place but that the place belonged to us”.²⁵

In *Victoria*, Michael’s most controversial novel, we observe the hesitant transition of the ghettoized identity of the Jewish Baghdadi working class into a Zionist milieu forged in the Israeli *ma’abarots* (transition camps for new immigrants) of the 1950s.²⁶ Michael seems to suggest that in their Iraqi homeland the Jewish upper and middle classes were relatively integrated into local Arab society, while their poorer brethren - Victoria’s people - were confined to communal neighbourhoods. As these Jews move to Israel, their traumatic encounter with the remnants of the Palestinian Arab underclass allows them to enhance their uncertain status in the new pecking order. Their socialization into a reconstructed Hebrew culture was achieved at the price of denigrating their Arab cultural roots. Recently, this process of conversion of the Arab Jews into Israeli Mizrahim was described most eloquently by Sasson Somekh:



When all were Ottomans Cornerstone ceremony for the Jerusalem Railway, 1890. Front row: The Ottoman Mutasarrif of Jerusalem Rashid Beyk, with Mayor Salim Hussein and the members of the Jerusalem Council and other city notables including Yusif Bey Navon - the grandfather of Elie Elyasher - and other members of the Elyachar family. Source: Courtesy of Julia Elyachar.

Today I am no longer an Arabic Jew, I am 100 percent Israeli, but I came to Israel at age 17 as a full Arab from a cultural point of view. I lived in the tent encampments of Tel Aviv and Bat Yam, and after a year, I was recruited by the Israeli Air Force. I came without knowing Hebrew, because in my home, there was not even one Hebrew book - not even a Torah or halakha (Jewish law) books. I grew up in a secular, Jewish community - the middle class in Baghdad had begun to be completely secular. No one in my family went to synagogue.... That situation changed, however, when they came to Israel, mainly among the ambitious immigrants who wanted to get ahead. Anyone who wanted to be a successful lawyer or accountant

had to accept the norms that were dictated here, and one of them was that someone who came from an Arab country had to be a little religious. That was the image, and it worked on them.... We are Arabic Jews just as there are American Jews - it's a historical fact. But people did not use that definition, because the Israeli society didn't like it. I am not afraid to use it, and there are others like me, such as the author Shimon Balas or Prof. Yehouda Shenhav, who do not try to erase it, but also do not use it too much.²⁷

But 'use it' or not, Somekh is aware and makes us aware, that this Arabness of the Mizrahim was so transformed in the Israeli cultural crucible that there is no easy way

to undo the transformation. Therefore, we can speak today of cultural affinities, or a symbiotic past, but a 'return to the roots' would constitute an ideological project that flies in the face of the reintegration of the Mizrahim into a new Hebraic culture that implies a different relationship with an Arab past.

This dilemma of the Mizrahi Jew, subsumed into the European culture of the Zionist project, is at the heart of Itzhaq Shami's conflation of identity. Born in 1888 in Hebron to a Damascene silk merchant, Eliahu Sarwi (known as 'esh-Shami') and a Hebronite Sephardic mother, Rifqah Castel, Shami's father spoke to him at home in Arabic, while his mother communicated with him in Ladino.²⁸

Shami's formative years in Hebron were crucial in shaping both his secular Jewish identity, and his Arab cultural affinities.²⁹ Eliahu Shami, according to Hebronite legend, was a strong-willed Arab patriarch who married three women - the third, native Rifka Castel whom he married when he was 60, gave birth to Ishaq and his two brothers, Yacoub and Dawood. His textile trade brought him in close proximity with the peasant women of Mount Hebron, from whom Ishaq later derived his intimate knowledge of peasant conditions. For much of his youth, Ishaq wore the traditional *Khalili qumbaz* (robe), and studied both Hebrew and Arabic at the local religious school. Later, as a member of the Hebron yeshiva, he adopted "heretic attitudes" and was asked to leave.³⁰ By the age of 18, he had departed Hebron with lifelong friend David Avitzur, and joined the Ezra German teachers' training college in Jerusalem, apparently against his father's will.

