

JEWISH-ISRAELI IDENTITY IN NAOMI SHEMER'S SONGS:  
CENTRAL VALUES OF THE JEWISH-ISRAELI IMAGINED  
COMMUNITY

La identidad judía israelí en las canciones de Naomi Shemer: principales  
valores de la «comunidad imaginada» judía israelí

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BIBLID [1696-585X (2009) 58; 41-85]

**Resumen:** El presente artículo analiza una selección de las canciones más populares de la prolífica cantautora israelí Naomi Shemer, con el objetivo de reconocer y señalar las pautas de pensamiento más repetidas en sus canciones. La primera parte del artículo expone brevemente la importancia de las canciones de Naomi Shemer para la identidad Judeo-Israelí y argumenta por qué las pautas de pensamiento que encontramos en ellas se pueden considerar relevantes para la comprensión de la identidad Judeo-Israelí en general. El análisis de las letras seleccionadas expone algunos elementos contradictorios en el núcleo de la identidad Judeo-Israelí que las canciones de Naomi Shemer representan.

**Abstract:** The following article analyzes the lyrics of a selection of the most popular songs by the prolific Jewish-Israeli songwriter Naomi Shemer, in order to recognize and highlight the most repeated patterns of thought in them. The first part of the article briefly explains the importance of Naomi Shemer's songs for Jewish-Israeli identity and why the patterns of thought found in them can be considered relevant for understanding Jewish-Israeli identity in general. The analysis of the selected lyrics reveals some contradictory elements at the core of the Jewish-Israeli identity as represented by Naomi Shemer's songs.

**Palabras clave:** Naomi Shemer, canciones, folclore, ritual, cantautor hebreo, Judío-Israelí, sionismo, comunidad imaginada, identidad, nacionalismo.

**Key words:** Naomi Shemer, songs, folklore, ritual, Hebrew songwriter, Jewish-Israeli, Zionism, imagined community, identity, nationalism.

**Recibido:** 10/02/2009 **Aceptado:** 27/05/2009

This article proposes to analyze the lyrics of popular Israeli songwriter Naomi Shemer in order to deconstruct the image of Jewish-Israeli identity that is promoted in them. The article will first introduce Naomi Shemer to the reader, looking at the reasons why her work is crucial to the

construction of Jewish-Israeli identity and folklore, before proceeding to analyse a selection of her most representative songs.

Even if Shemer's songs are considered «old-fashioned» or lacking sufficient quality to be included in the Hebrew Israeli literary canon, her vast production (up to 250 songs) has permeated Israeli media and education so deeply that most Jewish Israelis are able to sing along with many of her songs, often without realizing that Shemer is their author. Her songs have practically become modern folklore. While they do not entirely belong either to mainstream pop music or to the modern Hebrew literary canon, everyone knows them by heart. Her songs have become a tool of communication between Jewish Israelis; the mention of one of the lines of her songs leads to them being sung in the most unexpected situations and creates a sense of communion among those who can sing them — that is, those who have been steeped in Jewish-Israeli education and media.

The study of Shemer's songs is interesting as the study of a cultural phenomenon which is central to Jewish-Israeli identity. Their lyrics are rooted in the collective imagery so deeply that they are often overlooked and considered second-rate or mere pop culture; for this reason, their analysis is relevant to the analysis of a collective Jewish-Israeli imagery. A very specific Jewish-Israeli national folklore can be recognized in these lyrics and this folklore hints at the contours of Jewish-Israeli mythology.

#### 1. IMAGINED COMMUNITY

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word «identity» means: «the characteristics determining this identity». When talking about a certain identity, or, in the case of this article, about a certain national cultural identity, we are talking about the complex system of references used to define it. Cultural prejudices, symbolic historical events and certain everyday customs such as food and attire are all linked together to form a whole which can, without a doubt, be epitomized. It is this abstraction that we call identity.

National identity also applies to different individuals who may have little else in common beyond living within the same political borders. They all fall neatly into what Benedict Anderson calls the imagined

community.<sup>1</sup> This imagined sense of community is propagated in the origins of nationalism through the bulk of writings printed in the same language.

The connection between nationalism and mass culture helps to explain important aspects of nationalist thought that will be useful when analyzing Shemer's lyrics. According to Anderson, nationalism has never had great ideologues; it is more likely to be spread through popular culture. Furthermore, nationalism does not follow one spiritual or intellectual centre, but rather invents itself through popular culture, limited by the needs of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> To understand nationalist identity, representations of popular culture must be analyzed in search of the repeated patterns that form the foundations of what Eric Hobsbawm calls the «invented tradition».<sup>3</sup>

The invention of tradition is essentially a process of formalizing and ritualizing, characterized by its reference to the past. Historical continuity is invented, creating an ancient past that is beyond effective historical continuity (in the case of Israel, the Maccabean revolt, the Masada, Israelite forefathers etc.) or falsified. This is what remains in popular memory, what has been selected, written, drawn, popularized and institutionalized by those in charge of doing so.

Hence, a national identity is formed by the rituals of invented tradition, while maintaining an apparent connection with the past of the imagined community and its traditions. And indeed, the repeated national images in Shemer's popular lyrics do just that.

This article consists of an analysis of the lyrics of some of Shemer's most popular songs, focusing on the repeated allegorical or metaphorical images that may indicate what Hobsbawm calls the unspoken symbolic or ritual rules of behaviour of a nationalist identity. Or in words of Clifford Geertz, «In a general way, to ask who we are, equals to ask which cultural forms —which system of significant symbols— must be employed to give

1. Anderson, 1991.

2. Anderson, 1991: 9-36.

3. «The diverse collection of practices, normally governed by rules that are open or accepted while unspoken which are of a ritual or symbolical nature and have the means of inculcating certain values and rules of behavior by repetition, which automatically entails continuity with the past» (Hobsbawm, 1983: 40).

value and meaning to the activities of the state, and by extension, to its citizens' civil life».<sup>4</sup>

## 2. NAOMI SHEMER

Naomi Shemer was born on 13 July 1930 on a kibbutz called *Kbutzat Kineret* close to the Sea of Galilee and died on 26 June 2004 at Tel Aviv's Ichilov Hospital. While only a child, she revealed her musical skills by leading the kibbutz in communal singing on the settlement piano.<sup>5</sup> Later on, she studied at Tel Aviv and Jerusalem music academies before returning to her kibbutz to teach music theory to children. In 1953 she enrolled in the Israeli Army and served as a troop entertainer.

Many of Israel's famous musicians and entertainers have begun their careers during their military service, serving in one of the military's entertainment units. While serving in these entertainment units, the musicians enjoy the relative freedom to compose their first songs, as long as their lyrical content matches the military ethos. These then may be aired throughout the country via the army radio station *Galei Tshal*. Many artists have become popular among civilians and soldiers in this way. This is the case with Shemer, who began to work with leading composers such as Yohanan Zarai and Haim Topol right after her service, gaining immediate critical acclaim for her songs.

From the end of the 1950s and until the 1970s, she gradually gained popularity, her career having its highest peak in 1967 with «Jerusalem of Gold» [Yerushaliym shel Zahav], (1967), a great success at the Jerusalem song festival that year. The song became a hymn among the soldiers during the Six-Day War, which broke out three weeks after the festival. The political connotations of this nostalgic song of longing for the once Jewish Jerusalem sparked a public debate between Shemer and the writer Amos Oz, who criticized what he understood as the racist undertones in the song. Shemer never apologized or denied Amos Oz's statements<sup>6</sup> and faced criticism from the Israeli intellectual left for the rest of her life. However, although criticized by the left, the popularity of Shemer's songs

4. Geertz, 2001: 209.

5. See below, under «communal singing».

6. Widely-covered controversy that will be discussed below in the analysis of this song.

never ceased to grow. In the 1980s, her songs were already considered icons of Israeli society. She has been called «Israel's national songwriter» for at least the last three decades.

Shemer's public support for the rightwing paramilitary settler group *Gush Emunim* was the main source of her confrontations with Israeli leftist critics.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the searing heat of this confrontation with the left led Shemer to decide to retire from public life during the 1980s, never to truly return again. However, she did not retire professionally; her songs only continued to consolidate their status as a de facto representation of the Israeli way of life, being sung from nurseries to elementary schools to the official Hebrew language academy for foreigners in Israel, the *Ulpan*. In 1983, Shemer received the Israeli prize for song writing and became *Doctor Honoris Causa* of Hebrew University and The Weizmann Centre, as well as an honorary citizen of Tel Aviv.

