

Rabbi Shalem Shabazi—Greatest Poet of Yemen

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Shalem Shabazi, acknowledged and revered as the greatest Yemenite poet is an unknown figure to the English-speaking world. His name appears in no general encyclopedia. His works are not to be found in any general literary anthology or collection of poetry. Yet in his lifetime it is said he wrote 15,000 poems, many of which have been lost. He enriched Hebrew literature, creating in the shadow of the Psalms, in a mood of longing for the Temple. He gave form to the wedding ceremony, conceived in the image of the *Song of Songs (Canticles)* as a sacred consecration, a bond between God and his people. He wrote many books, but only one, “Hemdat Hayamim” survives. His songs are sung at every table and occasion where Yemenite Jews gather to celebrate their heritage, since the day they were written to the present.

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Background

Shalem Shabazi (1619-1680) lived in the mid-17th C in Yemen. This places him about two generations after Shakespeare in England and Cervantes in Spain. He was born to a large and respected family who traced their descent from Zerach, son of Judah. For generations his forefathers were rabbinical leaders, heads of the court.

The family name, Mashta, derives from a legend. One of his ancestors mysteriously disappeared in the “mashta”, a bowl used by his wife in preparing the griddle cake “lechuch” eaten by Yemenite Jews on the Sabbath. Both the disappearance and the name are continuing elements in his life and poetry. This name (in Hebrew acrostic) is used as a constructive element in most of his works. Each poem weaves the name in different forms as a leading letter in creating the stanza forms—eg., Shalem Ben Yosef, El Shabazi. Shalem Shabazi Mashta, El Shabazi Mashta, Yulad Yosef Shabazi, on so on.

Youth

Shabazi received a traditional education—Bible, Rashi, Mishneh, Talmud, Sifre and Tosefot, Midrashim, Poskim and Halacha—as well as the textile craft as a weaver. His father died when he was fifteen and he had to support his mother. He left home in search of a livelihood, wandering from place to place till he came to Shibam, a town about four hours walk from Sanaah, capitol of Yemen. In Shibam he sought to apprentice himself to a local weaver. The tradesman set the youth the usual conditions of 2 to 3 years apprenticeship, but Shalem refused and made his own conditions. “I will work till the needle falls from my hand” he declared. The master replied,

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“But to whom does not the needle fall many times a day?” Shalem replied, “From my hand the needle will not fall, only if there is a reason. Therefore this is my condition” (Chozeh, 1973, p. 5).

We have here, perhaps, an insight into his independent character and creative process, which was quick, inspired by the moment, and intuitive rather than labored.

At the shop he worked so nimbly that the master was unable to supply him with enough work and took him to a larger more established shop, where he worked for two years. The new master was pleased. One day, the needle dropped from his hand, and he immediately said, “I am going. My mother has died, and I must go to bury her. The master replied, “The way is far It is a six-day journey. When will you arrive?” “Don’t delay me” said Shalem (Chozeh, 1973, p. 7). His master gave him money, and he left. He buried his mother and observed ‘shiva’ (mourning period), A few weeks later he returned, to the astonishment of the master and continued to establish himself in Shibam.

Sanaah

During those early years of apprenticeship he went often to Sanaah to study with the wise men of the city. He was impressed with these learned men and exchanged questions and answers with them. He loved his studies. Throughout his life he dreamt of them and set his longings into verse. Perhaps, he expressed this feeling in his poems as a longing for Jerusalem and the Redemption—a *place* and friends that he loved.

Legends

Shabazi began to reveal himself in youth. Many legends recount his disappearing, using the Holy Name (of Kabbalah) and ‘jumping’ to Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, or Tiberius on the eve of the Sabbath, returning on its departure.

One day he went walking with a group of boys his age and they met a hungry Arab farmer, who asked them, “Who can bring me the food of the King?” Shalem replied, “The King eats what we eat, cereal and yogurt.” “Liar” shouted the Arab, “He eats the choicest food in the world.” Shalem continued, “Wait here, and I will bring you the King’s food.”

Immediately using the Holy Name, he jumped to the palace. A servant girl was on her way to the king with his food. Using the Holy Name, he glued her to the wall and took the tray, brought it to the Arab, and seconds later returned it to the servant girl and disappeared again. The girl brought the tray to the King, who demanded to know why his meal was late! She related the story, and the King called to search the kingdom for the Jew who had done this.

Shalem apologized when he came before the King. He related the whole incident of the Arab in the field and begged the King’s forgiveness. The King promised to forgive him on condition that he submit to a contest - for the King, too, had magical powers! (Chozeh, 1973, p. 12-13)

In the contest which continues we touch on two recurring motifs in the life of Shabazi—his position as a miracle worker and his many contests, trials, and challenges to overcome the forces of evil in the defense of his Jewish identity and the well being of the Jewish community.