In Jerusalem, Shami began to don Western clothes (*franji*) and discovered the ideas of the Jewish Enlightenment. He received his teacher's training certificate in 1909.³¹

It was through the Hebrew revivalist circle that he encountered in Jerusalem, and his friendship to S. Y. Agnon and Yitzhaq ben Zvi that Shami became exposed to Zionist ideas. Ishaq Shami became one of the few Sephardic writers of that period to become active in Zionist circles, and he seems to have attracted the attention of David Ben Gurion as an 'expert' on Arab society.³² But unlike the well known Jewish experts on Arab affairs in the Histadrut and the Jewish agency (for example, Yacoub Shim'oni and Ben Zvi himself), Shami was himself rooted in Arab culture, and it was this dimension of his cultural identity that continued to torment him for the rest of his life.

Zfira Ogen traces Shami's agony in a series of letters written from Hebron to David Avitzur. The internal struggle became increasingly overt as the communal clashes between Muslims and Jews (by this period, one can almost begin to identify them as a conflict between *Arabs* and Jews) intensified throughout Palestine, particularly after the clashes of 1921. Shami seemed to believe that Hebron was immune from these clashes. His father's death in 1927, however, personalized his political distress:

*Now my friend, I can reveal what has been going inside me and expose them without masks. One year after his death I can say that my relationship to him was not strong enough. But his death inflamed old wounds that I had thought were about to heal. Two different worlds! But in death we forget everything. Living in poverty, need, loneliness and these old walls of the city, blackened by soot, I feel like a mere insect. All his life was series of pain. And in his death he was alone, not even his children accompanying his coffin.*³³

The 'two worlds' referred to here are layered. They identify the schism that distanced him



Ishaq Shami after he moved to Jerusalem and began wearing Western clothes. Source: Joseph Zernick.

from his father's generation, and the wall that separated him from the orthodox Jewish community that he had deserted. But they also mark the walls that separated the world of Hebron from the modernity and freedom offered by Jerusalem and the 'outside' world.

Summing up this duality in his writings at the time, the Hebrew writer Yehouda Burla wrote:

*Shami is a son of Hebron, where Arab life is exposed to view, intermixed with the Jewish street like nowhere else in Eretz Israel - he can provide layers of life from the Arab existence like a man scooping up a handful of whey or cream. The Arabic language, customs, way of life, all the features of folk literature, are as evident and palpable to the hand as they are in Hebron itself.*³⁴

Immediately after the 1929 attacks on the Hebron, when the bulk of the community found itself compelled to leave the city, Shami's despair reached a new nadir. Twice Shami was compelled to leave his Hebron home: first in the early 1920s when his rebellion against conventional religion drove him to seek refuge with a Muslim family in the city, and second during the attacks of 1929 when he took protection in the Mani household. In both cases his despair was expressed in a revulsion; he felt himself the prisoner of the Jewish ghetto.³⁵ But it was typical of him to personalize his tragedy. Rather than blaming the situation on the increased ethnic-religious tensions in the country, he attributed them to his fate:

*Everything has lost its worth. For what is the use of anything if we are unable to reach our goals?...[This] is the secret of my tragedy - when I look back at my life, I realize that everything was distorted and wrong from the foundation. My very existence was a big mistake beginning with the smallest matters and ending with the biggest. Due to my own faults or due to fate, it does not matter. I have [spent] the best eight years of my life in Bulgaria. I have not retained a single memory that deserves to be rekindled. My life in Jerusalem before that, and in my birthplace, Hebron, and another nine years at the bottom - of killing and pillage, and poverty - all are the same. Here you have a life of dirt and mud, without my ability to do what it takes. (Letter to David, 1930)*³⁶

Shami moved to Tiberius briefly, and then with the family to Haifa where he remained until his death. But at the height of his agony, and after leaving his birthplace, Hebron always loomed in his dreams as the place to which he would return, metaphorically and literally. In 1939, the last year of the Arab

Rebellion, he was still living in Haifa and teaching.

