

SHULAMITH HAREVEN

VOICE OF THE LEVANT

MORIS FARHI

Shulamith Hareven is one of Israel's most distinguished writers. A member of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, her work encompasses novels, poetry, essays and children's books. She is yet to be published in Great Britain; fortunately, three of her novels, superbly translated by Hillel Halkin, have appeared in the United States. They are *City of Many Days* (Doubleday, 1977), *The Miracle Hater* (North Point Press, 1988) and *Prophet* (North Point Press, 1990).

Shulamith Hareven is also a prominent activist in Israel's peace movement. Having served in the Haganah and, later, in the Israeli Defence Forces, she has first-hand knowledge of conflict—"the total failure of common sense", as she defines it. She has also covered several of Israel's wars as a frontline correspondent and, latterly, has been a close observer of the Intifada.

Like all true artists, she has the best insight into her own psyche. In an essay which she delivered at the Barbican in London last year, and which is due to appear in *Poetry Nation Review*, she declares: "*I am a Levantine.*"

The definition conjures the safety of a strong, protective arm, the hope of a compassionate bosom. Levantinism is, indeed, the perfect perspective for fathoming the spirit which has forged Hareven into prominence both in Israeli literature and in the peace movement.

Hareven is the first to acknowledge that Levantinism has some deplorable aspects, that at its worst it can manifest "the moral principles of an alleycat". But, in true Levantine spirit, she has the capacity to accommodate transgressions: after all, to be human is to be imperfect. The virtues of Levantinism, on the other hand, are legion and outweigh all its shadows.

For Hareven, Levantinism is "the colour-blind pluralism that sees no racial, ethnic or re-

ligious differences". It nurtures the sort of person "who knows five languages and their literature to perfection" and distrusts powers and cultures "that speak one language only". Always applying "the third eye and the sixth sense", it is the humanism that "was created gradually, over a long, long period of time". Consequently, it knows that "not everything has a solution" and is wise enough to exercise "great patience".

Today, this mellow brand of humanism barely survives in the Levant—or anywhere else. Today, intolerance, fanaticism, political expediency and disregard for life have a stranglehold even on liberal systems. The silent majority has multiplied; it continues to betray basic human rights by condoning with lunatic complacency everything that will keep it fat and contented. Shulamith Hareven rightly identifies these evils as mutations of Manichaean dualism and, therefore, non-indigenous to the Levant. She further identifies the most virulent of these evils, the kitsch totalitarianism and genocide which induces the schizophrenic pursuit of "institutionalized sentimentality and institutionalized brutality" as the outcome of a Christianity cynically misused by Europe. Now, in those countries of the Levant where the soul has been dazzled by western materialism, Levantinism is a mark of backwardness: in some Arab countries, it is virtually treason; in Israel, it is the sanity—"the common sense"—which is continuously spurned by the blinkered followers of unenlightened leaders and religious fanatics.

All of which make Hareven's declaration a bold one. For what she is stating, unequivocally, is that, above and beyond the universal values which every artist seeks to reach in his/her work, she has also undertaken to uphold the values of a whole region of which her

MORIS FARHI is a member of the Editorial Board of THE JEWISH QUARTERLY. His latest novel is *Journey Through the Wilderness*.



Perle Hessing's version of *Exodus* (oil on canvas)

own country, Israel, is but only a part.

Consequently, she is a constant target for obloquy. For the undertaking to serve Levantinism's wisdom—distilled over several millennia from the region's profusion of cultures—imposes the condition that she must challenge any behaviour or policy, including her own people's, that falls short of sanctifying life. In an age when mankind is poised to destroy the whole of creation, there cannot be a saner attitude.

Yet another characteristic which she attributes to Levantinism is "that quality which knows that there is no great art, no serious literature, without a hidden theology". This quality dominates her work. By "theology" she does not mean a code of religious behaviour but, quite simply, the natural presence of God: God the Supreme Creator whose miraculous compositions we witness everywhere and at every moment, and with whom we can deal directly, without the need for any mediation, as we used to when we trusted our spirituality.

The presence of this Creator is felt—sometimes even glimpsed in the reader's inner eye—in all three of Hareven's novels that have appeared in English. These works contain a classical density; or, perhaps I should say, the classical qualities that permeate them give them a density that is as durable as antiquity.