Naomi Shemer was well aware of her status within Israeli mainstream culture and understood that her songs formed part of the educational system. She made this point clear at the end of the 1990s when an interviewer mentioned her detractors and critics and she cynically responded that her most fervent public were 3-year-old children, the future of the country.<sup>8</sup>

The character of Shemer's songs continued where noted Israeli writer Nathan Alterman's songs (though not the poems) left off, depicting everyday life in Israel with great romanticism. However, instead of representing the urban culture of Israel in the 1950s, marked by the traumas of the War of Independence and the holocaust in Europe, Shemer represented the voice of the next generation, the generation that built the Israeli state. While Alterman represented the European Ashkenazi<sup>9</sup> Jewry in Israel and the workers party, Shemer had the ability to go beyond these boundaries and speak to the left and the right, to Ashkenazi and eastern,

7. Shemer is quoted on *Maariv* Newspaper in 1975 saying: [*Gush Emunim*] is a refreshing splash of deep waters that I wasn't expecting, and they irrigate the hearts. One group tired out, did what it did — and it did many and mighty deeds — and lost its breath. A new force appeared, sparkling and invigorating, only it doesn't please the old group which is reluctant to accept it' (quoted by Amir Ahoranson in *Maariv*, 2.7.2004)

8. *Maariv* weekend special *7 Yamim* on 23.10.1998.

9. Central and mainly Eastern European Jews.

even if her melodies technically represented the European/Russian legacy of the Ashkenazis and the old image of the first early Jewish immigration movements to Palestine.<sup>10</sup>

The status of Shemer's songs as a representative of Jewish-Israeli identity has even been accepted by the country's left wing despite her extremist ethos. One example of this is the leftwing activist and former member of the Knesset, Uri Avneri, who made a proposal in 1968 to change the Israeli national anthem «The hope» to Shemer's «Jerusalem of Gold», implying that Shemer's song better captured the spirit of a national people than «The hope» which is «the hymn of a disperse religious ethnic community rather than an anthem of a sovereign state».<sup>11</sup> Thus he indicated that the symbols of the song written by Shemer better matched the Israeli national ethos than a song written before the existence of the Israeli state.

Another example is the highly critical article on Shemer by the writer Dan Miron, who despite everything, still ended his commentary with the lines, «If Naomi Shemer didn't exist, we would have had to invent her». When criticizing the ideals underlying Shemer's songs, Miron is criticizing the central ideals of the Jewish-Israeli imagined community while acknowledging Shemer's work as an accurate representation of those ideals and, at the same time, as a cohesive force between the symbols of Jewish-Israeli imagery. Therefore, even as he criticizes some ideals of his own imagined community, Miron is thankful for belonging to an imagined community he can criticize and honours the important role that Shemer has played in its construction.<sup>12</sup>

For the purposes of this article, the complex and sensitive personality of Naomi Shemer is less relevant than the role of her songs in the Israeli mainstream and their importance to Jewish-Israeli identity. This article limits itself to dealing with the symbols and values that are most often repeated in the lyrics, dividing them into groups in which Jewish-Israeli identity can be recognised as patterns of thought. As mentioned earlier, the repetition of certain ideas in the construction of a myth create

10. «Eastern Jews did not begin to mass immigrate to Israel until the 1950s and other communities immigrated only late in the 70s, 80s and 90s». Quote: Miron, 1984: 174.

11. See Haaretz, 4.15.2002.

12. Miron, 1984: 206.

unspoken rules of behaviour and values while automatically entailing continuity with the past. According to Clifford Geertz, these ideas become external sources of information or models for organizing social and psychological processes. Their presence is always necessary because they regulate those situations that still lack institutionalized guides of conduct.<sup>13</sup>

Together, the unspoken rules of behaviour inherent in the Jewish-Israeli imagined community and their translation into national folklore are the characteristics that form the national identity. Many of these elements are represented in Shemer's lyrics in an interactive way; together they reflect issues in Jewish-Israeli society and her own contribution as an artist to the collective mindset. Those values that are most often repeated hold special interest because they lead to a better understanding of the imagined community they represent.

«We are all Naomi Shemer. Her songs will be sung forever, not one note will be lost» — Quotation from the famous influential Israeli showman Shaiké Levi.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. COMMUNAL SINGING

The practice of communal singing (*Shirah Betsibur*) is a ritual activity inherent in Israeli life, where strangers meet either in public spaces or in private gathering halls to sing Hebrew songs together, led by professional singers.

The phenomenon of communal singing goes far beyond Naomi Shemer and although this article mainly focuses on the analysis of Shemer's songs, it is important to first briefly discuss the communal singing phenomenon in general. Many of Naomi Shemer's songs are central to these gatherings, as they are sung in practically every communal singing reunion. Therefore, understanding the significance of communal singing is essential to understand the role of Shemer's songs in the development of the Israeli identity.

13. Geertz, 2001: 191.

14. *Yediot Ahronot* — 6.27.2004

Communal singing was already central to the first Jewish settlement movements in Palestine, which were organized according to socialist values. The so-called first *Aliyah*, meaning the first emigration wave to Palestine (1881-1903), which represented a secular socialist movement, tried to fill the void that religion had previously filled (see Yosi Mar Haim and Yair Stavi) with *klezmer* songs sung at evening time in the communal dining room of the kibbutzim. Sung with a secular mindset, these songs were seen as continuing tradition and may be the origin of Israeli communal singing.<sup>15</sup>

The origins of the songs sung in Palestine by the first *Aliyah*, and still popular in the Israeli communal singing of patriotic romantic songs, can be traced to the origins of nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe. Communal and/or choral singing of a diverse array of patriotic songs became popular in the first half of the nineteenth century among German youth organizations and social clubs. The practice was also important in the development of late joiners to the nationalist movement, such as Lithuanian and Baltic nationalism, which used the choral singing of their «recovered» national folklore as an important way of propagating their nationalisms.<sup>16</sup> This trend influenced Jewish people as well, who formed their own clubs when they could no longer join other nationalist social clubs. It is important to remember that Germany and the Baltic area were major focuses of Zionism at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Zeev Jabotinsky, theorist and promoter of Revisionist Zionism, was still citing the use of communal singing in Baltic nationalism as an example to follow as late as 1931.<sup>17</sup>

The repertoire of songs to be sung (in Europe as well as in Palestine-Israel) in a choir was selected and composed by learned members of the bourgeoisie and spread among poorer and uneducated members of the new emerging nations as well as among the bourgeoisie, in order to create the needed cohesion between the members of the country by means of a national folklore.<sup>18</sup> Some of the characteristics of this early invented folklore reappeared in later Zionist communal singing and are seen in the

15. Mar Haim- Stavi, 1980: 21.

16. Karnes, 2005: 180.

17. Shachar, 2003: 85.

18. Dahaus, 1989: 110.



songs composed by Naomi Shemer. One example is the nostalgic tone, the longing for a distant and eminently desirable bygone age, as with Baltic nationalism; this would be slightly adapted in Shemer's repertoire.

The songs of the first Jewish settlers in Palestine were secular Hebrew songs that were mainly composed in Europe. They were largely published in the journals of European Jewish social clubs that were created according to the model of German and Austrian social clubs towards the end of the nineteenth century, when membership was beginning to be forbidden to Jews. It is amidst those first Jewish social clubs that the first Hebrew secular songs were composed, imitating European models with the same nationalistic aims.<sup>19</sup> And it is through journals of those Jewish social clubs that the songs arrived in Palestine to be sung in communion by the settlers.<sup>20</sup>

These songs are the ones Naomi Shemer grew up with and the ones she is said to have been inspired by,<sup>21</sup> the ones she, as a child, had played on the piano at her kibbutz next to the Sea of Galilee. These early Hebrew songs had many of the characteristics that Shemer's songs would have later on. They were composed in Hebrew and sung accompanied by existing Yiddish and Russian melodies known to the settlers from their homelands, while the lyrics often revolved around a romantic longing for a metaphorical Zion represented by mystified descriptions of the nature of the Palestinian countryside, inspired by biblical texts.<sup>22</sup> This melancholy tone is understandable considering that most of these songs were, in fact, written in Europe, even if they were sung in Palestine. The question here is why did Naomi Shemer use this tone when her public were the generations born in the established Israeli state?

Written memories of the first and second *Aliyah* (1904-1914) refer to the constant presence of songs in daily life. Songs were sung while working, on field trips and during each important daily activity. After the First World War, contact between European Jewry and Palestinian Jewry became more difficult and the epicentre of the composition of Hebrew

19. See *Die Wacht an Rhein*, composed in 1843 and translated to 21 minority languages by Bismarck in order to strengthen anti-French nationalism.