Torrents of rain falling outside. My clothes are wet and my teeth are shattering from cold, and water flowing like rivers in the street. I am totally fatigued and walking aimlessly looking for a shelter. Suddenly the door opens, and a blinding light shatters the darkness. Around me I hear heavenly music, filling my heart with contentment. I look around me and there is a huge table flowing with food, the delicious bounty of this land, set by an elevation of carpets and silken pillows on which I saw our elderly Hebronites (khitiyaritna al Khalayleh), with their long white beards and red cheeks - each one of them holding a golden goblet, full of wine whose aroma was filling the room. I stood by the door for a moment. Silently they made a place for me, and without stopping the music, they sat me next to them. (Letter to David from Haifa, 1939)³⁷

In this dream sequence it is interesting to note that his elderly *Khalayleh* (he wrote the Arabic expression in Hebrew) have the combined attributes of Muslim sheikhs (imposing 'white beards, red cheeks'), and Jewish patriarchs ('drinking from golden wine goblets'). They were Muslim Jews.

To the very end of his life, Shami maintained one single obsession: to write a major book about life in Hebron, which to him meant the life of the country as a whole. The object of his hatred was also the source of his love and dreams.

I will tell you something about my dream. Last week I was seized by insomnia. As I lay awake I began to ponder a great book narrating the life of Hebron. It should be a volume of

a thousand pages and more, made up of several chapters. Again I dream, but who knows if I can ever realize this dream. Yes my friend, pain often strengthens us, but sometimes it undermines us and confiscates our creative powers. (Letter to David, Haifa, 1932)³⁸

Sins of the Fathers

It is very hard to categorize Shami as a writer, in part because he was an Arab Jew writing about Palestinian themes in late Ottoman Hebrew, (or perhaps one should say in early modern Hebrew). He had begun his career writing on themes of Arabic literary production, both in Arabic and Hebrew. The early essays that still exist include contributions on Jurgi Zeidan historical fiction, various tracts on Arab poetry, and an essay on the origins of modern Arab theatre. The Jerusalem Municipal Archives also include correspondence in Arabic with a number of his colleagues, including his fellow Sephardic writer Yehouda Burla,³⁹ but apparently none of his Arabic writings are available in print.⁴⁰

From a reading of his short stories and novella, one can say that his style is highly ethnographic, with a strong tendency towards naturalism (recalling Jack London in *Call of the Wild*). The settings in many of his short stories were his immediate environment in and around Hebron, in Jerusalem, Jericho and in Nablus, and most of the characters in those stories are entirely Muslim. It was this nativism which elicited from Anton Shammas singularly exceptional references to one of Shami's books: "Shami brought into the scene of modern Hebrew literature, some seventy years ago, a local Palestinian validity that hasn't been marched, or challenged, since 'Vengeance of the Fathers' is the only novel in modern Hebrew

literature whose characters, landscapes and narrative voice are all Palestinian.”⁴¹ Yet in this novella there is a disturbing tendency to treat religious ritual, processions, tribal gatherings, as a series of descriptive vignettes for the titillation of an external viewer: an ethnographic, if largely accurate, painting of an Orientalist tableau.

Only on two occasions does Shami deviate from this externalizing discourse and become very subjective. The first concerns the manner in which he contrasts the pecuniary ways of the coastal plains dwellers and their cunning to the basic goodness of the mountain people. Here it is clear where Shami’s Hebronite affinities lie, even if we take into account the sarcastic tone:

*Those of the coastal plain - the Prophet will surely forgive them their errant ways, and not injure the land on their account. They after all, have a long way to come, and to double work, to till their own plots as well as the fields and orchards of the Jews. The Jewish khawajas don't even pick their own legumes: they come to the villages and offer high wages for a day's work, and even give away the gleanings. ...The sahil-dwellers are shrewd calculators. Sharp, cunning bargainers.*⁴²

The mountain people, by contrast, were at peace with themselves:

...the hill-dwellers can confidently leave their homes and meager farms to the children and the old folk, and go off to join the celebrants [of Nabi Musa processions]. A week of little work brings in no earnings. When the work season ends in the hills the fallah [villager] has little to do. Many loaf around idly even when work is available. In the hills there is no call for working hands, and those who

*go off looking for work in the nearby town generally don't even earn enough to pay the price of a pita and a night's lodging at a khan. In bad times, when money is scarce and all sorts of creditors and tithing collectors descend on the fallah's neck to such his very blood and marrow even before his grain is ripe, the best thing is to flee to the hills and hide until the storm passes. The mukhtars and the sheikhs will know their job, and will turn the creditors away with a curt "Go, and return when blessings descend again".*⁴³

The second departure from his clinical ethnographic style occurs in a very stark and poignant episode in *Vengeance* where Shami describes the fate of Nabulsi women who went to bid farewell to the procession of men in the Nabi Musa *mawsim* (festival) leaving town towards Jericho. Shami’s weaving of the rich details of the fantasia of the dancing youth, of horse racings and *dabkeh* circles is juxtaposed against the condition of the womenfolk - who were not allowed to accompany the horsemen and who had to turn around and head back to town. During the fantasia, their spirits were lifted and they felt free to uncover their faces and ululate. But the moment of temporary elation was fleeting.

