



## **The Genizah at the House of Shepher**

*Tamar Yellin*

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A scholar, returning to her family home in Jerusalem becomes embroiled in a family dispute over a discovered Codex, brought home originally her great-great grandfather. Set against the backdrop of a hundred and thirty years of change, this is a novel of exile and belonging, displacement and the quest for both love and a true promised land.

## **The Genizah at the House of Shepher Details**

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Author : Tamar Yellin

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## **From Reader Review The Genizah at the House of Shepher for online ebook**

### **Elizabeth says**

The reasons an individual chooses a book are varied, and often quirky. My reasons for choosing *The Genizah at the House of Shepher* may be among the most quirky. First of all, the author's given name, Tamar, is that of the younger daughter of friends who immigrated to Israel a number of years ago. The main character is Shulamit, which happens to be the name of their older daughter. As one progresses through the alphabet, it becomes harder to find books written by authors whose last names begin with letters further down the alphabet. At my local Barnes and Nobel, the X, Y, Z authors fill at most 2 small shelves at the end of the literature section. And so, I was pleased to find a "Y" author whose book I did enjoy. I'm not sure I followed all the twists in this book which covers at least 4 generations in the lives of the Shepher family; but there were elements of the story that were so wonderfully descriptive that I was able to overlook my lack of understanding of the characters and intricacies of plot. Ms. Yellin has a new book debuting this fall (2008), *Tales of the Ten Lost Tribes*. I look forward to reading it.

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### **Dennis Fischman says**

At first, I feared this book would tell the story of a hunt for secret spiritual knowledge, sort of a *Da Vinci Code* in Hebrew letters. Thank God, it is nothing of the kind. The Codex that sets the plot in motion is nothing more than a McGuffin. The real story of the book is the search to solve the deeper mysteries: Who were my parents before I was around? What made them the way they are? Who am I, and how do I fit in?

If you are reading for adventure, set off in another direction. If you seek certainty, know for sure that the author will frustrate your quest. If you would enjoy the gradual unfolding of a family history (and I think that everybody's life is in part that unfolding, so reading the book is like growing up again), then spend some time with this beautifully written book.

My major objection to this book (which I finished reading on the second day of Rosh Hashanah 5773) is its air of being an elegy. Judaism as I love it is not a pile of fragmented decaying manuscripts. It is me and my friends and family, singing, eating, praying, and arguing over how to make the world better before God has to be sorry for having such schleppers as partners in Creation. The author appreciates the intricacies of the tradition, but she is not adding to it, and that's a moral fault. Whether it is also a fault of the book is for you to read and decide.

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### **Amy Paget says**

Another fabulous debut novel. The multigenerational aspects were very well handled

Plot summary:

Beginning with a search for the ten lost tribes and ending in an attic, where lies an important bible which has been missing for seventy-nine years, *The Genizah at the House of Shepher* is Tamar Yellin's critically

acclaimed debut novel.

Returning to her grandparents' home in Jerusalem after an absence of many years, Shulamit, an English biblical scholar, stumbles into the mystery of the so-called Shepher Codex, an ancient and valuable manuscript of the Bible which has been discovered in the "genizah" or attic. In uncovering the truth about the Codex she reveals the loves, hates and histories of the Shepher family itself, and at the same time struggles to answer pressing questions: what is the significance of the Codex and where does it come from? Who is the stranger, Gideon, who is desperate to enlist her help? Above all, whom does the Codex belong to and what part must Shula play in its destiny?

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### **Chrissie says**

If I were to pick one word to describe this book, it would be confusing. You start a new chapter and it begins with pronouns; I kept wondering, who are we talking about?! After a page you know, but that is too long for my tastes. He did this and felt that and she responded in this manner.....but who, who, who - I was asking over and over again?! Finally I knew and then what was I supposed to do? Go back and reread the page? This happened not once, but often. The time-line jumps around and few dates are given. There is a war; but which war? Forget learning any history. Maybe another good word to describe this book would be disjointed. And then there were short chapters with discussions between God and Moses..... After reading a few, I learned to skim such chapters. This book is supposed to have a spiritual message? What was that message? The book has been compared to "People of the Book". OK, they are both about books that are found and what their history could be. Here the questions are predominantly who does it belong to and what should be done with it? We are talking about fame and money...and a squabbling family. Furthermore, the origin of the codex found is simply not believable. So forget the lost/discovered book theme.

The primary theme of THIS book is family relationships. It didn't help that I didn't care a hoot for any of them.

And the ending.....CORNY! I recommend this book to no one.

Oh, one good thing with the book is that it is short. There are blank pages between chapters and they are numbered too. :0) That is the only compliment I can give this book. I do not hate it; it is just a total waste of time. A book that really annoys me would even be better than a book that leaves me indifferent.

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### **Daphnar says**

Although the bones of the story are interesting (woman returns to family home before its demolition to find that a valuable Codex of unknown origin has been found, interspersed with family history), the actual writing is so boring it was all I could do to finish the book. Pages pass where nothing occurs. Although not densely populated, it was difficult keeping track of the 20 or so characters because they were not sufficiently distinct.