Density should not be confused with obscurity. There can be no work of art without density. Invariably, this density is almost palpable, almost tactile; it contains a weight which is as satisfying to our imagination as ancient stone is to our hands.

Density of this calibre can only be achieved through purity of insight, through the ability to explore the individual mind and its extraordinary habitat, the mass unconscious. Density of this calibre rediscovers for us our favourite myths, whisks us to mystic flights and invests harsh reality with meanings that soften it in order to make it bearable, even acceptable. And density of this calibre can only be communicated with a language that flows clear and unhindered, reflecting the wisdom, poetry and resonance of life. Since all these components can be blighted by an insensitive hand, great tribute must be paid to Hillel Halkin's translation.

City of Many Days is set in Jerusalem and has, as its protagonist, Sara Amarillo, born to a well-to-do Ladino-speaking Sephardi family. The narrative, spanning the early 1920s to 1945, the end of World War II, provides a panorama of the British Mandate years. The labours that led to the birth of the Jewish state are highlighted with exotic echoes of the preceding Ottoman period when the idea of a homeland for the Jews started gaining ground.

Loosely, the plot revolves around Sara whose father, Don Isaac, runs away with a paramour (and is found, two decades later, in an Egyptian asylum). Sara grows up in the company of her mother, Gracia, grandfather and grandmother Amarillo, sister Ofra, and the liberal, if not liberated, Aunt Victoria: a normal family, if the unique and intense relationships that govern families can qualify as normal. A British Captain, Tony Crowther, starts his Army service in Palestine by befriendng the Amarillos with orders to pick up what intelligence he can on any subversive activity from the Amarillos' milieu of Jews and Arabs; but the growing conflict between the two peoples and his role in the Army plague his conscience. Just before World War II, he successfully applies for a discharge, returns to Jerusalem as a civilian. Matti, Sara's boyfriend in her teens and, briefly, her lover in later years, becomes a leading figure—and bomb-maker—in a Jewish underground group. Elias, Sara's husband, a lawyer sympathetic to the Arabs' aspirations, nevertheless devotes himself to defending members of the Haganah and thus emerges as someone who will have a key role in the creation of the Jewish state. An immigrant from Germany, Dr Barzel, builds up a hospital where Sara is eventually employed and where, in later years, victims of the disturbances—of which he himself becomes a victim—will find some succour. Taleb, the son of the Amarillos' Arab friends, Subhi and Faiza, joins the Palestinian nationalist movement. Dr Barzel's mother, Elizabeth, sensing the impending Holocaust, emigrates from Germany, but rather than assimilate to her new country, tries to impose her "superior" Germanic ways on all and sundry. World War II intensifies the three-cornered conflict between Jews, Arabs and the British. The end of the War augurs further conflict; but what sort of peace, if any?

A novel that uses a large canvas and covers a lengthy period must have a remarkable—a diachronic—structure to accommodate all the themes and nuances; it must billow and tighten, drift and anchor all at the same time. *City of Many Days* achieves this condition with remarkable panache.

Most of the characters—except for Matti and Elias who do get involved in the independence movement—are tangential to the main events of the times, yet serve as litmuses of history. Much as they seek to lead quiet, peaceful lives, they cannot escape the tremors of the events that are reshaping the region. The story unfolds in short vignettes, each bearing impressionistic strokes. Thus, as the characters interpret or misinterpret events, are acute or shortsighted about the future, we sense rather than witness the changes. The subtlety of the narrative is further enhanced by "the city of many days" itself, Jerusalem.

Shulamith Hareven's Jerusalem exudes a breath that is as alive as Durrell's Alexandria, Kazantzakis's Crete and Joyce's Dublin. It starts as "a small city: as small as a man's palm"; it loses innocence progressively through the possessive demands of Jews and Arabs and the iniquities of Ottoman and British rule; with strife comes some wisdom, but also much sadness and uncertainty. Needless to say, like all great cities, it is always hauntingly beautiful.

