
Reviewed by Shoshana Knol, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

Tamar Yellin’s book *The Genizah at the House of Shepher* is a well-written novel about the journey of several members of the Shepher family. These aren’t just journeys in the literal sense of the word, although there seems to be a definite longing to be somewhere else than where they are. There’s also an inner journey; struggling with love, identity and choices made or not made. The book is divided into four parts, each containing small chapters dealing with the different story lines of the four main characters of the book: Shulamit, her father, grandfather and great-grandfather. There are also several chapters on Judaism and Jewish literature, which gives the impression that the author, a lecturer in Jewish Studies, wishes to teach as well as to entertain.

The book starts off with the great-grandfather, Shalom Shepher, a great scholar who through diligent study knows the Torah inside out. This knowledge and a keen eye made him the greatest corrector of scrolls of his time. At the age of eighteen he decides to leave for Jerusalem, divorcing his wife of five years, pulled by a longing to go to the East. It takes him a good two and a half years to get there because not only does he get ill on the journey, every Jewish community he passes wants him to correct their texts. Once in Jerusalem he remarrys and despite the fact that the marriage isn’t really based on love, it lasts and they have many children. Batsheva, his wife, is a hard woman but one who has a head for business. At some point there is an outbreak of cholera and Shalom falls ill. Batsheva nurses him with vinegar and saves him. Yet after his miraculous recovery, Shalom becomes restless again and wants to travel even further to the East. He becomes overly certain that the Messiah is coming and that he’s got a task to bring the ten lost tribes back home. With the agreement of his rabbi he leaves only to return two years later. He states that he has found the ten tribes and that they live in great splendour beyond the River Sambatyon. His travel stories are well loved by his
children and other members in the community. Everyone keeps asking him when the ten tribes will come, but his answer remains throughout the rest of his life “not yet”.

Shalom is a very religious man, yet his only son Joseph becomes entranced with Zionism and outwardly sheds the signs of a religious man. He and his wife have several children as well. Their son Amnon is the one who is restless like his grandfather, yet where Shalom’s spiritual journey took him to Jerusalem, his grandson Amnon’s spiritual journey brings him from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv and eventually to Southampton, England. Amnon is a great procrastinator; he leaves Jerusalem for Tel Aviv in order to get a good job, but every opportunity seems to be passing by him. His parents deeply love him and try to encourage him as much as possible. They even help him out financially. When Amnon finally decides that he wants to leave for Britain to go to university there, his parents also help him out. Amnon however misses his chance to start university there because of the love of a woman, Hannah, whom he has been teaching Hebrew. Amnon would like for Hannah to come with him to England but she tells him that she cannot marry him. This, as later becomes clear, because she’s already engaged to someone else. In England Amnon marries another woman and starts working at her father’s furniture factory. Despite the fact that Amnon has got a good life, he continuously feels that life has short changed him; he can’t stop thinking whether that’s really what he wanted from life. Yet he fails to recognise his own responsibility in this: being a procrastinator throughout his life, not able to make choices when they should have been made, always waiting for the thing that would never happen.

It’s Amnon’s daughter Shulamit, or Shula for short, who’s the actual narrator of the book. She herself struggles with the choices she made in her life. Choices she truly faces on a visit to Israel after not having been there for 20 years. The fact that the family home is going to be returned to its owners is what sets off this travel. Shulamit wants one final time to spent time at the house in Kiriat Shoshan, the house that was for decades the living heart of the family but has now become a derelict place. Here she is confronted with the situation that in the attic of the house a Codex has been found, a situation, which seems to be splitting up the family. The main questions are: whom does the Codex belong to and what should be done with it?

The interesting part is that the Codex has a colophon, which states that the Codex came from
the tribe of Dan, the tribe that lives beyond the River Sambatyon. The Codex’s ownership is questioned within the family; even though found amongst the belongings of Joseph, other family members believe that they are true inheritors of the Codex. The fact that the Codex seems to have several variants also causes plenty of discussion within the family: what to do with the Codex? The Haredi family members want it to be buried, whilst the more modern Shephers prefer a thorough study of it.

During this family feud, Shulamit delves into the history of her family by reading the other documents in the attic. Here she discovers matters she had no knowledge of, such as the story of Hannah, the woman her father really loved. She also confronts her own choices, which include losing the man she once loved, remaining single and not having a family of her own. She is very interested in the Codex, personally but also from an academic point of view, since she is a lecturer in Biblical studies. She comes into contact with a religious man, Gideon, who singles her out to get access to the Codex. This man stirs feelings in her, which she didn’t have for a long time. There is something in him that seems so familiar and at the end of the story we become aware that this feeling is correct. During her stay in Jerusalem Shulamit faces up to the consequences of her life choices, or lack of them, and accepts them for what they are. It’s as if she’s at peace with herself. It also propels her to make a definite choice with regards to Gideon.

The Genizah of the House of Shepher is really a story well told. There are various themes in the book, which seem to crop up in every generation, as if the character traits are genetically inheritable just as the physical appearances are. The longing for travel, the lack of making choices, the absence of loving relationships and the compulsion to steal; all seem to be inherent factors of the family described.

The character Shulamit shares some autobiographical notes with Tamer Yellin such as the shared profession and the fact that Yellin’s father was also a third generation Jerusalemite.

All in all I very much enjoyed reading the book and can happily advise others to read it as well.