The King raised his sleeve, and a garden appeared—full of bushes, flowers and fruit trees. Shalem raised his sleeve, and locusts came and devoured the garden. The King, then licked his lips—and a palace appeared - filled with all manner of beautiful things. Then, the young Rabbi licked his lips, and the palace disappeared, as if it had never been. Then, the King beat the ground with a stick and a river appeared—broad and flowing. Shabazi threw his ring into the river, and it dried up. They continued this way for some time, then agreed on the following test. In a small window they placed a glass

of water and agreed that he who could go through the window and not spill the water was the winner. The King tried but spilled the water. They filled the glass again and the Rashash (a nickname for Rabbi Shalem Shabazi) passed through the window without spilling the water. Immediately the King understood he was dealing with a holy man, and released him. After all this, he returned home to the province of Sharab. (Chozeh, 1973, p. 16-17)

Again and again we find the imagery of King and palace in connection with the life of the Tzaddik. One senses in these experiences something of the Hassidic soul world of another poet—storyteller, Rabbi Nahman of Breslav of Eastern Europe. Perhaps, what they share are the same Kabbalistic roots—the imagery of the conflict of good and evil personified, the metaphor of the King as God, the palace as heaven. For example, the story goes: The King loved him and wanted him to live with him in the palace, but the Rav asked to return to his work in Shibam. Here we read into the narrative a conflict in the soul of the Tzaddik. The Eternal (i.e. God) wishes to absorb him into his ideal world of perfection, while the poet returns to the lower world to be actively involved in creativity and community.

Maturity

Thus Shabazi decided to “return back to the region of his ancestors in Sharab”. The adventures of youth over, he married and fathered three children, two sons (Yehudah and Shimon) and a daughter Shamah (Malka or Sarah). Many are the legends surrounding her beauty, piety, and early death. One is enough to give us a feeling for her place in our story:

One day the son of the King saw her and asked his father the King to give her to him in marriage. Some say the King approached Rabbi Shalem, who refused saying, “There is a difference between us in milah (circumcision), Sabbath, and marriage.” Others have it that the King sent men and took her by force. They dressed her in a wedding dress and put her on a camel (as the Bedouin of the desert do to this day). During the wedding festivities the King gave Shabazi much honor. Nonetheless, father and daughter stood their ground and fled to Shabaz, a district under the protection of another ruler. They arrived at the foot of the mountain, lamenting. He sang a half-verse, and she responded completing the line. There she fainted and died. She was buried in the shadow of the mountain, Al-u-din. Overcome with sorrow, the poet returned to his family in Shabaz, near Taiz. (Chozeh, 1973, p. 22)

Wandering

He tried to find comfort in work, but poverty clung to him and he found it difficult to support his family. “The trade of shame and embarrassment hovers over me” he remarked. “I tried all kinds of work but couldn’t find anything better than the promises of God” (Chozeh, 1973, p. 25). He left Shabaz to wander in all the cities and towns of Yemen in search of a livelihood, writing songs all along the way. What he earned, he sent back to his family in Taiz. In all his wanderings, he again returned to Sanaah, its wise men, wisdom, and the longings of his youth, which he praised in the poem “Ahavat David”. In our own time, we have witnessed another figure of similar stamp—the contemporary hassidic bard, Rav Shlomo Carlbach, whose wanderings, songs, and stories have created a sense of community for post-industrial aged youth divorced from Jewish culture, and renewed in them a feeling for their historic traditions.

Old Age

By this time his name had spread throughout Yemen. His last trials were in defence of the Jewish community. They regarded him with legendary awe as a miracle worker, Rabbinic authority, and defender of the Jews of Yemen in the same way that European Jewry regards Rabbi Judah Low, the “Maharal of Prague”.

During his absence an Arab miracle worker, called Ben-Alban, caused many Jews to doubt their faith. In a dream, the Eternal visited the Rashash, assuring him that he would be with him in overcoming the evil one and bring the Jews back to their faith. After arising, he prepared himself through prayer and fasting, read the “Tikun Hazot” (Midnight Vigil), and studied the secrets of the vowels in “Sefer Yetzirah” and the Holy Name. Then he called together the community, explaining that he who follows the Arab is as if he worshipped idols. Rabbi Shalem promised to fulfill all their needs with the Holy Name. Thus, they left the sorcerer, but not without a vigorous battle against the accusations of Ben-Alban. (Chozeh, 1973, p. 30)

By this time the Tzaddik was better off financially and bought property on the western side of Taiz to establish the Jewish community—building houses, synagogues, mikvaot, study halls, and finding watering places for the animals. But there is no peace for the righteous! The King, jealous of the growth of the Jewish community under Shabazi, placed a *herem* (censure) on their property. He called the Rav to his palace, placed him in dangerous situations and trials, but eventually, released him and sent him home to his property.

By this time Shabazi was an old man. He continued to travel to settlements and encourage the Jews, who along with the gentiles considered him a holy man. He wrote songs for the Arabs upon request: *Shirah* (joyous), *Evel* (mourning), *Qasid* (poetic tale), *Nashid* (serious), *Manneh* (responsive) *Hallel* (praise)—each according to a specific subject and appropriate time, as he had done for the Jewish wedding, Brit Milah, Sabbath, Festivals, High Holidays, Burial, Mourning, and 9th of Av. Much of Arab wisdom is drawn from him; and those who were the enemies of Israel became friendly through him.