This is how Crowther, the English Captain sees it:

Jerusalem was a veiled lady on a still, torrid day, feminine, forlorn, softly dreaming, self-absorbed, sucking time sweetly like an old sugar candy, her sons gathered under the many folds of her robe, picking rockrose and herbs. Other days she was a man, fierce, dry, and ancient, smelling of thyme and wild goat, his head covered with a sack against the wind, bare feet viny-veined, brusque-voice and ornery, sniffing the slippery scent of sin in abandoned alleys, the odour of prophecy in public squares . . . Each solemn girl in a courtyard was more girl than anywhere else, each baby wrapped in a shawl the only baby on earth, each single person the leaven of life. The city tensed its muscles under your feet. Put your hand on a wall and you felt the stone pulse. The very light percolated through it with each breath of the desert heat.

For Sara it is: "A city you long for the more you are in it; in which you are most yourself and most miss yourself; in which whatever you find you will want again from afar. A duplicitous city in which everything is its own looking glass . . ."

And for Taleb, of the Palestinian nationalist movement, this is how Jerusalem looks:

A city on the desert's edge, its populace holding on with bare nails, high-strung, quarrelsome, haggling, wrangling, cupidinous . . . On certain warm nights when a dry sirocco wind that has assembled its forces on the Plain of Jordan, that has marshalled them again on the Mount of Qarantal, that has gathered reinforcements in the badlands of Judea, bursts through the streets of the city like the foothills of an invisible invader, the desert overruns Jerusalem again. You can hear the city groan then in the stillness as though hurt. And then silence once more. The broken tablets of the Law. Until morning.

The Miracle Hater, written at least a decade after *City of Many Days*, and *Prophet*, first published in 1989, are novels of an altogether different timbre. Both have a strong philosophical core and serve as parables for our times. Though they are short and sparse, they nevertheless provide a large canvas.

The Miracle Hater is a novel about the Exodus. The title refers to Eshkhar, born at the time when Hebrews, forbidden by the Egyp-

tians to bear children, either hid their sons or sent them floating down the Nile to childless women bathing by its banks.

Whilst giving birth, Eshkhar's mother is observed by Baita, a five-year-old girl. The mother hands the baby to Baita, telling her to take it home. The women in Baita's household prove willing to look after Eshkhar, but Baita refuses to part with him.

When Moses takes the Hebrews out of Egypt, Baita's household joins the multitude. Eshkhar remains in Baita's charge.

After some years in the wilderness, a marriage is arranged for Baita. Eshkhar seeks to reverse this decision; he goes to the elders and asks to have Baita for his wife. The elders mock his temerity. Eshkhar goes to appeal to Moses and confronts Joshua, appointed to protect the great man from the crowds that "would kill him with affection". Joshua declares: "We work miracles. Justice is not our concern", and sends Eshkhar away.

After Baita's marriage, Eshkhar leaves the Hebrew camp. But he stays on the periphery and starts his own flock.

He witnesses the drought and the way Moses strikes water out of the rock. But he also sees that for some the water has come too late; they have perished.

A year or two later, Baita seeks him out. At first he wants nothing to do with her, then they become lovers. But fear of discovery and the prescribed punishment of lapidation, particularly fear of Moses who "had ways of finding out everything in the whole world, on earth, in heaven, even in the stones", renders Baita ill and she dies.

Eshkhar goes back to his mountain. He can see the Ancestral Lands ahead; yet to his amazement, the Hebrews choose to languish in the wilderness.

One day Yonat, a mute girl, goes wild and incites the camp to melt their gold. Eshkhar goes to investigate. The molten gold is now shaped like an ox, people talk of miracles. Eshkhar leaves in disgust. He decides to live in solitude for ever.

Provoked into action by the incident of the golden calf, Moses resumes the journey towards the Ancestral Lands.

Eshkhar wanders alone, roaming to and from the Ancestral Lands, thinking, at times, that "he was God himself".

One night, he discovers a young Hebrew woman, Dina. She is with child, conceived out of wedlock and, therefore, in danger of punishment: if he testifies that she is his wife, the people might allow her to live. Eshkhar cares for her. Dina goes back to her people. She returns with her child. Soon she conceives Eshkhar's child.

The multitude reaches the Ancestral Lands.

As they begin to cross, Dina asks if Eshkhar will join them. He agrees. The people enter the Promised Land, a land that Eshkhar has often visited in his solitude.