20. Shachar, 2003: 20).

21. Talila, 2007: 109.

22. Shachar, 2003: 23.

songs had to switch to Palestine. There was a conscious need for a Hebrew folklore — basic things such as Hebrew lullabies were missing — and songs appeared at the time to be a useful tool to encourage the use of Modern Hebrew among Jewish immigrants. These immigrants identified more with the language and with more possibilities to use it in their daily lives. By 1948 there was already a Hebrew song for almost every daily activity, ranging from cultural events, new settlements, political party meetings and city celebrations to sports events and mourning.<sup>23</sup>

During the escalation of Jewish-Arab violence in the years 1936-1939, the Jewish paramilitary organization, the *Palmach*, strengthened the sense of unity among its members with military songs, again composed with the same Russian melodies that would later characterize Shemer's songs. However, this time the Palmach chose Russian melodies for their songs not because its members had cultural ties to Russia (many came from countries other than Russia), but out of admiration for the U.S.S.R.

Singing in military units retained its popularity throughout the years and with the creation of an official Israeli army in 1948, a special military unit was designated to organize and promote these songs. These military entertainment troupes became the major focus of entertainment in the country until 1967. Their programs, presented first in army camps, enjoyed wide public exposure on the civilian scene because they were released as commercial long-plays and could frequently be heard on the radio.<sup>24</sup> By the sixties, when artists from the Israel Defence Forces troupes begin to become major stars in the entertainment industry, the line between army and civilian entertainment circles became rather blurred.

During the late 1970s and 80s, people became more critical of traditional communal singing. Popular music styles picked up from major world trends such as rock and pop moved communal singing to the margins of the entertainment industry. Communal singing remained anchored, however, in the same Russian Palmach melodies and pre-Israel themes in its lyrics. It was moved to the side of the artistic spectrum, where it stayed as the expression of old Zionist pre-state nationalism.

The brief revival of communal singing as a popular trend among young Israelis in 2002 shows the prevailing importance of this activity among

23. Shachar, 2003: 181.

24. Seroussi, 1996: 10.

the Jewish-Israeli population. Even if set aside for decades, a critical political situation (here, the peak of the second *Intifada*) and good marketing was able to bring communal singing back to the forefront of the entertainment industry because people knew the songs and how to sing them. Although the songs lost their popularity for a while, they had never disappeared. It is important to understand that communal singing was never really gone; on the contrary, its repertoire is still sung today in nursery and primary schools and still aired on the radio for national celebrations and mourning days. Communal singing has become one of the foundations of Jewish-Israeli identity.

Naomi Shemer's songs are crucial to communal singing meetings. Together with other important songs like «To the Spring» and «Where are those Girls», Naomi Shemer's «Beautiful People» and, of course, «Jerusalem of Gold», are well known to practically every Israeli. For this reason, it is relevant to analyze these songs, because beyond their poetic quality these lyrics are used as part of a significant ritual. Singing Shemer's songs brings strangers together and creates a bond between them where they all feel like part of the imaginary Israeli community. The use of these lyrics is ritual, and in words of expert, James Fraser, a ritual «tells us more about the participants than the ritualized».<sup>25</sup> Because of their ritual use, the lyrics in Shemer's songs can be detached from the references she may have personally had when writing them and be read as the expression of a Jewish-Israeli communal myth. The analysis of these lyrics brings insight into the constructed myth shared through the Jewish-Israeli collective memory.

«Young people want something that is ours, not cosmopolite.» — «It is because of the [political] situation, yes. Once we wanted to be Americans, now everyone wants to feel Israeli».<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. THE SONGS — BECOMING ACQUAINTED WITH THE IMPORTANT VALUES OF THE JEWISH-ISRAELI IMAGINED COMMUNITY

25. Bell, 1997: IX.

26. Anonymous comments on the communal singing revival, quoted on *Maariv* Newspaper 6.9.2002.

Not only the vast number of followers of Naomi Shemer's songs, but also her detractors can sing along with her most famous lyrics. Precisely because of the strong presence of Shemer's songs in the Jewish-Israeli collective, it is possible to analyse their lyrics as a representation of the Jewish-Israeli imagined community.

The analysis of the songs in this article takes into account the influence of the songs' lyrics on the wider public and sets aside the polemics around the intentions that Shemer might have had when she wrote them. Popularity is the main criterion for the choice of songs.

The songs that were written before the 1970s became popular through communal singing gatherings and contemporary radio hits sung by popular Israeli artists such as *Hagashash Hachiver* and *Hadudaim*. Although the public at large is not always conscious of the fact that Shemer wrote these songs, they do know the lyrics by heart.<sup>27</sup>

Naomi Shemer's mastery was writing melodic, light-hearted and easy-to-remember songs that used a neutral Hebrew, not representative of the spoken Hebrew in Israel, yet very clear and understandable<sup>28</sup>. Although the songs appear to be simple, they contain layers of biblical references that are not always clear to the bulk of the population, but are recognizable to the eye of the expert.<sup>29</sup> However, the goal of the article is not to analyse each song's numerous literary layers, but to summarize those aspects that repeat themselves throughout Shemer's songs often enough to be recognized as patterns of thought which lead to the fundamental elements of the shared Jewish-Israeli imagery and national identity.

*To the Water Wells*  
 To the Water Wells  
 Out of my love  
 I went to the water wells  
 Through desert paths  
 On a non-planted land  
 Out of my love  
 I forgot city and home

27. Rashaf, 2007: 150.

28. Miron, 1984: 195.

29. See Talila, Horovitz, Ostrobsky and Miron.

And after your steps  
In wild attraction

To the water wells, to the water wells  
To the spring that pounds in the mountain  
There my love will find affection  
Fountain water  
Deep water  
River water

Only my love  
Gave shadow in summer time  
And through the terrible sandstorm  
Only my love  
Built me a city and a home  
It is my life and it is...  
my death every hours

To the water wells...

There's the fig tree  
And there are the olive tree cuttings  
And the wonderful pomegranate blossoming  
And there's my love  
Drunk but not from wine  
Her eyes she will close slowly

To the water wells...

«To the Water Wells» [El Borot Hamayim], written for the communal singing star band *Giba'atron* in 1982, depicts the arduous road to a water oasis, crossing the hot sands. Strangely enough, many Israelis can relate to these lyrics, even if they were born among the comforts of the city. It is a song about the longing of the soul for a fertile oasis which holds water, fertility and some sort of peace. The soul's desire for this will lead it to this paradise in the desert.

What kind of paradise are the songs talking about?

*The importance of having a home*

On 5 July 2008, an anonymous student, commenting on a song by Naomi Shemer on the Ben Gurion university web forum, wrote, «In the nineteenth century there was an anti-Semitic saying: The Jew, wherever he is happy, there is his country». It is striking to see how these non-nationalist words are unquestionably perceived as an anti-Semitic proverb here — the student does not even feel that there is a need to explain why s/he interprets it thus. From his or her comment, it can be deduced that to believe that a Jew could be at home wherever s/he likes is anti-Semitic. Those who are not anti-Semites, thus, will not agree with that; a Jewish person must not feel at home wherever s/he likes. However, s/he may have the right to feel at home in one place at least, since to have somewhere to return to and feel at home is a basic need for anyone. Where would a Jew feel at home? Only in his/her true home, by which we understand to be his/her country. The country of the Jews is their only home, not wherever they please.

It is arguable whether this idea is inherent in the Jewish religion or not, but it was certainly the conception underlying nationalistic Zionism — Theodor Herzl's nationalism — which saw the Jewish national state as a priority. This is in contrast to the Zionism of Ahad Ha'am,<sup>30</sup> who sought to establish a Jewish intellectual presence in Palestine as a non-Jewish state, while maintaining a peaceful relationship with the non-Jewish population.<sup>31</sup>

*The Guest*<sup>32</sup>

If there is a guest at the gate  
That landed from overseas  
What will be offered to the guest?  
At his arrival from there?

A green basket, a white flower  
Red wine, a piece of bread with salt  
That is what there is  
Sit with us here

30. (1856 - 1927) Hebrew essayist and one of the greatest pre-state Zionist thinkers.

31. Arendt, 2004: 120 and Leibovitz, 14, 370.

32. «The Guest» [Haoreah], 1984 for *Hakol 'Over Habibi*.

Sit with us, that's the home  
 An open shutter to the desert  
 Sit with us as a house's son  
 Not as a stranger

A green basket...

And this fool heart  
 That will never get wiser  
 Starts again and roams  
 To the distances.

A green basket...

Guests go home  
 An open shutter closes again  
 The table cleared and empty  
 And that's what's left.

A green basket...

The essence of this 1984 radio song is the concept of home. It does not matter how small or modest it is («that is what there is» and «the [only one] table remains empty») or that there is nothing special to offer to the guest. Even if the guest may end up insulting the house by leaving, after he has been treated as a son of the house (his heart is «foolish» for «roaming to the distances»), the closing sentence of the last strophe summarizes the song: «that's what's left», a home.