The celebration had finished so quickly: the spectacle was over, and they again felt their enslavement. Ahead of them stretched a long line of gray, monotonous working days, with no spark of joy or consolation to illuminate them. Again they would have to close themselves up in their homes and continue bearing the yoke; again they would have to suffer in silence at the hands of their rivals and mothers-in-law, to submit to having their every movement watched

*and used as a pretext for hints and slanderous remarks against them to their husbands....Sad and dismal... they made their ways back mutely along the sides of the road. At the town gate they covered themselves properly again, hid the hand drums under their arms, and, dark as outcasts, moved on with a groan, slipping away like shadows into the dark narrow alleys of the town.*⁴⁴

In these moving paragraphs Shami displays not only feminist sensitivities, but also a profound insight into the role of ritual, carnivals and religious ceremonials in releasing the repressed libido of poor urban women. This is an insight, one is tempted to add, that could only be gained from close knowledge of, and empathy with, a traditional society such as Hebron at the turn of the century.

Vengeance of the Fathers received highly different interpretations among Shami's contemporaries, and continues to evoke controversy in the current debate about his status as an early pioneer of nativist Hebrew-Arabic literature. Hannan Hever suggests⁴⁵ that the single most devastating factor explaining the marginalization of Shami as a writer were the series of attacks on him by the critic Yosef Chaim Brenner, who dismissed him as belonging to the "stories of Eretz-Israeli genre",⁴⁶ in other words that he wrote folkloric ethnographies about the life of the Jews in their various national environments - in this case, Palestine. The task of the new "Hebrew Literature", according to Brenner, was to transcend the ethnographic in favour of universalistic human norms depicting local realities, only to discover "the manifestation of the inner life and its essence". In this task Shami failed, according to Brenner, and his failure was due to his inability to escape the confines of his environment.

But it was precisely this aspect of Shami's writing that explains its significance in the eyes of Palestinian critic Issa Boullata, who notes that it evokes "earlier times free of hostilities between Palestinian Jews and Arabs" in the early decades of the century.⁴⁷ He points to Shami's leisurely style, unhurried by the modern pre-occupation with speed. Those "who crave action in stories may be frustrated by his style but those seeking ambience will be rewarded and indeed moved by the deep human interest of each story."⁴⁸

It is quite intriguing to see how *Vengeance of the Fathers* continues to receive such contrasting treatment by Israeli writers. Joseph Zernik refers to this work as conveying a "blasphemous, macabre permutation of the 'Blessing of the Fathers' - one of the oldest and most central elements in Jewish prayer."⁴⁹ Zernik suggests that the story implies that the 'Fathers' (i.e. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the common ancestors of Muslims and Jews buried in Hebron, do not constitute a blessing but a curse and a cause of continued bloodshed for their descendents. In other words, the conflict between the Hebronites and the Nabulsis is a camouflaged allegory to the Jewish-Arab (or Jewish-Muslim) fratricide.

Hannan Hever does not share this view. He sees Shami's story as an internal critique of Arab culture by one of its practitioners. While under pressure to produce a new universalistic Hebrew literature, he was nevertheless keenly aware of his need to prove himself as a Sephardic Jewish writer in a Zionist European milieu. In *Vengeance of the Fathers*, as well as in many of his other short stories with Arab characters, Shami produced a universalistic critique of Arab culture from the inside. Hever concludes his assessment:

[Shami] systematically created characters that, while central to

*his story, were ultimately revealed as unstable, disintegrating figures, whose attempts to face conflicts led to their own dissolution. The Arab that Shami brought to Hebrew literature is on the one hand, what identifies his work as Jewish-Arab writing. On the other hand, it also rejects Arabism as a canonical norm of full and autonomous subjectivity. Shami, then, solved his own acute conflict by constructing a disintegrating subject.*⁵⁰