Prophet also takes place in Biblical times. Set in the period when the Hebrews have entered the Ancestral Lands and are threatening its city-states, it could well be a sequel to *The Miracle Hater*. Dealing with settled communities as opposed to people wandering in the wilderness, this is a powerful novel where even the words appear to spread roots.

In *Prophet*, rumours of an approaching enemy send the hilltop city of Gibeon into panic. The city's ruler and elders ask their prophet, Hivai, "to tell them what to do so that they might live". But Hivai cannot prophesy: augury has its own rules and comes in its own time. Days go by. The enemy does not come. But that only increases the citizens' fears. Still Hivai cannot see into the future.

One day, desperate to regain his gifts of divination, he disembowels a slave child and studies the intestines. He sees the walls of another city, Ai. He believes the vision predicts that Ai alone will survive the enemy's attacks. That night, secretly, he sends Sahali, his daughter whom he has made his lover, to Ai.

Some days later, a band of people straggle with news of Ai's destruction and claim to be the only survivors. Roused by an albino demagogue, the Gibeonites refuse to believe them. Hivai, however, knows that Ai has fallen, that his vision had revealed the weakness of Ai's walls, not their strength.

The unrest prompts a few elders, among them Hivai, to seek out the Hebrews and to offer an alliance between the Gibeonite gods and that of the Hebrews.

The Hebrews accept the offer. The elders set out to return to Gibeon with the good news. Hivai, bereft without his daughter, chooses to stay with the Hebrews in order to study their ways.

He attaches himself to Ahilud, the leader, and humbly carries out all that is asked of him. The Hebrews begin to build a settlement. Hivai, still trying to understand the Hebrews' ways, finds their customs strange. Marit, Ahilud's wife, distrusts his curiosity.

One day Hivai asks Ahilud to be shown the Hebrew God. When Ahilud tells him that the Hebrew God has no form or body or shape, Hivai thinks he is being mocked. Every night he searches the camp to find the God.

One night he is caught rummaging; Marit urges Ahilud to send Hivai away. Since, after seven years with the Hebrews, Hivai himself thinks it is time to go, he and Ahilud part as friends.

Hivai heads westward. He hears news of Gi-

beon: it is now being ruled by the albino demagogue. He reaches the ruins of Ai and dreams that he has been cursed by his dead daughter. He proceeds to the river Jordan.

An old man now, he cultivates his patch. He meets a tongueless boy, Goshia. As he becomes attached to him, he regains his prophetic gifts: "the small, harmless prognostications of old men . . . when it would rain on the mountains across the river . . . which date palm would bear the first fruit, and what he would find when he opened his traps . . ."

Though there are many conceptual differences between *The Miracle Hater* and *Prophet*, thematically they complement each other.

In terms of parable, each provides an intense study of solitude, both that of an individual and that of a people, at a time of turbulence and change. It is impossible, therefore, not to draw parallels between the ancient Hebrews toiling to establish a land and a God, and the Israel of today, struggling to find the conditions that would guarantee her a future in the Ancestral Lands.

Many questions are posed.

Is justice on the side of the strong, as Eshkhar believes when he fails to prevent Baita's marriage to another man? And is there no time for justice during the making of miracles? Can we accept this premiss for an Israel which, whilst making miracles constantly, strives desperately to stay strong, sometimes brutally, at the expense of justice?

Are these years of statehood Israel's years in the wilderness? Is the present materialism a new cult of the golden calf? Does Israel's distrust of dialogue with its enemies suggest an arrogance like that of Moses who chose to extract water from the rock by *smiting* it instead of *talking* to it as God had commanded? If so, will our generation, like that of Moses, be prevented from entering the true Ancestral Lands, that of Israel in peace? Does peace lie, as Hivai discovers, in cultivating our land and loving our neighbours?

And many other questions . . .

Are there any answers?

Difficult to say. As Hareven's Levantinism confirms: "*not everything has a solution.*"

But one answer is sure to lead to disaster: the proscription against change. Both novels impress the fact that people who fight change by embracing power and giving it divine or occult dimensions, squander the inner strengths requisite for their survival.

There is another answer, that of humanism, of Levantinism, that might—given the chance—lead to true salvation: peace: the ability to adapt, like Eshkhar and Hivai, and in so doing rediscover that single constant which is always available to us: the beauty of diversity—a beauty that deserves celebration, not destruction.