Naomi Shemer, 1930-2004

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Naomi Shemer, the grande dame of Israeli song, died this past June at age 74. She left behind a legacy of hundreds of original compositions and classic poems set to music, all of which reflect her profound love of the Jewish people and the land of Israel and bear witness to her country's tumultuous history of joy and tragedy—from the yearning for a reunified capital expressed in "Jerusalem of Gold" to the prayer "Let It Be," which is associated with the Yom Kippur War. Much of her music was also infused with a childlike innocence and charm, and it was this, along with her unabashed Zionism, which led to her vilification by a phalanx of critics in the days following her death.

To the influential *Yediot Aharonot* columnist Nahum Barnea, for example, Shemer's songs depicted a romanticized image of the Jewish state, "an idealized land of Israel that probably never existed, or at least has not for a long time." Her songs, he added, willfully ignored the darker sides of Israeli society, such as its materialism, political corruption, and social inequality. Most important, her songs leave out the negative effects Zionism has had on the local Arab population. "For her," he wrote, "the land of Israel is a one-people land, devoid of conflict and minorities. A one-sided deal, for Jews only." Doron Rosenblum of *Ha'aretz* took the charge even further, accusing her of jingoism, narcissism, and romantic delusions. "From the first lines of 'Jerusalem of Gold,'" he wrote, "we become intoxicated by her description of clear—almost oxygen-free—mountain air; it is all symbolism, metaphor, and flowery turns of phrase."

At best, Shemer's critics conceded her songs' pleasantness—a bit saccharine, they insisted, but still exuding what Barnea called an "agrarian charm." But as for the three muses of her art—the Hebrew language, the Bible, and the land of Israel—these were simply delusional. As historian Aviad Kleinberg put it, "a gentle fragrance of death lingers over her poems, from the water wells and the path in the fields—a whiff of aristocratic decay. Because, in the end, we will not inherit that world and that dream; we will only bury it." Barnea, too, warned against focusing too heavily on the literary value of her works, in light of the dangerous nationalism they advocated. "She was not the first poet," he argued, "to be carried away to the Right's hallucinatory edge. It also happened, under infinitely graver circumstances, to Ezra Pound.… Today, years after his death, the Americans adore his poetry but have not forgiven him his sins." In this short step—from the "sin" of unrepentant Zionism to the fascism, anti-Semitism, and treason of Ezra Pound—is revealed the depth of her critics' animus.

But such criticism is wrong on two fronts. It is wrong because Zionist idealism is no sin. And it is wrong because Naomi Shemer was not trapped in that idealism. In many places her lyrics expressed the concern that Israel's dreams would in fact never materialize, or the disappointment that "perhaps it never really was," ("In the Land that Never Was"). Her songs also included a critical—at times bitterly so—side. In "Current Affairs," for example, she chided Israel's carefree youth, who would seek greener pastures in foreign lands. "By all means, go ahead and dance, with your future so bright / The boys are all in India and the girls are all in China." In her hit "Never a Dull Moment," she denounced the country's corrupt leadership and the social chaos that resulted. These, too, are no less a part of her repertoire than is "Jerusalem of Gold."

The importance of artists, however, is not limited to their ability to criticize. We also look to them for their vision, and their ability to affirm that which is good in our world, as well as to give voice to our

longings. This is precisely what Shemer offered in songs such as "Birth Pangs of the Messiah," which spoke to a nation's shared dreams; in "My Soldier Has Returned," which touched upon the collective experience of a nation whose sons went to war; and in "We Two Are From the Same Village" and "Each Year in Autumn, Giora," which express the nation's shared grief at the loss of its children in battle. So, too, did Shemer know how to comfort a battle-weary nation in need of hope ("Let It Be" and Natan Alterman's "Along the Highway"), and how to express the Jews' deep-seated connection to the land of Israel (the poetess Rachel's "Kinneret" and Shaul Tchernichovski's "My Country, Land of My Birth"). She also knew how to give voice to our prayers ("Sleep, Noga" and "Tomorrow") and our love ("Wear White" and "Night on Achziv Beach"). In her incomparable imagery, Shemer captured the beauty of Israel's cities ("The White City") and of its people ("Good People"). And she reminded us of our biblical roots ("To the Water Wells") and joined in our effort to carry on in the face of tragedy ("Renewal").