The images in the song's lyrics are recognizable to every Israeli as an image of the motherland, systematically praised in communal singing gatherings and often heard on the radio. It is clear that the point is not the simple house in the desert, but rather a metaphor for having a home, a mythical home.

When analyzing «The Guest», it must be taken into account that the song was written by Naomi Shemer for a communal singing-oriented pop band, *Hakol 'Over Habibi*, a context closely related to Israeli nationalism, as explained before. With this in mind, it is understood that this home in

the desert is something more than what it might seem. Thus, the house is a metaphor to which any listener can relate.

The ritualized context of communal singing gatherings gives the songs' lyrics a mythical nature. The idea of the humble house in the desert is an idea to share with all those strangers who will listen to this song, either buying it on records or listening to it on the radio, as well as with those who actively sing it in communal singing gatherings. This idea must be metaphorical, for it is only that way that it can fit the thousand faces of reality. The house must become a metaphorical one, a myth that will unite all those who accept it. And what is understood from the lyrics is that the mythical home exists. It may be modest, but it does exist.

The lyrics of the song «There is and there isn't» [Ein vaYesh], written in 1972 and one of Shemer's most famous songs, underscore this point: «We don't have great rivers/ and rain in summer time/ we don't have grey capitals/ and a husky voice - / but we have blue all over the sky/ but we have sun throughout the whole year long».

Just like the character Gay Peregrino in Valle-Inclan's play *Luces de Bohemia*, who claims to have left a life of luxury in London for poverty in Madrid because he missed the Spanish sun, when we, the readers or singers of this song, engage in these lyrics in Shemer's song, we must acknowledge that a blue sky compensates for great rivers and capitals. As the song continues:

We don't have nobleman's castles  
 Closed walls  
 We don't have dark forests  
 Fallen amber leaves-  
 But we have springs and depths  
 In a crevice, and in the mountain too, and in the mountain too

We don't have a tower standing, with its head in the clouds  
 We don't have a treasure lost on a valley's shadow —  
 But we have part in David  
 Inheritance in the son of Jesse.

Springs and deep crevices are not special per se, but it is special to be a part of David. Naomi Shemer turns to Samuel 2, 20:1, where a faithless Jewish man claims «We have no part in David and neither inheritance in



the son of Jesse», to stress the importance of belonging to David. To be part of the descendants of King David and to possess the country that once was his, to have the springs, mountains and blue sky, all this is comforting enough to counter dark forests and castles.

The heart of the myth is to have the country. It does not matter how ordinary its geography may be; what matters is to possess it. This possession is what makes the house in the desert comfortable enough to stay in it. The fool is the one who leaves.

This is the same idea that the Israeli rappers *Hatzel* and *Subliminal* refer to in the closing sentence of their collaborative song with Shemer, «The light and the shadow» [Haor veHatzel]: «2002 and we are still on the map». This is a reference to the exclamation that the famous Maccabi Tel Aviv basketball player Tal Brodi made in 1977 after his team's victory against CSKA Moscow: «We are on the map...not only in terms of basketball, but in terms of everything». This is a phrase that has become a popular Israeli slogan since then. The importance of the existence of the state of Israel above all else (and the pronoun «we» is always used), is obviously crucial to the Jewish-Israeli national identity and seen in many of Shemer's other songs («Middle Rhymes» [Haruzei Beinayim], «Tributary» [Yuval], «I Have a Friend» [Yesh li Haver], «Beautiful People» [Anashim Yafim] and even «*Hamsin*<sup>33</sup> in the Vantage Point» [Hamsinim baMishlat])

Since a «state is invisible, it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived».<sup>34</sup> An allegorical image of the state must be shared by the community because it does not have a real physical one.

In just few minutes, the humble living room of Naomi Shemer and Oppenheimer Street's little grove that could be seen from its window, turned into her lost paradise: the 30's on the Galilean Sea. In counted minutes, Naomi Shemer was able to do what no history teacher was able to do in hundreds of lecture hours. She connected me to my past, to that

33. Hot dry desert wind.

34. Kertzer, 1988: 5.

land, beautiful and virgin, that always seemed to me as a weird craziness of the old generation.<sup>35</sup>

The landscape so often described in Shemer's songs is her childhood landscape. For her followers, it is their land. It is what holds the imagined community together — the nation, to which nationalist language refers to either by kinship (motherland, *Vaterland*, *patria*) or that of home (*Heimat*). Both idioms denote something to which one is naturally tied.<sup>36</sup>

And what does the mythical home look like? What form do its walls have and who lives in it?

*The Hebrew House - Linguistic Borders of the Imagined Community*

*Summer Guests*<sup>37</sup>

In our courtyard/playground  
Under the olive trees shadow  
Usually come many guests  
Each one of them  
Has their own language  
And their own way  
To say hello.

Ben from Italy says Bon Giorno  
Beth from France says Bon jour  
Ken from Japan says Ohayo  
When he comes to visit  
Hi from Hawaii says Aloha  
Tania from Britain says Hello  
Everyone who comes to our home  
Has its own hello.

We painted the fence  
We pruned the grass  
Children from the whole world  
Can now come by

35. Roni Koben – *24 Sha'ot* supplement of *Yediot Ahronot* – 6.27.2004.

36. Anderson, 1991: 143.

37. «Summer Guests» [Orhim laKaiytz], 1979 for cabaret trio *Hagashash Hachiver*

And open widely  
 The green fence  
 And bring a blessing  
 From far away

Johnny from Kenya will say Jambo  
 Yan from Greece Kalimera will say  
 Chan from China will say Nichauma  
 And will stay till tomorrow  
 Gil from Brazil will say Bom dia  
 Koko from Morocco will say Ahlan  
 And the blessing he will bring me  
 Is the most beautiful from them all.

At our place  
 Under the shadow of a blooming tree  
 Children from all over the world  
 Are coming to visit  
 At our playground/courtyard  
 Children from all over the world  
 Dance in a circle  
 And say hello [*shalom*]

This children's song written in 1979 for comedy and song trio *Hagashash Hachiver* is a home-welcoming song for the house which is still not quite a palace but has been cleaned up. The home, as seen in the song, is a place where children from all over the world learn to say hello in Hebrew, its official language.

Since the language of the songs is Hebrew, the guests at the home learn to say hello in Hebrew and the house that concerns the singers is mythical — the myth is described with the Hebrew language and the house is Hebrew. The language holds it together and defines it as different from the other houses, which are not Hebrew.

The tradition of singing in our country is almost the only thing [in it] that is sure, you cannot miss that it is a product of the land. Communal singing is really typical [Israeli] entertainment

because it is what we have. Its blossoming is immense and in my performances the public does half of my work.<sup>38</sup>

*Mythical Hebrew Nature*

In the lyrics of «Summer Guests», it is understood that the house is now an inviting place for children as well, since the fence has been painted, the grass pruned and a wide green gate has been erected. There is also shade coming from olive and other trees. This information seems to indicate that the house used to be something less inviting at some point. The fence was not painted, the grass used to be abandoned to the wild and there was no gate. This connects with the idea of the self-generated Israeli community in a blank country that had been abandoned since its biblical Hebrew past.

The fashioning of a nation's history is marked by deaths and tragedies to be forgotten and remembered at the same time, as if summing up a list of traumatic events that goes back over the years of history. In the case of Jewish-Israeli imagery, the traumatic events that form the imaginary Israeli community are traced back to Europe, to the Russian pogroms of 1880s and further down through the European Middle Ages — every Israeli high school graduate has heard about Yehuda Halevi's twelfth-century song «My heart is in the east and I in the uttermost west» — to the biblical Judea. Palestine between the first and the nineteenth century, however, does not form part of that imagery. On the contrary, the Zionist myth conceives of the land as almost nonexistent, besides the sporadic presence of Jewish religious settlements, until the beginning of the work of the modern Jewish settlers, at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup>

One man will build for me a bridge to cross the river  
 Another man will grow a forest at the mountains feet  
 And another good woman, if it will be hard,  
 Will just point at the horizon and say that —  
 There are good people in the middle of the road  
 Very good people  
 Good people who know the way  
 And with them we can walk.

38. Naomi Shemer in *Maariv Lanoar*, March, 1988.

39. «Watch Out, Construction Work!» —[Zehirut Bonim Kan], 1964.

We will build ourselves a firm bridge  
Made of iron, metal and reinforced concrete  
And when it will be connected to the shore  
Then we will build a river under it.  
Watch out, construction work!<sup>40</sup>

One man will build a bridge and another will grow a forest, says the famous song «Good People» and someone else will build a river. Rivers and forests must be built according to this mythical thought, for they are not natural. The country is a blank page that lacks even nature. It is a home that must be constructed from the foundations.