In “Jum’ah the Simpleton”, the most ‘Hebronite’ story in the collection (and in my view, his best work), Shami was able to weave his rich knowledge of peasant lore, cropping arrangements, grazing rights, and intimate perception into the psychology of the shepherd into the plot. Here, unlike in many of his other stories, the ethnographic material is seamlessly integrated into the body of the novel. The author emerges as a master storyteller, and the reader feels that a qualitative shift has been gained in his craft. Shami does not dwell on the nobility of the lonely shepherd, nor does he glorify the peasant’s place in nature, as in other works. Here, in contrast to earlier pieces, there is a tendency to enhance the viciousness of nature (and the cruelty of children towards the weak and the deformed), and the hopeless existence of people at the edge of subsistence. But this is delicately balanced with the kindness of the elderly peasants towards those in distress. At one point Jum’ah the Simpleton is taunted by the town children during an epileptic fit that drives him to take his clothes off and enter an uncontrollable rage. For the older peasants, however, his madness was a sign of divinity:

For them his fit of insanity was a visionary seizure, a gracious gift from Allah. It was plain that the hidden light of the prophet rested upon Jum’ah at that moment. They believed that the

*angel Gabriel had touched him with his staff, and had filled him with his spirit until it had proved too much for him, so that he was now pouring it upon the demons and the goblins who, hidden among the bushes and in the clefts between the rocks, lie in wait for the faithful.*⁵¹

The womenfolk in the crowds were particularly agitated. His madness resonated with their anguish:

*Electric charges sparked through their bodies, as with wide eyes they watched Jum’ah’s twitching and listened to his cries. Every moan of his struck a chord in their souls, and filled their hearts with a sweet trepidation and a strange, astonishment. The well-springs of compassion were opened in them to the point of tears, while some of them were so moved that they tore their hair and groveled on the ground.*⁵²

Jum’ah’s derangement has the touch of divinity in it, and it is recognized as such. His imbecility is blessed and blesses those who come to know him. His death comes after an act of redemption - by a brutal kick from the hind legs of the very mule he had saved from his disease. He comes to his end alone in the wilderness, surrounded by his flock and the evening stars, with only Mas’oud the dog left to mourn him.

In Jum’ah’s death, Shami celebrates the profundity of the simple folk, uncontaminated by the avarice ways of the city, and the corrupting culture of the coastal plains. This genre is not unique to writers of his generation, or to several Arab writers who portrayed village life and glorified the peasantry - Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi comes to mind. But Shami’s case is doubly unique: first because he is a Jewish writer who - in this case - was not writing about Jewish life; and second, because his

celebration of the peasants did not slip into sentimental glorification. Rather he placed it in the context of cruel nature, and the incessant struggle for survival.

The Last of the Levantines?

David Shasha, writing in the *American Muslim*, described the Hebronite writer:

*Shami, perhaps the last authentic Levantine writer among Jews of the Middle East, is the missing link between the Genizah of Goitein and the Cairo of Mahfouz. In his short stories and novella, he explores the everyday lives of simple Levantines, Jews and Arabs, that bespeak simplicity and a deeply abiding understanding of the rootedness of both peoples in the region.*⁵³

This enthusiastic assessment of Yitzhaq Shami's work has a major problem, common to the vast majority of retrospective appreciations of this almost-forgotten author. It attempts to place Shami's work in the context of the current conflict between Arabs and Jews. It is unlikely that Shami would have appreciated the backhanded compliment. Shami wrote in an epoch and a place where his Jews *were* Arabs - or at least we can say that a substantial body of native Jews exhibited an Arabist consciousness. In contemporary narratives of the late Ottoman period - such as in the autobiographies and diaries of Khalil Sakakini and Wasif Jawhariyyeh - native Jews of Palestine were often referred to as '*abna' al-balad*' (sons of the country), 'compatriots', '*Yahud awlad Arab*' (Jews, sons of Arabs).⁵⁴ The Red Crescent Society of Palestine, established in 1916 in Jerusalem, brought many leading Arab-speaking Jews (Eintabi, Mani and Elyachar) together with their Muslim and Christian compatriots, with the aim of mobilizing Ottoman Palestinians against the

