
THE *Jewish Reader*

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A Pigeon and a Boy

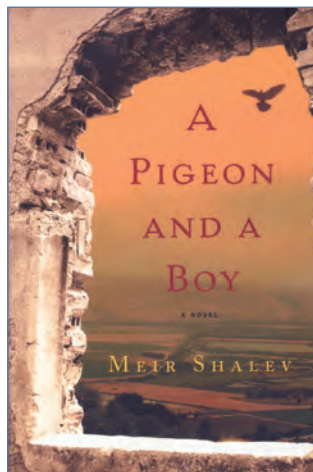
by Meir Shalev

(Schocken Books; 2007)

ESSAY BY RACHEL RUBINSTEIN

It is tempting to read Meir Shalev's newest novel as a political fable about exile, diaspora and the desire for home. The novel alternates between scenes in the present, where a middle-aged shlemiel of an Israeli tour guide finally leaves his wife and buys a home of his own, and scenes from 1948, when two homing-pigeon handlers fall in love against the backdrop of Israel's battle for independence. These characters are connected through two miraculous births which both occur in 1948: our hero, searching for a home in the present, is conceived in a most unlikely way just as Israel is violently birthed as the national Jewish homeland.

Meir Shalev too was born in 1948, under circumstances hardly less miraculous. He was conceived during the siege of Jerusalem, and his pregnant mother was smuggled out in order to give birth outside the beleaguered city. Shalev grew up to fight in the 1967 war, and was badly injured not long after that war ended. Touring the newly acquired territories with his father after 1967, Shalev recalls that he told his father, "Israel has bit off something that will choke us." Shalev has enjoyed a rich, varied career in Israel in radio, on television, and as a political journalist, children's writer and novelist. He is the bestselling author in Israel of such novels as *The Blue Mountain* (*Roman Russi* in Hebrew) and *Esau*. *A Pigeon and a Boy* has won multiple awards, including the Brenner Prize, Israel's highest literary recognition, and the National Jewish Book Award in the U.S. All his fiction is profoundly preoccupied with Israeli history, taking on Israel's most cherished national narratives, such as the Jewish pioneer settlements in Palestine a century ago (*The Blue Mountain*) and the bloodiest battle of the War of



Independence (*A Pigeon and a Boy*). At the same time, these are not ideological or polemical novels; Shalev saves his polemics for his weekly newspaper columns, where he articulates a distinctly left-of-center point of view.

And thus we return to the temptation to read politics into *A Pigeon and a Boy*, a tendency that Shalev himself rejected on a recent visit to Amherst, Massachusetts. Writers of fiction, he explained to his audience on the Hampshire College campus, cannot be obligated to write about anything except what

they experience and imagine. Readers can come to a novel with aesthetic or narrative expectations, but not political or ideological ones. Throughout the question period, Shalev continued to resist politicized interpretations of his fictional work. Rather, the whole story began, he said, with a house.

Weary of Jerusalem life, Shalev said, he and his wife found a small house in northern Israel, one of those cottages built for new immigrants in the early postwar period. As they spent their first night in the empty dwelling, Shalev recounted, he turned to his wife and said, "I think I'm going to write my next novel about this house." A version of this scene appears in the novel, when Yair convinces his estranged wife to spend a night with him in his renovated but empty house, and they briefly reconcile as they watch the a flock of cranes noisily flying overhead. Many large birds, including cranes, we learn in the novel, stop in Israel's Hula Valley during their long annual migrations between Europe and Africa. The migration and nesting habits of birds play a central role throughout this story: much description is lavished upon the ways in which homing pigeons are built for long periods of flight, and how they can be trained to find their way home from anywhere they are released – perhaps not unlike Jews, in their millennia of diasporic wandering, and in their fierce national yearnings for a homeland. What does it mean, then, that no one in the novel ever feels fully at home?

The novel opens with the voice not of Yair, nor of our two pigeon handlers, but with that of an elderly American man who, it turns out, is a veteran of the battle of San Simon and, in fact, an Israeli. (“What?!” he exclaims when Yair, his tour guide, asks if he was an American volunteer in the war. “You’re insulting my Hebrew!”) Through the old man’s reminiscences, we learn the story of the battle for the monastery, a key strategic point in the campaign to keep Jerusalem. But Shalev injects a characteristic note of magic into this account of a famous battle: “And suddenly, above that hell, the fighters saw a pigeon. Born from bulbs of smoke, delivered from shrouds of dust, the pigeon rose, she soared.” “For a single moment,” the American tells Yair, “every eye and every finger was following that bird as she did what we all wanted to do: make her way home.” The pigeon carries the final message from “the Baby,” a boy, mortally wounded in the battle, who is in love with another pigeon handler called only the Girl. During Israel’s battle for independence, homing pigeons were used by the Israeli army for communication, and Shalev uses this historical detail as an occasion for an extended meditation on the desire for a home and a homeland. Homing pigeons, the novel tells us over and over, have to love their homes in order to want to return there.