Anticipating his own death, he prepared his grave. On the sixth day (Friday) he went to the mikvah and dipped himself. When his soul ascended on the Eve of the Sabbath there was no one to take care of him. His students and the people of the city wished to wait and bury him at the conclusion of the Sabbath. But those responsible, the “chevra kadishia” said, “Bury him immediately!” And so they did. The day was prolonged for him, so that when the mourners returned, there was yet time for them to join the congregation in prayer. When they were leaving the synagogue, a voice from heaven was heard over the mountain.

Far away in Sanaah, the wife of Mori Yitzhak Sharabi gave birth to a son, and his father named him Shalom. The boy grew and became a great Kabbalist—Rabbi Shalom Sharabi.

Artistic Stature

His piyyutim compare favorably with the Spanish Jewish poets of the Golden Age (i.e., Yehuda Halevi, Ibn Gibril, Abraham Ibn Ezra). The artistic element in the poems is their intricate word play, based on and derived from the permutation of the Hebrew letters in a word. An analysis of the well-known song ‘Kirya Yefefiya’ (Beautiful City) about Jerusalem, though beyond the scope of this study, manipulates the letters in various combinations to generate new words and meanings, exhaustively weaving-in historic recollections and Biblical associations with Kabbalistic allusions and personal emotional overtones. Translation seems insurmountable.

Shabazi was a religious artist. What is unique is that he was able to create a personal world within the religious tradition of the community. He saw an opening within the boundaries of Jewish Halacha and placed into the family atmosphere of table songs a repertoire of poems in the image of the *Song of Songs*, filled with love and longing, merging something inside the person with the image of Jerusalem and the Temple. They are songs that belong to the group. Nonetheless, they require expertise and sensitivity in performance by the “paytan” (solo singer), a leader amongst equals. Their long, ornamental melodic lines are hardly comparable to the clear, square rhythm of European ballad and folk song. These songs require a listener of equal refinement, an attitude closer to the Medieval Court, rather than the earthy peasant village.

Subjects of the Songs

The poems of Shalem Sabazi are collected in a songbook called “Diwan”. They are frequently written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic (inscribed with Hebrew characters). They deal with abstract concepts, a sacred rhapsody to the Eternal, frequently about longing for Zion, Redemption, and mystical union with the invisible God. Love is sublimated - in the spirit of the *Song of Songs*, as a longing for Jerusalem and the Temple. There is difficulty in translating these concepts and modes of expression into the non-traditional secular worlds of poetry and literature.

The wedding songs are grouped into 5-movement suites with many interchangeable poems to be chosen for each category: (1). *Nashid*-songs of longing about the bride who is leaving her home; (2). *Zafat*-processionals leading the couple to the bridal canopy; (3). *Chedduyoth*- songs of joy at the consummation of the wedding; (4). *Hallelot*-interludes, short expressive exclamations on the word Hallelujah and blessing the couple; (5). *Shira*-elaborate love songs of the bridegroom.

Structure and Performance of the Songs

The couplet is the basis of his form. Its overall structure is a combination of couplet quatrains, and sometimes three-line schemes. The structural frame is limited by an acrostic formation of some form of his name, as mentioned above. The ‘Shira’ or ‘girdle’ form is the most complicated form - consisting of a quatrain, a three-line ‘girdle’, and a closing couplet. The songs are performed in groups requiring at least 4 participants.

The structure of a verse is as follows: A soloist sings a line; a second singer joins him in closing the couplet. This pattern is repeated for the next couplet of the quatrain. Then the three-line ‘girdle’ is sung by another pair of singers (third and fourth). Finally, all four join in the last couplet. This structure is then repeated as many times as needed to complete the acrostic. These fixed forms are, perhaps, more to be likened to other fixed melodic troubadour song-forms of the Middle Ages than the pop tune of today, or the simpler ballad forms of folk music.

Afterword

Nearly fifty years ago I lived in, visited, studied with, and participated in Yemenite family and community life in the Baka and Katamon neighborhoods of Jerusalem with the Jews who had immigrated to Israel from Yemen and their children. At every occasion in the celebration of Sabbaths, Holidays, or Life cycle events (eg. weddings, circumcision, bar mitzvahs, etc.), whether at homes or in synagogues, the Yemenite Diwan was a

regular companion—sung during and after meals with enthusiasm and gusto—living proof of the awe and reverential function the poems of Shabazi hold for Yemenite Jews to this day.

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He has founded and directed the orchestra and chorus at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and directs the music program at Ariel University in Judea and Samaria. He studied at the Eastman School of Music, Yale University School of Music, and received a doctorate from the University of Colorado, Boulder.

He was asked by Ovadia Ben-Shalom (1923-2004) - pioneer and trailblazer who immigrated to Israel from Yemen before the establishment of the State, engaged in public activity, and absorbed the large Yemenite immigration to Israel in the 1950s - founder of “The Association for Society and Culture, Documentation and Research”, to serve as it musical advisor, and for whom Dr. Stern has frequently lectured to groups in Israel and visitors from abroad (eg. The Norwegian Friends of Israel).