Western allies.⁵⁵

The demise of Ishaq Shami as a writer simultaneously signalled the defeat of a continuing Arab Jewish cultural tradition in Palestine. Unlike Iraq or Egypt, where there was a literary and artistic milieu to which native Jews could contribute and be integrated within, Palestine, immediately after the Great War and the inclusion of the project for a Jewish National Home in the Mandate, was decisively severed in two. Not only Zionism was responsible for this rupture, but the social and ethnic composition of the Jewish community in Palestine precluded Arab Jewish cultural continuity. At one point it appears that Sephardic-Oriental (native) distinctions had meaning within the indigenous communities of the Holy Land. The fact that many Sephardim spoke Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) at home, while Orientals (Yemenis, Iraqis, and Moghrabis) spoke Arabic was one factor. Another had to do with social status. The Sephardic aristocracy maintained a class status and genealogical claims that appear to have set them apart from all other co-religionists. Soon after the first war, these distinctions began to blur, partly due to increased intermarriage between Sephardis and Orientals (as Elyachar points out), and partly because of Hebrew language revivalism. There is no doubt, too, that the rise of Zionism was the decisive factor in this transformation, creating a new polity, a new set of relations with the Ottoman and later Mandate authorities that dwarfed the clout and access to power of traditional Jewish communities. A new cultural divide was brooked between the hegemonic East European Ashkenazim and their poorer Sephardic co-religionists. The new term "Mizrahim" emerged and subsumed the earlier distinctions between natives, Moghrabis, Kariates, and Sephardis.

Within the rising tide of Arab national sentiment in Palestine and Syria, there was

a clear differentiation between European non-Ottoman Jews, and the ‘native Israelites’. An anti-Zionist petition signed in Jerusalem in November 1918 by a number of Palestinian intellectuals makes the point that “it is our wish to live in a satisfactory manner with our brothers, the Israelites, the indigenous inhabitants of the country, with complete equality between their rights and obligations and ours.”⁵⁶ Y. Porath also refers to a statement made by the Syrian Congress of 1919, in which a native Jewish delegate participated, claiming to represent “all the Arabs of Syria - Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike”.⁵⁷ Similarly, the First Palestinian Congress meeting in February 1919 issued an anti-Zionist manifesto which rejected Zionist immigration while welcoming those Jews “among us who have been Arabicized, who have been living in our province since before the war; they are as we are, and their loyalties are our own.”⁵⁸

Ishaq Shami’s parallel predicament was to escape the repressive atmosphere of the traditional religious environment that he belonged to, while retaining the social bonds of the community. The Hebronite Arab-Muslim society among whose networks he was raised, and from which he made an early escape out of Jewish religious repression was too closed, and too conventional, to offer him any social or intellectual solace. Coming to his intellectual maturity in Jerusalem on the eve of the Mandate, Shami was too late to join forces with Palestinian secular nationalism - which had within it a strong religious streak. His adoption of Zionism was far from an embrace of Jewish nationalism, which appears in his writings as an ambivalent phenomenon.⁵⁹ One might say that Shami’s Zionism was an attempt to break away from his Jewishness, and an effective vehicle for bringing him into the modernist circles of the Jerusalem literary scene.

Beyond that, Shami’s writings reveal a

desperate nativist undertaking. They were his attempt to define his own identity in an Arab culture in which the indigenous Jew could no longer belong without finding himself at odds with his Jewish community. Shami’s tragedy lies in that it was the same community of native Jews that became the main target of populist wrath against Zionism. Communal clashes between Muslims and Jews in Safad, Jaffa, and Tiberius in the 1920s, and later the massacre of Jews in Hebron in 1929, took place in the context of peasant displacement via Zionist land purchases and a rising tide of nationalist agitation against Jewish migration. But it wasn’t only the European immigrants who were the early target of Palestinian Arab nationalism. It was *particularly* those Jewish communities that were in closest contact with and integrated into Arab traditional centres inside the country. In Hebron, the attacks were apparently initiated by peasant mobs from the city’s rural hinterlands, and not the Hebronites themselves. And it was established Hebronite Muslim families in the city who protected the Jews.⁶⁰

In the prevailing atmosphere, these distinctions must have become irrelevant for someone like Shami who could define himself as both as an Arab and a Jew. He was already alienated from the traditional Jewish community and its stifling orthodoxy. Nevertheless he identified with them as his people, his *Khalayleh*. Their tragedy became his tragedy in the double sense: he could not dissociate from them as victims, nor could he overcome the shattered hope of reconciliation as the two communities were driven down the path of impending irresolvable nationalist polarity.