The Baby and the Girl are connected to Yair in a way that we begin to guess at early in the novel. As a guide, Yair specializes in birdwatching tours, though when we meet him he mostly works for his wife Liora, an American who has built a successful business empire in Israel; Yair guides her business associates on their trips to Israel. As we also come to realize, nearly every character in the novel is involved in some sort of love triangle, so when Yair buys a dilapidated small house with money his dying mother has given him, he quickly begins an affair with his contractor Tirzah, who was his childhood sweetheart. Often, Yair addresses his narrative to his mother, to whom he feels obliged to give an account of the home he has found with her money. He realizes that his mother was the heroine in her own drama, her own love triangle, between a boy and fellow pigeon handler with whom she was in love, and the man she would eventually marry but with whom she too would never feel entirely at home.

A Pigeon and a Boy elaborates on the theme of home and homelessness in subtler ways as well. We are introduced, for instance, to the Chinese construction workers who renovate Yair’s home under Tirzah’s supervision. Gradually we might begin to grasp an interesting irony: these workers who fulfill Yair’s dream of a home of his own are themselves far from

their own homes, guest workers in a culture from which they are alienated. Or the ruined Arab village where Yair goes to find stones to build a wall on his property, where he observes: “Depressions made by hinges or bolts could be detected in some, evidence of the ways of this land: war, exile, people uprooted and banished, stones abducted, moved from one place and time to another.” These characters or presences who haunt the edges and margins of this novel underscore the themes of exile and return, rootlessness and belonging, that exert such perennial power here and in so much of Jewish literature. JR

EXCERPTS

“Indeed,” he asked with emphasis, “who but the Jewish people returning to their homeland can better appreciate the tremendous yearning of the pigeon for her home and homeland...” He lowered his voice as he neared his conclusion. “For that reason we must plead with you once again to keep this matter a secret. Do not unwittingly reveal the existence of this pigeon loft to anyone, and certainly not wittingly, either.”
(PAGE 66)

I set out to find myself a home. One that would wrap around me, provide a refuge of sorts. I passed down village lanes stippled with light and shadow and the cooing of turtledoves. I peeped and knocked, I entered local grocery stores and inquired of shoppers. I perused bulletin boards studded with thumbtacks and strewn with slips of paper. I paid visits to the village secretariats, all with matching gray desks and people, all with the same aerial photographs: patchwork quilts of orchards and fields, agricultural buildings, pens dotted black and white with cows caught in the amber of the lens.

Like a vulture I soared, scouting after the collapsing, the dying, the dead. I met ruined farmers and couples that had split up. I scoured farmyards of thorns and dust. I drank tea with old people who refused to sell and their children who wished them dead, heard pigeons coo in an abandoned hayloft and winds howl in a breached roof. I saw dreams that had faded away, loves that had been proven false, crumbling cement and cobwebs.

I was a fugitive and a vagabond, my hands on the large, soft steering wheel of Behemoth as I searched throughout the country and, eventually, found it. Here it is, the house you intended for me. (PAGE 103)

I pointed out the high flying flock of large, soaring birds and told her, “Those are pelicans, heading north.” And she asked, “How can you tell what they are from so far away? Maybe they’re storks.” I informed her that pelicans change colors as they wheel and storks do not,

“Migrating birds have winter homes and summer homes,” I continued several minutes later. “But which of the two is the real one, the one they come home to?”

“The whole world’s their home,” Tirzah said. “When they fly down to Africa all they’re really doing is moving from room to room.”

I told her about the *yaylas*, the summer residences of shepherds in the mountain ranges of northeast Turkey. In winter they abandon them and descend to the villages in the valleys and the seaside towns; then in spring they return with their flocks.

“I didn’t know you’d been there,” Tirzah said. “Who did you go with?”

“Nobody,” I told her. “I haven’t even been there myself. I went to a lecture about the Kackar Mountains at the Traveler Shop.”

“Why don’t you go visit the Kackar Mountains for real, instead of listening to other people’s stories?”

“I don’t like going places – I like coming home,” I said....

(PAGE 151) **JR**

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Meir Shalev’s work is often compared to that of “magic realists” like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in whose novels magical events are described in a most mundane and factual manner. Is there anything magical in this novel?
2. What further connections do you see between Yair’s story in the present and the story of the Baby and the Girl in the past? Why do you think Shalev juxtaposes Yair’s search for a home of his own with Israel’s 1948 war? Is Yair’s quest for a home of his own entirely successful?
3. Are there links between the novel’s detailed discussions of pigeon rearing and house renovation? How does one make a home? How do pigeons fall in love with their homes? Why does a pigeon appear in Yair’s home when it is finally finished? Is it real or imagined?

4. Shalev’s description of the battle of San Simon is a particular tour de force, and quite true to the historical record (except for the presence of the pigeon handler and his pigeons). Does it matter that we never see the soldiers against whom the Israelis are fighting? Why is the other side in this war so invisible?

5. Why are there so many love triangles in the novel? Yair, Liora, and Tirzah; Yair, Tirzah, and Gershon; the Girl, the Baby, and Yordad; even Yair’s two nephews and their shared girlfriend. Yair says, “Migrating birds have winter homes and summer homes.... But which of the two is the real one, the one they come home to?” What does it mean to be torn between two loves, or two homes?

6. Can and should the novel be read as political commentary? Why or why not? **JR**

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