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### **Jennifer says**

Tamar Yellin's first book explores the themes revisited in her later collections of short stories: the lost tribes,

Jewish and Biblical history, family history (real and imagined), estrangement, life's irrevocable choices and conflicting homelands and the notion of belonging. The narrative proceeds through a series of stories strung together that link the first person protagonist, a biblical scholar, with her personal past and generations past, and from lives of great spirituality to 20th century ambivalence and loss of faith. It is the story of a mysterious inheritance, a rediscovered codex that provides an enduring but enigmatic connection between the great grandfather and the book's modern day scholar. Tamar Yellin unfolds her narrative with elegant language and skillful, sensitive control. Epic!

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## Carol says

I don't know what made me pick up this book, but I'm so glad I did! It's like visiting a foreign country where they speak a dialect of your language, so while everything is new and fascinating, you can still understand what's going on.

Shulamit has gone to her grandparents home (from England to Jerusalem) to visit one final time before the house is torn down. Her trip is a journey in self-awareness and acceptance which takes her through 4 generations of her eccentric Jewish family.

I really enjoyed this book. It's sometimes difficult to write about multi-generations of families because you can easily get lost trying to figure out who is who in what generation. It's possible to do in this book with all the aunts and uncles, but I was able to keep them straight on the whole. A chart would have been a lovely thing to add, especially for others less versed in family organization and genealogical charts. (I can do them in my head, so no problem for me!)

The writing has a breeze to it that is really lovely. I found it to be an easy read. Sometimes easy reads are pretty straight-forward in language, but this one had some really beautiful descriptions and analogies. Even with (or especially with) the Jewish words, her descriptions are real and sensual. You can smell, hear and see what she is writing about.

The majority of characters, even in their eccentricities (which may not be entirely eccentric to a person of Jewish heritage!), are on the whole believable. I had one issue with the main character. Shulamit is a professor of Biblical studies and yet she shows an amazing lack of interest in the Codex (read the book). I'm not a professor of biblical studies and I would still show a more concerned interest in the possession of a handwritten Torah. Shulamit is interested, of course, as it is the mystery of the book, but not in a way I found particular believable.

I also felt like Gideon and the final scene in the attic were left slightly unanswered. I liked the mysticism of it, but felt like the question of Gideon was not answered (read the book). Then again, that may have been the point of Gideon. For those reason, *The Genizah* gets 4 stars, instead of 5, but it's definitely worth reading; especially if you love the feel and learning opportunities of visiting a foreign land full of fascinating stories and people.

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### **Cindie Harp says**

I love magical realism and I love stories that have Judaism as its own character. I actually was left unsure whether a character in this book was real or imagined, so I emailed the author, and G-d bless her, she emailed me back the answer. If you are in the mood for something spiritual and are not the sort who need literal and definitive answers, I recommend you come to this book

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### **Psirene says**

This is the story of the Shepher family and how they acquired the Genizah and how it was returned to its rightful owners. The Shephers are an eccentric family of Jews living in Jerusalem. Uncle Saul asks his London niece Shulamit to visit the family home - a rented dilapidated house about to be torn down and replaced by modern lofts - where he has recently found a codex in the attic. The chapters weave in and out of the present and the history of the Sephers and Shulamit's own past. It is a story of coming to peace with who we have become and understanding the past. Why isn't there an American writer who can produce this type of book?

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### **Ilana Diamant says**

This is one of the worst but well-written books I've read in a long time. Unreadable, soporific, full of cliches and stereotypes, and forget about character/plot. I'm glad I finished it.

Memo to would-be Tamar Yellins of the literary world:

Just because your novel spans multiple generations and just because Jerusalem's history is part of it, that doesn't make it a good novel or a non-boring one. I don't understand why this got the jewish book award. And speaking of Jerusalem in fiction, Shulamit Hareven's Ir Yamim Rabim is immensely better than this.

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Older review:

I haven't finished this yet but so far it seems just like any other panoramic historically-inspired novel that tries to cover too many things at the expense of depth and insight. Yellin attempts to present her protagonist as an 'every-woman' but that just doesn't make her any more believeable or any less boring.

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### **Allan says**

This book was a joy to read. The language, rich and warm, particularly when describing the mythic history of the Shepher family going back to the 19th century. It is a tapestry of emotion, longing and want. The threads of family histories are woven into the story of love, of aging and missed opportunity. Yellin is particularly masterful in showing us the passage of time. [return:][return:]Shulamit Shepher, the narrator, enters the genizah, the storeroom of the past where every yellowing packet of letters and photographs, documents and receipts is weighted with significance for no one but the hovering spirits and the lonely seeker. Though she is a scholar searching out the truth of the ancient Codex found in her family home, this is primarily a story of relationships. [return:][return:]All families are flawed, have their strengths and weaknesses hidden in attics

and closets that are perhaps better left undisturbed. You cannot go back on the road not taken to see where it actually led.