This myth of autogenesis is not so surprisingly new when related to its nationalist context. The nationalist myth is in itself a myth of self-creation, ex-nihilo and self-referential. The creation of a nation is inspired by the past, however it is by its own past that it is inspired and not by another; as it is the case of the Jewish Palestinian settlement's inspiration in its own biblical past. The return of the Jews to Palestine means the continuation of the biblical era in an interesting secular twist. God's biblical task, to fulfil its promise to protect and enrich the land promised to its chosen people, now becomes the settler's task. As the Bible says, «For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; Joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving and the voice of melody» (Isaiah 51:3).<sup>41</sup> Only this time the settlers are those who turn the wasteland into a garden, singing their own modern, nationalist songs.

The land where the singers are going is not just a land; it is the Promised Land, a place promised to be an earthly paradise, without flaws. The first settlement movement in Palestine, the first *Aliyah*, had to struggle with the gap between reality and what was expected or wished to be found in Palestine. The literature of the first *Aliyah* worked to describe as real what was desired,<sup>42</sup> describing green plantations and peaceful Jewish villages instead of the harsh nature and difficulties the first settlers

40. «Good People» -[Anashim Tovim], 1982.

41. Sinai Publishing, 1997.

42. Guvrin, 1985: 7.

had to endure. Naomi Shemer, as well, adds her own personal touches to Israeli/Palestine nature.

### *The Garden*

A 1935 anecdote from Tel Aviv illustrates the Zionist relationship with Palestine's nature: the city council of Tel Aviv decided that year to pull up all the city's sycamore trees because they were considered to be unaesthetic, proceeding afterwards to plant palm trees where the old sycamores stood in order to emphasize the eastern character of the city; palm trees better fit an eastern image of the Middle East.<sup>43</sup>

As can be seen in many of the songs discussed in this paper, Shemer's selective description of nature reveals a similar approach to the land. The country that Shemer's songs depict generally appears to be a cosy, sometimes magical, garden of green, white and red colours. The descriptions of nature in the songs consist of a clean expressionistic summary of one or two words that refer mostly to flowers. They are all named by their specific names (such as sunflower, citrus, lily or anemones) in a playful use of the language that appeals to most Israelis, as experimentation and cultivation of the Hebrew language in Israel has a sentimental meaning for the population.<sup>44</sup> The other elements of the landscape, however, are less specific: green grass and fruits which are largely figs and red grapes or wine, while the colour white makes its presence predominantly through the moon or a white wall holding up a red roof. The animals are basically the donkey, the goat and the sheep. Water always has a controlled appearance in lakes, springs or the small Sea of Galilee. Desert sands and dust are a foreign element that stays outside the borders of the garden. The sea figures in the imagery but always on the garden's edge as if it were a border, and there is practically never an invitation to cross it. Anything worth seeing is to be found within the garden.

It is not necessary to write a list of the unwelcoming natural elements in Israel/Palestine to understand that this limited choice of descriptive words has more to do with the search for a mythical space than a real confrontation with reality. Moreover when we perceive the prominent

43. Herman, 1999: 76.

44. Bejarano, 1988: 36.

presence of rural life in the songs, it may seem that the Israeli life takes place mainly among orchards and springs. An interesting contradiction is seen in the fact that already during the 1920s and 1930s, 80% of the Jewish population of Palestine was living in urban areas.<sup>45</sup> This percentage has risen today to 92%. There are reasons to believe that when Jewish Israelis claim to recognize the essence of what Israel is in Naomi Shemer's songs, they do not pretend to recognize the physical ambiance of their daily lives in them, but rather may identify with an ideal shaped by the songs.

Those who gather to sing the songs composed by Shemer or other similar types of songs (motherland songs), already have an idea of what the songs are going to sound like, thanks to recordings played at home or radio airings. At the same time, in each communal singing gathering, at least one or more professional singers perform the melodies correctly and lead the crowd. The rest of the singers, however, are not professional and the gathering of up to hundred or more unskilled singers sounds closer to the roar that can be heard in sports fields when supporters praise their teams. In the mind of the participants of a communal singing gathering, however, the original performance of the song prevails in its harmonious and emotive melodies, the same way the magical Jewish-Israeli garden prevails in the mind beyond the shifting and edgy reality of everyday life in Israel.

### *An Exclusive Home*

#### *How to break a Hamsin*<sup>46</sup>

There once was a hill made of dust  
With sun and thorns  
And one day stepped on it  
A group of settlers

A cruel *sharav*<sup>47</sup> hit them  
And each good boy said

45. Herman, 1999: 69.

46. Hamsin means «hot dry wind from the desert». «How to break a *hamsin?*» [Keitzad Shovrim Hamsin], 1963 for singers Yafa Yarkoni and Dorit Reuveni.

47. Hot dry weather.

Tell us, how to break a *hamsin*?

Tell us what to do  
How do you do break a *hamsin*?  
How do you break a *hamsin*?

The boys searched and searched  
And didn't find any advice  
And meanwhile what did they do?  
They dried the swamp

And when they saw there was no choice  
They stretched and stretched a hose with a sprinkler  
And around it they planted a colonnade

(...)

Around fifty years passed  
And one clear day  
Suddenly the people saw  
That it was actually nice here

Water flows through the hose  
And a sprinkler sings a song  
And the trees have a cool shadow  
And birds begin to sing  
And on the grass children  
Ask father and mother —  
Tell us, how do you break a *hamsin*?

(...)

The grass is green; a clean, cool garden has been built on the once dead and thorny hill. The community stands where there was nothing besides wilderness. And in a place without any vegetation surely there were no people. The hill was deserted and now there is a garden on it where the children use the Hebrew language to speak with their parents just as they taught summer guests from all over the world to say shalom. There is no other language in the garden than Hebrew; everything in it has a Hebrew



name and those who live in the garden are the Hebrew settlers that once came to the wilderness.

Other than an old silent Bedouin in «The Big Trip», Muslim and Christian Arab Israelis (or any other non-Jewish nationality) are practically absent from Shemer's songs.

In the 1963 song «The Big Trip» [Hatiyul Hagadol], for the Nahal<sup>48</sup> singing troupe:

(...)  
 We continued through a twisted road  
 To walk forty kilometres  
 In a green and shadowed valley  
 We found a flock of goats  
 From Mount Chorazin  
 We played [to] them with a herders flute  
 All the songs we know  
 And so we continued to walk  
 With all our friends  
 And a flock of goats from Mount Chorazin  
 (...)

Flocks of goats are normally led by shepherds; they do not roam free in the countryside for Hebrew travellers to pick them up. The invisible shepherd of this song could be a Muslim/Christian Arab, Circassian or Druze. But in this case he is invisible. Not only is the shepherd invisible, but the flock of goats comes as well from Mount Chorazin,<sup>49</sup> which is the site of the ruins of a Jewish settlement on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. The Chorazin settlement existed from the first to the eighth centuries. Did Shemer mean to say that the goats were coming from the ruins of the ancient settlement or from the real living Chorazin community? Are the travellers, then, our contemporaries or is this a historical song? This is not so important, because in the collective imagery

48. Israeli army unit whose soldiers work in settlements.

49. Mount Chorazin is an excavated village in the north Galilee, inhabited from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries by the Jewish community of Chorazin. The city of Chorazin is cited in the New Testament (Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 10:13-15) as a cursed city for rejecting the work of Jesus and in the Talmud Babli (Menahot 85:1) as a producer of high quality grain.

everything mixes into one omnipresent myth that links past with present and present with future.<sup>50</sup> Other nationalities apart from the Jewish do not exist in the ideal Hebrew garden and nature's goods are related either to the Jews and their land or to the hard work of the Jewish settlers.

Ignored nationalities in Shemer's songs provoked her first confrontation with the intellectual left. After Shemer's «Jerusalem of Gold», the writer Amos Oz accused Shemer of racism because of the following lines:

The city that sits alone  
 And in her heart there is a wall  
 (...)  
 How did the water wells dry?  
 And the market town is empty  
 No one visits the Temple Mount  
 In the old town  
 (...)  
 No one descends to the Dead Sea.  
 In Jericho's road  
 (...)

Shemer responded to this critique saying, «A world empty of Jews is for me a dead planet and a land of Israel that is empty of Jews is desolate and empty.»<sup>51</sup>

Again, it is not the purpose of this work to analyze Shemer's response to her critics. It is true, as well, that in addition to being controversial, these verses hold a complex web of references to Hebrew literature. Examples include Rabbi Akiva's Midrash, the Book of Lamentations, the Medieval al-Andalus poet, Yehuda Halevi and the books of Genesis and Jeremiah.<sup>52</sup> What matters here, however, is the interpretation that the typical Israeli would make of these songs. What matters is the consequence of these verses, the understanding of the myth created by the songs, which is the mythical garden and its exclusivity.