Endnotes

¹ I am indebted to Abigail Jacobson for obtaining several documents on Ishaq Shami from the Jerusalem Municipal Archives; to Shlomo Hassoun for his insightful comments on the native Jewish community

of Palestine at the turn of the nineteenth century; and particularly to Joseph (Yossi) Zernick, the grandson of Daoud Shami (Yitzhak's brother), for sharing with me his extensive knowledge and unpublished essay on the Shami family history. I am also indebted to Hisham Nafa', in Haifa, for his translations of Hebrew material from the Jerusalem Municipal Archives.

² Kamal Salibi, *Ta'ir ala Sindiyanah: Muthakkarat* (Dar al Shuruq, Amman: 2002) 121-122, 128.

³ Salibi related an exchange of correspondence between his brother Bahij and Ishaq Elias - a Jewish friend from Baghdad - during the years 1940-1941. Elias expressed openly militant and Arab nationalist views. In the 1950s, Elias migrated to Israel and became a deputy foreign minister to Moshe Sharett. *Ibid*, 128.

⁴ Neville Barbor, *Arab Attitudes to Zionism Before WWI* (University of California Press, Berkeley: 1976) 63-65.

⁵ Arnold Band, Introduction to Shami's *Hebron Stories* (Labyrinthos, Lancaster: 2000) xiv. In this essay I use both the Hebrew and Arabic transliteration of Shami's first name, Yitzhaq and Ishaq.

⁶ The use of the term 'Jewish Arab', in contradistinction to 'Arab Jew', was suggested to me by Anton Shammas (correspondence 1 July, 2004).

⁷ Robert L. Cooper and Bernard Spolsky, *The Languages of Jerusalem* (Oxford University: 1991) 49.

⁸ By 'Native Jews' I also include Ashkenazi Jews who were Ottoman citizens and whose mother tongue was Yiddish or German.

⁹ For an original discussion on Jewish writings in Arabic, and the persistence of the use of Arabic as a religious and literary device by Arab Jews see Nissim Rejwan, "Jews and Arabs: The Cultural Heritage", *The Israel Review of Arts and Letters*, No. 105 (Jerusalem: 1997).

¹⁰ Elie Elyachar, *Living with Jews* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson: 1983) 59-60.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 15-16.

¹² *Ibid*, 51.

¹³ Omar Saleh al-Barghouti, *al-Marahel* (Beirut: 2001).

¹⁴ David Landau, "The Educational Impact of Western Culture on Traditional Society in Nineteenth Century Palestine", in *Jews, Arabs and Turks*, (The Magnes

Press, Jerusalem: 1993) 63.

¹⁵ Elyachar, 50.

¹⁶ See for example the description of this move in Wasif Jawhariyyeh's *Memoirs*, *Al-Quds al-Uthmaniyya, Volume 1*, Tamari and Nassar, eds. (Institute of Palestine Studies, Beirut: 2002)

¹⁷ Elyachar, 56-57.

¹⁸ *Al-Quds al-Uthmaniyya*, 200-201.

¹⁹ Elyachar, 56.

²⁰ Wasif Jawhariyyeh, *Al-Quds al-Uthmaniyya fil Mudakkarat al-Jawhariyyah, 1904-1917* (Institute of Palestine Studies, Beirut: 2003) 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, appendix 12, 273.

²² Yehouda Shenhav, "Jews from Arab Countries and the Palestinian Right for Return: An Ethnic Community in the Realms of National Memory", *The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (29, 1, 2002): 27-56.

²³ *Ibid.* See also Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Exile within Sovereignty: Toward a Critique of the 'Negation of Exile' in Israeli Culture", in *Theory and Criticism. An Israeli Forum* (No. 4, 1993): 23-55, and "Exile within Sovereignty: Toward a Critique of the 'Negation of Exile' in Israeli Culture" Part II, in *Theory and Criticism: An Israeli Forum* (No. 5, 1994): 113-132 (both in Hebrew).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Sami Michael, *Victoria* (Macmillan, London: 1995).