Nor was the use of the Jewish past in her songs merely an effort to romanticize or create myths. For Shemer, the past is a source of solace and hope. As the current hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians reached their terror-filled peak, she wrote the following ("In Your Blood, You Shall Live"):

The ancient words give me strength
In the ancient voices I will be healed
They help me to live
They help me to grow
To create a more beautiful world

And I shall go to you and see you
Lying in your blood
And say to you, in your blood, you shall *live*! ...

Above my head a rainbow suddenly unfurls
Extending a fan of colors
Proclaiming life, proclaiming hope
And peace and tranquility and loving-kindness

Here we see the biblical resonance—the second stanza is based on Ezekiel's words of hope to the fallen Jerusalem—which filled her writing. Shemer's lyrics are from the Bible, her words spoken in the revived Hebrew language, and her dreams are of the ancient homeland. Indeed, these three pillars form the foundation of her world. Of course, the most controversial of the three, and that which led to her excommunication in some Israeli cultural circles, was her dedication to the land. In a televised debate years ago, the Israeli writer Amos Oz asked Shemer why, in "Jerusalem of Gold"—composed just before the reunification of Jerusalem—she wrote that "the market square is empty." After all, was the Old City's market square not full of the Arabs of East Jerusalem? Shemer replied that to see it that way is like trying to console a man who yearns after his beloved by saying that she is not alone—she has found comfort in the arms of another. As far as she was concerned, the land of Israel without its ancient people is, in effect, deserted.

In Shemer's songs is reflected the original Zionist dream, both the longing of the past and the hope for the future. Shemer understood that a central element of Zionism—arguably the key to the whole enterprise—lay in an optimistic love of the land and its people. Her words gave form to an ancient Jewish dream of return and renaissance. Her songs allowed a generation of listeners to tap into a hidden common denominator that binds the Jewish people into a single nation, with Israel at its center. It was not by accident that Shemer's songs gained their status as a cornerstone of Israeli culture, and that she herself became known as Israel's first lady of song. And it is thus no surprise that so many in Israel were profoundly saddened by her death.

Naomi Shemer's critics, however, live in a different world. In their view, the dream that Zionists like Shemer dreamed was oppressive, manipulative, tragic, and redolent with "aristocratic decay." It is this dream, they contend, that has stood in the way of convivial pragmatism, and of a vision of universal harmony devoid of parochial attachments to land, lore, and language. These two views are irreconcilable.

Which is right? We may all takes sides today, but the question will ultimately be decided by those who, generations from now, will attempt to look back and understand what happened here during the twentieth century. It is they who will look to the literary heroes of the Zionist movement—to Bialik and Rachel, to Alterman and Tchernichovski, and to Naomi Shemer—to learn of the strength and vision that produced an unfathomable ingathering of the Jews in their ancestral land. It is they who will compare the two competing visions of Israeli reality, that of the Zionist dreamers and that of the critics, and draw their own conclusions as to which of them, to use Shemer's words, "perhaps never really was."

At the end of the traditional thirty-day mourning period, tens of thousands of people gathered in Tel Aviv's Yarkon Park for a concert in Shemer's memory. It was here that her last poem was put to music for the first time. "Ilan," written just three weeks before her death, was dedicated to Israel's first astronaut, Ilan Ramon, who died in the *Columbia* disaster on February 1, 2003. It was only fitting that Shemer's final work was motivated by the sense of national bereavement, as well as the indefatigable shared dreams, evoked by Ramon's death. Here as elsewhere, she employed the words of the prophets (this time Isaiah) to speak to the Jews of all generations, expressing the same mournful-yet-hopeful national unity which would soon be directed at herself:

How you have fallen from the heavens, O Morningstar
How you are felled to the earth, like a tree

In the infinite depths you have been inscribed in fear
And in the azure expanse, a trail of white.

Your daughter Noa says, "We have lost Father."
As a chariot of fire and its riders ascend to heaven
In the infinite depths your name will live forever
Among the stars on high, you will be a star.

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