50. Bell, 1997: 10.

51. Quoted in the «To the Water Wells» documentary series about Naomi Shemer for Israeli TV, 1981.

52. See Heitner.

Even if one of the summer guests (see «Summer Guests», above) at the garden comes from Morocco and says *Ahlan* — his Arabic is still foreign and does not belong in the Hebrew house. The Hebrew house has no other languages than Hebrew. Hebrew is in fact the «land» in these songs, since the land was a blank page until new Hebrew names were used to describe it and, thus, essentially «construct» its nature.

The popular 1971 song «In the Fields of Bethlehem» [Bisdot Beit Lehem] tells the story of a slightly melancholic shepherd (he has a «stone in his heart») who plays his flute in the fields of Bethlehem, which are described using all of the clichés in Shemer's songs; the peaceful night, white moon and grass hint that we are dealing with the mythical garden, and the song is written in first person, with the shepherd speaking Hebrew.

Considering the fact that the population of Bethlehem consists mainly of Muslim and Christian Arab speakers, the song leads to an ambiguous zone. Is this a historical song about the Jewish presence in Bethlehem in ancient times? In that case, the use of Modern Hebrew would still be an anachronism. Or is it a song in Hebrew about an Arab shepherd? In that case there is some recognition of the presence of other nationalities in the mythical garden. However, this would not be in line with the rest of Shemer's songs. This song, then, is important because it serves as an example of the ambiguity of the approach to otherness in Shemer's songs. The lyrics in Hebrew about a shepherd in Bethlehem let the public choose their own way of relating to the song, following some of the interpretations given above.

One implication of these politics of ignorance, in the sense of voluntarily ignoring other nationalities, is the exclusion of those Jewish Israelis who recognize other nationalities living inside the borders of the myth, since their beliefs contradict the essence of the myth, which is a Hebrew national garden. In this case, the ambiguity of the myth is very helpful. The political borders of the Hebrew garden are not strongly defined in the myth. This is the reason why the strongest polemics regarding Shemer have centred around the song «Jerusalem of Gold», the only song to ignore an Arab presence in a marked geographical space. The rest of the borders of the imagined community remain ambiguous. This allows leftwing supporters to identify more easily with the myth, while

supporting all kinds of different territorial agreements with non-Jewish nationalities living inside the political borders of Israel.

The geo-political borders of the Hebrew home are mentioned in some of Shemer's most famous songs, but with no repeated insistence. The Golan Heights, the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula are all named in one or two songs, but do not appear often enough to believe that they are inherent in the mythical Hebrew house. Jerusalem does have a central role in this house, represented by «Jerusalem of Gold», Shemer's most famous song and probably the most popular song in the *Shirei Moledet* (motherland songs) genre. For its popularity<sup>53</sup> and recognition outside Israel (it has, in fact, been translated into several other languages), this song represents a value in and of itself.

Hence, biblical connotations, an emphasis on the Hebrew language and a nebulous presence of non-Jewish inhabitants twirl around Shemer's songs to allow everyone to find an approach to the myth to match their own political view. What does not change in the myth are its Hebrew character and the exclusion of non-Jews. Opinions differ only about the political translation of the myth, about the physical actions of the state's government. Even if those brought together by the songs may disagree about where the physical borders of the Israeli state should be, it is unlikely they will argue about the exclusively Jewish nature of their imagined community.

### *The Inevitable War*

When mother came here young and beautiful<sup>54</sup>  
 Father built her a house on the hill  
 Springs changed, a half century passed  
 And curls turned gray

Just on the river of the Jordan it is as if nothing came to pass  
 The same silence and also the same decor:

53. In a survey carried out jointly by the leading radio station Reshet Gimel, the main TV channel, Channel One and the Yediot Ahronot newspaper, «Jerusalem of Gold» was voted the most popular song from Israel's first fifty years and was chosen «song of the century» by Reshet Gimel on the state's fourteenth anniversary.

54. «The Eucalyptus Grove» [Hurshat haEuchalptus], 1963.

The eucalyptus grove, the bridge, the boat  
And the salted smell on the water

(...)

Just on the river...

Beyond the Jordan the cannons thundered  
And peace returned at the end of the summer  
And all the children became adults  
And they built a house on the hill again

Just the river...

The mythical Hebrew home is often depicted as Shemer's birth kibbutz on the Sea of Galilee. This can be seen in «The Eucalyptus Grove», another of Shemer's all-time hits. Written in 1963 and sung by a wide range of artists, this is yet another song about the Hebrew home as the paradisiacal garden, albeit this time with a special meaning for Shemer. The song is about her kibbutz and the eucalyptus grove she used to play in as a child.

Besides Shemer's natural attachment to the landscape where she grew up, it is interesting to mention the use of the Jordan River as a symbol of a natural border, and the image of the mountains on the horizon, both of which appear often in Shemer's songs. The mountains and the Jordan River are the most repeated images of borders seen in Shemer's songs. In «The Eucalyptus Grove», the cannons once thundered beyond the Jordan, i.e., war «occurred» beyond the borders of the garden.

In Shemer's songs, as well as in Israeli life in general, war and the military are constantly present, and are, in fact, a part of everyday life. It is interesting to note that in Shemer's songs war is a phenomenon that is always happening somewhere beyond the horizon, beyond the borders, yet never in the garden.<sup>55</sup>

55. «After Sunset in the Field» [Ahrei haShkiah baSadeh], 1962 for armored division veterans and Naomi Levi.

Between the field of corn and the field of wheat  
 After sunset in the field  
 A little girl walked alone  
 After sunset in the field  
 The sun disappeared behind the mountain range  
 And she is still walking on the road  
 After sunset in the field  
 Sunset in the field

From the field of war or field of manoeuvres  
 After sunset in the field  
 Noisily came back an armoured division  
 After sunset in the field  
 ‘Step on the tank, ride with us  
 The tank is yours and you are ours’—  
 After sunset in the field  
 Sunset in the field

To home, among piles of clouds  
 After sunset in the field  
 A child drives a line of armoured cars  
 After sunset in the field  
 And a song rises from the turret  
 - ‘with you we will arrive to the end of the world’  
 After sunset in the field  
 Sunset in the field

The tanks come from the field of war and meet the child, who is alone in her fields. War is waging in a different field somewhere beyond the garden. It is somewhere far enough that it does not form a menace for the little girl, who meets the joyful soldiers as if they were returning from a satisfying day of work. To use the word field with four different connotations — war, manoeuvres, corn and wheat — implies that a field of war is comparable to a field of manoeuvres and both are parallel to the fields of corn or wheat where the little girl is walking. Only the fields of war or manoeuvres are far away.<sup>56</sup>

56. «We are Both From the Same Village» [Anahnu shneynu meOto haKfar ], 1969 for *Lehakat Pikud Merkaz*.

We are both from the same village  
 The same height, the same hair forelock  
 The same short speech — what can we say?  
 We are both from the same village

(..)

We went to the same places  
 We went to the same wars  
 We crawled over thorns and thistles  
 But returned together to the village

I remember the battle that never ended  
 Suddenly I saw how you are falling apart  
 When the sun rose from the mountain  
 Then I brought you to the village

You see — we are here in the village  
 Almost everything remains the same  
 Amidst a green field I walk  
 And you are behind the fence.

In this sad song, war does have its negative consequences; however, the action of war still takes place beyond the borders of the garden where there are only thorns and thistles. Again, the presence of the mountains appears as a border, which is the direction the soldier came back from with his wounded friend.

Clearly, the myth is not necessarily affected by war. One soldier dies, but the other lives and the garden remains peaceful while war takes place beyond it. In fact, war is treated as something so common that it becomes routine. With «Me and Brother Ron» [Ani veAha Ron], Shemer wrote a playful cabaret song for the Military Choir in 1960. This song follows the stages of life of the singer, which are birth, military service, love and death. In one strophe the song says:

To each clown its punishment and to the warrior... his reward  
 As a bereaved lion I fought, when we moved to the south

There with my teeth and nails  
 I drove tanks after my command.  
 With an act of honour the medal of Sinai was given to ... brother Ron.

The inclusion of a tale of war in this long cabaret song is done casually. It is nothing we should be surprised about. Just as one gets married and attends high school, so one performs military service and fights in a war, all considered normal stages in the life of those who live in the Hebrew garden.