²⁷ Based on an extended interview with Sheri Lev Ari, "The Last Arabic Jew", *Ha'aretz*, 22 December, 2003.

²⁸ Arnold Band, "Introduction" to Yitzhaq Shami's *Hebron Stories* (Labyrinthos Book, Los Angeles: 2000) xii.

²⁹ Most of this biographical material is based on Zfira Ogden, "Izhaq Shami: the man and his work", in *Bikoret ve Parshanut* (Volume 21, 1986, Bar Illan University); and from the unpublished introduction to his forthcoming collection of short stories by Joseph Zernick, *Yitzhaq Shami: 1888-1949*.

³⁰ Ogen, 37.

- ³¹ Ibid., 38.
- ³² Letter dated October 1927 from Ben Gurion to Izhaq Shami (in Hebrew) in the Jerusalem Municipal Archives.
- ³³ Letter to David Avitzur, Hebron 1927, Jerusalem Municipal Archives; cited by Ogen, 45.
- ³⁴ Letter from Yehouda Burla to David Avitzur, 22 May, 1924, quoted by Ogen and cited by Hannan Hever, "Yitzhak Shami: Ethnicity as an Unresolved Conflict".
- ³⁵ Joseph Zernik, , "Yitzhaq Shami, introduction to a new edition of his collected stories", forthcoming, and correspondence with the author.
- ³⁶ Cited in Ogen.
- ³⁷ Cited in Ogen.
- ³⁸ Cited in Ogen.
- ³⁹ Both Yehuda Burla (1886-1969) and Shami, according to Joseph Reznik were marginalized by the Ashkenazi Hebrew intelligentsia. See Reznik, *Ishaq Shami*, 8.
- ⁴⁰ Communication to this writer from Joseph Zernick, 12 January, 2004.
- ⁴¹ Anton Shammas, in Yitzhaq Shami, *Hebron Stories*, back cover.
- ⁴² Shami, "The Vengeance of the Fathers", *Hebron Stories*, 118-119.
- ⁴³ Ibid, 119.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, 144-145.
- ⁴⁵ Cited by Hever.
- ⁴⁶ Hever, 2.
- ⁴⁷ Issa Boullata, "Yitzhaq Shami's Hebrew Fiction: Arabs and Jews before Balfour", *al-Jadeed No. 34* (Winter, 2001): 20-21.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Joseph Zernik, "Yitzhaq Shami, introduction to a new edition of his collected stories", forthcoming.
- ⁵⁰ Hannan Hever, 10-11.
- ⁵¹ "Jum'ah the Simpleton", in *Hebron Stories*, 31.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ David Shasha, *The American Muslim* (January-February, 2003).
- ⁵⁴ See Khalil Sakakini, *Yawmiyyat, Volume 1* (Ramallah: 2003); and Wasif Jawhariyyeh, *Al-Quds al-Uthmaniyyah* (Jerusalem: 2003).
- ⁵⁵ Jawhariyyeh.
- ⁵⁶ Cited by Y. Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian Arab National Movement, 1918-1929* (Frank Cass, London: 1974) 60-61.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid, 61.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ I was unable to find any traces of Jewish nationalism in his fiction. We are aware of Ben Gurion's interest in Shami from the former's invitation to the writer to consult on the 'Arab Question', but little is known of Shami's actual involvement in the Zionist movement, if any.
- ⁶⁰ There are several accounts of the 1929 incidents, mostly from Jewish sources. Most Jewish sources tend to stress the local conditions which gave rise to these clashes, while Arab sources, such as the memoirs of Ajaj Nweihid (see below) relate the incidents to the wider clashes between Zionism and Arab nationalism. For contrasting views see Neri Livneh, "Hebron Diary", *Ha'aretz*, Friday, 9 July, 1999, and Shira Schoenberg, "The Hebron Massacre of 1929", in *The Jewish Virtual Library*, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/>. See also Ajaj Nweihid, "What Happened in Hebron?", in his *Sittun aman ma al-Qafilah al-arbiyyah* (Dar al-Istiqlal, Beirut: 1993) 148-149.