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### **Summers says**

FYI -- the meaning of genizah [C19: from Hebrew, literally: a hiding place, from g?naz to hide, set aside] In Judaism, a repository for timeworn sacred manuscripts and ritual objects, generally located in the attic or cellar of a synagogue. In the Middle Ages most synagogues had a genizah, because ceremonial burial (often with the remains of a pious, scholarly Jew) was thought to be the only fitting manner of disposing of sacred documents. Countless sacred manuscripts-called shemot ("names") because they contained the name of God-were thus left to gather dust or to disintegrate slowly.

The plot was a little strange and plodded along rather awkwardly, but then I started catching on to what was happening and it was a little less confusing. The 4 stars are really because I liked the history-ness of all things Jewish, and getting a feel for the beliefs, not necessarily their faith. And the complexity between the myths or the reality of history.

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### **Rachel says**

I struggled a little bit with this book. Somewhat like SY Agnon's "Only Yesterday," this novel starts with a Jew coming to pre-state Palestine out of ideological conviction. It's more a novel of ideas than it is of character development, which made it difficult for me to lose myself in.

But there's certainly a lot going on in this non-linear narrative. Protagonist Shula recounts her family history, starting with her great-grandfather who moves to Jerusalem in the 1860s, all the way up, and surpassing her father's decision to move west to England. We cover wars, marriages, love affairs and perhaps most significantly, great-grandfather, Rev Shalom Shepher's quest to find the ten lost tribes of Israel. He returns to Jerusalem after two years with a codex, a version of the Torah, which drives a lot of the plot of the present day narrative.

In the present, the crumbling family home is about to be sold for demolition, and relatives and others gather to argue over who has rights to the codex. Shula is a biblical scholar, and she adds an analytical note to those who claim it more out of familial squabbles or religious conviction. But Yellin does paint a lyrical world tinged with history and spirituality. I don't think it's possible to write about searching for the ten lost tribes without straying into the fantastical; since reading "The Angel of Losses" by Stephanie Feldman, I've been struck by this notion that reuniting with our mysteriously disappeared brethren is a unique fount of Jewish fantasy.

Questions of authenticity and humanity litter this book--the codex is one of many Torah variations, and characters in the story (and surely the real world) vie over which one is "true." Yellin, a biblical scholar like her protagonist, takes, to my mind, a more fascinating approach by considering all of them, and what they say about the multi-faceted Jewish experience. She also includes some exegesis about Moses--I'm vaguely aware that these stories appear somewhere in Jewish texts--where he grapples with the limits of his humanity. Including after he's dead, because though he was a major player in writing down the 5 Books of Moses, there's no way he could keep current with all of the Jewish literature and history that followed. I saw

this as proof that we are imperfect, and that our culture is vast.

But narratives about all of the characters had a sort of folkloric tint--like Rev Shalom's sickness when he wasn't traveling for spiritual enlightenment, his diet of figs and his wife's detailed vinegar business. As we move through the generations, Shula's other paternal forebears get little vignettes, and the women, save perhaps for her Aunt Miriam, get even less. Said females seem to blend together after awhile as unattractive and unlearned shadows for the men, and it all felt a little shallow to me. Shula, of course, had the most character depth--besides for her interaction with the plot, she's also struggling with a lost love affair, a strained relationship with her brother and feeling like the last Generation of the Shephers, and her nebulous feelings about her life in England vs her family history in Jerusalem.

I read Yellin's short stories, "Tales of the Ten Lost Tribes," several years ago and I think they worked better for me. Short stories allow the creative space to explore faith and belonging in these lyrical, spiritual terms. To sustain the length of the novel, I think I needed people to be a little more fleshed out and grounded.

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### **Denise says**

Me topé con éste libro por casualidad en Sevilla. No me arrepiento de haberlo adquirido. Es una belleza de principio a fin. El lenguaje que utiliza la autora es verdaderamente hermoso, al igual que la historia familiar que nos relata a lo largo del libro. Creo que en el mundo hay pocas comunidades verdaderamente estrechas, unidas y solidarias, y una de ellas es sin duda la comunidad judía.

Pocas son las familias que preservan su historia con tanto cuidado, y que conocen sus orígenes y su paso por el mundo. A través de la vida de varios de los personajes vamos conociendo la historia de la familia Sheper, sus tradiciones, creencias, tribulaciones y el intrincado tejido de sus afectos. El libro está muy bien escrito. Es de fácil lectura y el lector queda atrapado dentro de la historia desde el inicio. Vale la pena leerlo, sobre todo si se quiere aprender un poco más de otras culturas y grupos sociales.

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### **Allan says**

This book was a joy to read. The language, rich and warm, particularly when describing the mythic history of the Sheper family going back to the 19th century. It is a tapestry of emotion, longing and want. The threads of family histories are woven into the story of love, of aging and missed opportunity. Yellin is particularly masterful in showing us the passage of time. [return][return]Shulamit Sheper, the narrator, enters the genizah, the storeroom of the past where every yellowing packet of letters and photographs, documents and receipts is weighted with significance for no one but the hovering spirits and the lonely seeker. Though she is a scholar searching out the truth of the ancient Codex found in her family home, this is primarily a story of relationships. [return][return]All families are flawed, have their strengths and weaknesses hidden in attics and closets that are perhaps better left undisturbed. You cannot go back on the road not taken to see where it actually led.

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