In «Forty» [Arba'im] (1972, for singer Miri Aloni), Shemer wrote a cheerful song about a woman who turns forty. She still feels like a little girl in spite of all the things she has done during her life. Among other normal activities, Shemer sings about taking on too much debt from the bank, wearing a bikini when she was too old to do so, speaking ill of other people, wearing makeup, dating younger men and travelling «...by car, plane and tank». In the world created in Shemer's music, the military world is normalized and has a constant presence. The fact that in 2008 the Israeli Defence Force posted the song «We are From the Same Village» on its official webpage demonstrates yet again that the songs, while mourning the anonymous fallen soldier, support the war by normalizing its presence in life. The option of preventing war is nowhere to be seen; war is implicitly unavoidable.

*Roads*<sup>57</sup>

In a summer day, in a hot morning,  
 A man comes out of his confinement,  
 In a crossroads he watched here and there,  
 And only a black sign showed him his way,  
 Forward, go on  
 And don't look back

Roads, roads  
 Ways of dust and flowers  
 Come towards me

57. «Roads» [Drachim], melody by Shim'on Israeli.



Where is the ending? The end of all roads.

And then all the roads get filled  
 Cars and cannons  
 The soldiers with personal equipment and explosive charges  
 To the sign flowed as a steadfast river  
 It showed them the way,  
 As a command heard in a battle

And dawn came as a flame  
 To the wide crossroads,  
 A cannon fired some shells,  
 And hit the sign, and tore its head  
 And so broke its body  
 Yes, this was its end,

Roads...

The appearance of dust on the road warns that this song is not talking about the garden, but rather about the war in the wilderness outside. There is a black sign showing the way, then «soldiers come», «a cannon fires», as if by itself, and hits the sign. What we see is a passive attitude towards the outbreak of war. War is something that happens in the wilderness. We see the same thing in «The Eucalyptus Grove», for the cannons «thundered beyond the Jordan», as storms do, as a natural phenomenon that cannot be avoided by men. War is something that happens by itself. Its origin is not necessarily related to life in the garden; it is something that surrounds it like clouds or wind.

*It doesn't matter*<sup>58</sup>  
 If I miss the way and wander north  
 And a big storm passes and announces floods  
 And I do not know what tomorrow will bring  
 Something in the darkness comforts me and sings

It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter  
 More complete than a broken heart

58. «It doesn't matter» [Ein Davar], 1970s for «*Tsemed Reim*».

And screaming louder than silence

A broken heart and a wounded heart  
 A heart tired from talking  
 He knows love  
 That was attained through torments  
 And when it almost sinks  
 And the water reaches the neck  
 Something in the darkness  
 Comforts him and sings

It doesn't matter...

If in a screaming silence  
 Sometimes I break  
 Guess the future  
 But remember the past  
 When fear encloses me  
 Then amidst the mounds of darkness  
 That encloses me softly  
 Something always tells me  
 To keep on going and wait/keep on waiting

It doesn't matter...

The storm passes and heralds floods that will come again from far away. Inside the darkness that surrounds the heart, there is still hope. The fight is a fight for hope and the remembrance of the past against the menacing mountains and storms from outside. There is no mention of self-criticism, which gives the reader the protagonist's feeling of integrity. There is fear, but it is a fear from foreign menaces, not from one's own mistakes. The only menace is to lose hope because when there is hope the way is clear and we always keep on going forward. It is the fight for the purity of hope against its disappearance. The blows come from outside, against an innocent protagonist, as seen again in «Messianic Sufferings» [Hevlei Meshiah], a 1978 song often performed by Naomi Shemer herself:

When I walk  
 With no sense or direction

On my heart as an amulet  
I have all the time  
A little song, a little song

Messianic sufferings here it comes  
Messianic sufferings here it comes  
Messianic sufferings here it comes today  
Here it comes today

There are some who sing  
From beyond the silence  
Their lips may not move  
But their voice  
Will be heard, will be heard

Messianic sufferings...

Sometimes I absorb  
Blow after blow  
And when I feel bad and bitter  
Then I even more  
Sing like this, sing like this.

Messianic sufferings...

If I reach home  
By the cypresses  
Someone will offer me water  
And with the possibilities of my strength  
I will still sing, still sing

Messianic sufferings...

The song is entitled «*Hevlei Meshiah*» in Hebrew, which is a phrase from Jewish tradition to describe the calamities that will shortly precede the coming of the Messiah. Naomi Shemer uses the words here to describe the calamities that strike her in successive blows, as in previous songs. She only insists on singing. In Shemer's songs, the response to the calamities coming from outside is often to continue singing.

To sing, we understand, is to invoke the ideal of the mythical house. Problems come from abroad, and the victims of these blows must not lose hope but must continue to evoke their ideal.<sup>59</sup>

I have seen the Galilean sea storming in turquoise  
 And a dark purple wave stood and splashed  
 I thought to myself everything is possible  
 As long as we are here.

(...)

Everything is open it is not yet late  
 The winds will change tomorrow  
 It could be, it is possible —  
 As long as we are here singing.

(...)

In this recent but rapidly popular song by Shemer, the lyrics list sites in the state of Israel that please the singer and bring him or her to believe that «everything is still open». The winds may change —we do not know— but as long as there is singing, the ideal is alive and still possible.

The call repeatedly heard in Shemer's songs, to keep singing and to not lose faith, contains the feeling of menace to the stability of that faith. War is normal and inherent in the myth and at the same time a threat to its future. Since war is always present in the background, it becomes the constant threat that explains the call to not lose faith. This is reminiscent of Theodor Herzl's view of global anti-Semitism as an unavoidable trait of humanity, which is the reason for the creation of a Jewish state.<sup>60</sup> This thought seems to be ever present in the current idea of the Israeli imagined community.

We begin to perceive that the myth we are concerned with in this paper has a paradoxical nature. The Sea of Galilee and the rest of the country are beautiful and the mythical garden is blooming, yet it must be insisted so

59. «Everything is open» [Hakol Patuah], 1994 for a special concert at the Sea of Galilee.

60. Herzl, 2004: 98.

vehemently that «everything is still open» and hope must not be lost. If the garden already exists, what is there left to hope for? Where is this menace coming from, even during the celebration? It appears that while the mythical garden does exist, it still must be sought after at the same time.

### *Nostalgia*

The mythical Hebrew garden is celebrated and at the same time longed for in Shemer's songs. As seen above in «To the Water Wells», the protagonist went to the water wells because of his or her love and there, her love «will find affection». As we saw in the song, «There is and there isn't», «we have part in David» and «inheritance in the son of Jesse», but not much more. Even if the children of the world have learned to say shalom, the rivers and forests of the land have not yet been created, «one man will plant» them, though he has not yet done so. Something has been achieved; there is a mythical house, yet something no less important is apparently still missing.

In words of the famous comedian Shaike Levi from *Hagashash Hachiver*, for whom Shemer often wrote songs: «You hear her songs and you immediately feel longings for Israel without a reason. You are after all in Israel, you are here, so what are you longing for?»<sup>61</sup>

The mythical Hebrew garden is something that the members of the community have, but not yet. They must sing for it, once more, and while singing, its vision will remain present.

### *Onward*<sup>62</sup>

In the end we are quite alone  
 It is true not all of us are saints  
 But I am still in love,  
 So onwards!  
 At the end I just wanted to bless  
 They slain me on my thigh and knee  
 But I will still make my blessing  
 Onward!

61. *Yediot Ahronot* - 27.6.2004.

62. «Onward!» [Hala'h], 1984 for *Hagashash Hachiver*.

Onward! Ancient days  
 Onward! Motherland songs  
 Onward! The earth shakes  
 And the country dances  
 Onward! Till the morning light  
 Onward! Not a baby anymore  
 Onward! Onward! Onward!

Maybe as an acrobat on a thin rope  
 I tried to cross the distance  
 And don't let the light blind me  
 And besides that I even [have time to] play the violin  
 Maybe as a swimmer that has already swum  
 More than five hundred pools  
 He is thirsty to a little rest  
 Onward!

Onward!...

(...)

«Onward!» says the song. «Onward! Motherland songs» that make the land shake and the country dance. Even if «they» hit the singer on his «thigh and knee» he still goes onward and continues singing. Singing is what holds the myth together; it is the force that creates its rivers and forests and makes the country dance. This energy will not disappear as long as it is sung because the songs are this energy. The songs are the myth itself and to sing them is to make the myth exist.

The problem is that the myth is inherently conflictive in itself. The myth that is so passionately longed for in Shemer's songs is the mythical Hebrew garden in the middle of the wilderness, with wells, grass, blooming flowers and the surrounding war as basic components. It is a peaceful refuge encircled by war. That is, war and peace are paradoxically both the essence of the myth.

By summarizing the most repeated ideas in the songs in order to gather the foundations of the myth that forms the Jewish-Israeli imagined community, we perceive the image of an ideal that reveals itself to be a paradox.

The song will carry its singers through darkness to the magic garden surrounded by war, where brave soldiers live:

*And this is just the beginning*<sup>63</sup>  
 A man builds his home from clay and bricks  
 And meanwhile there are problems with the neighbours,  
 And this is just the beginning, la —la...

Trees must be cut and water wells pumped  
 And he who has many ideas will suffer too much  
 Because this is just the beginning, la —la...

Sometimes a man is happy sometimes he suffers  
 And from one to the other he celebrates half jubilee  
 And this is just the beginning, la — la...

A man builds his home and his strength is with him  
 It may be a bitter moment, but it hasn't ended,  
 Because this is just the beginning, la — la...

From the eastern edge a new day will burst,  
 And this is your land of honey and milk  
 And this is just the beginning, la — la...

There is a lot of work to be done and a lot of suffering, as the song says, but in the end, this is your promised land of honey and milk. This is a common way of referring to the Israeli state related to the biblical promise of God to its chosen people (see among others, Exodus 3:8: «and I am come down (...) to bring them up out of that land and unto a good land and a large land, unto a land of flowing milk and honey»).

If this is just the beginning, it is a mere question of keeping the faith and continuing onward. Where is onward? The song does not say. Naomi Shemer's «onward» is an ideological one; onward to somewhere that is not described clearly in her songs which is why they can be so popular among people from very different shades of the Israeli political spectrum.

63. «And this is just the beginning» [veZohi Rak haHathalah], 1974 for *Lehakat Pikud Merkaz*.

Ambiguity is what gives strength to a ritual practice and Shemer's songs are a good example of this concept. Ambiguity allows a certain freedom to the participants in a ritual to make their own interpretations of it. Moreover, this ambiguity also offers an apparent freedom of choice regarding the reason the participants believe they participate in the ritual.<sup>64</sup> However, in the case of the myth represented in Shemer's songs, its ambiguity becomes its own trap.

Hannah Arendt's critique of the Zionism inspired by Theodor Herzl's writings is also relevant to the myth of the Hebrew garden. A society that believes conflict and animosity to be the only ways of communicating with those who are not its members is lost because it will not be able to find allies among those who are not against it.<sup>65</sup> In other words, since there is no plan for dealing with «problems with the neighbours», or any space for self-criticism or change in the ideal, and war has become inherent in the myth, the hopeful proposal of advancing onward becomes destructive.

This destructive attitude is expressed in Prof. Gurwitz's discussion of the revival of communal singing in 2002: «As if we would say [with the songs]: We love ourselves. The whole world is against us anyway, so let's go back together to the place where we were right, where we were strong».<sup>66</sup> Everyone can feel the appeal of the idea of advancing onward toward a paradisiacal garden, but since war forms part of this same peaceful garden, realization never arrives. The myth is something to which the songs aspire, and war is implicit in the myth. The strife perceived in attaining peace cannot be detached from an implicit strife associated with going to war.

It is possible, in this Jewish-Israeli myth, to perceive the fusion of the two contradicting streams of Zionism that have merged in Israel. On the one hand, there is Eastern European socialist utopian Zionism, which originated from the idea of establishing a base in Palestine that would serve as a meeting and organizing point from which it would be easier to participate in international revolutions against class and nationalism. This

64. Kertzer, 1988: 11.

65. Arendt, 2005: 62-73.

66. Bar-Ilan Media Studies, Prof. David Gurwitz on communal singing, quoted by Kutes-Bar in *Maariv* Weekend, 6-9-2002.



was a utopian socialist Zionism, longing for the fulfilment of a dream of a justice somewhere in the far-off future<sup>67</sup>. On the other hand, there is the Zionism of Herzl's followers, a movement originating in Central Europe, which strived towards national emancipation.<sup>68</sup> This nationalist Zionism celebrated cultural hegemony over a geographical territory, seen as the «national home». In the latter case, a national home as seen in Herzl's eyes is a space to take refuge from endless and unavoidable conflict with foreigners.

To acknowledge the fusion of these two opposing tendencies in the Jewish-Israeli imagined community helps to understand the paradoxical approach found in the songs analyzed in this paper, represented by two opposing quotes from Naomi Shemer, herself. One is an imperialist statement where the possession of power legitimizes dominance: «In my eyes it is not an occupation, it is a dissident minority inside of us, I haven't yet seen a country divided because of a dissident minority. We are supposed to deal with the Arab minority and make it still democratic. This is not a democratic country, it is a Jewish one!»<sup>69</sup> The other is a cry for justice for the weak: «I will dance and sing until my soul leaves my body because my happiness is my protest. Happiness is the real protest and I believe this is the essence of Zionism. It is a protest against destruction, extermination, sadness, insignificance[...]. We forget that we all form part of a big protest movement».<sup>70</sup>

A Herzlian fear of an anti-Semitic planet can be perceived in Shemer's remarks and songs, as well as the interesting fusion of nationalistic imperialist thought with revolutionary thought.

The myth of the Israeli imagined community seems to consist of a constant longing for a situation that has already been achieved; the ideal of a Hebrew-speaking Jewish nation has fused with a socialist ideological utopia. The endless war announced by Herzl and his followers and the celebration of a Jewish national home can be recognized in the myth, mixed with a longing for something which is unclear. This longing is not

67. «Ideological vision is futurist, since it strives to reach a utopian culmination of history where order will be fulfilled» (Geertz, 2001: 176).

68. See Arendt, 2004: 136.

69. *At* monthly magazine, September 2001.

70. *Pnai Plus* Magazine, 7.1.04.

explained in the songs that instead only encourage the belief that something better than what we have awaits us in the future. It is a longing for something that lies «onward», which can still be reached because «everything is open».

The myth represented in Shemer's songs is perceived by its followers as an emblem of the already existing Jewish-Israeli imagined community<sup>71</sup> and at the same time, as an ideology projecting into the future — «Who does not join the stream [of communal singing/Shemer songs] may be jealous, deaf or a defiler of Israel».<sup>72</sup>

The myth of the Hebrew garden appears to be something that can be celebrated while simultaneously being fought for. It represents an eternally menaced reality to rejoice over and the longing for a better future that will be achieved in an undefined time. What cannot be seen in the myth is any plan for reaching this better future. The only proposals are to maintain faith in the myth and celebrate its mythical depiction of the reality in Israel/Palestine. Perhaps in this openness lies its success in fusing opposing streams of Zionism.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A national myth can be recognized in the analysis of the main and most repeated elements in Naomi Shemer's lyrics. This myth represents what could be called the Jewish-Israeli imagined community.

We recognize in the lyrics a mythical representation of a perfect garden built out of a void, which holds life inside it while surrounded by war and desolation. The borders of this garden have no strict parallel to any physical ones. It is placed within the area of biblical Judea, but there is no clear delineation of its limits beyond that. The garden is a mythological ideal, expressed in Hebrew for Jewish speakers of Hebrew to take refuge in it.

Although the mythical garden exists and the community enjoys its symbolization while celebrating its existence, it is still being menaced by the war surrounding it. The community relates to the myth and therefore does not lose its faith and hope in it. However, war, paradoxically, forms

71. Harel: «A simple natural expression of love of country» and see Miron, quoted earlier: «If she didn't exist, we would have had to invent her».

72. Anonymous, quoted by Kutes-Bar in *Maariv* Weekend, 6-9-2002.

part of the myth, as it is the inevitable and eternal menace that gives meaning to the fight for that mythical refuge for the members of the imagined community. The result is a dynamic of circular motion where war justifies refuge in the myth and the myth embraces war.

Shemer's songs have a central place in the Jewish-Israeli collective imagined identity; therefore it is not far-fetched to say that the national myth reflected in her songs has great relevance for the majority of the Jewish population in Israel. The combination of the contradictory nostalgia for a national home that is already achieved leads to the circular motion of fighting for an ideal that involves fighting in itself, and this paradoxical myth could trap a wide human population in endless conflict. This is the reason why the myth reflected in Shemer's songs merits more in-depth study. The conclusions of this analysis could be useful for comparing Shemer's myth with the one reflected in other Jewish-Israeli popular representations (films, popular songs, etc.) and furthermore, in comparing the Jewish-Israeli myth with the myths of Arab-Christian Israelis, Palestinians or any other imagined community relevant to the interacting communities of Israel/Palestine. In addition, historical research into the roots of the Jewish-Israeli imagined community myth would be interesting in order to understand some of the mythological forces that affect, among others, the political decisions taken in the conflictive atmosphere of the Middle East.

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