

## Fiction by Tamar Yellin

### THE GENIZAH AT THE HOUSE OF SHEPHER

Toby Press, 2005.

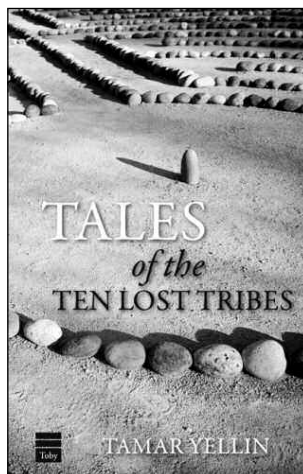
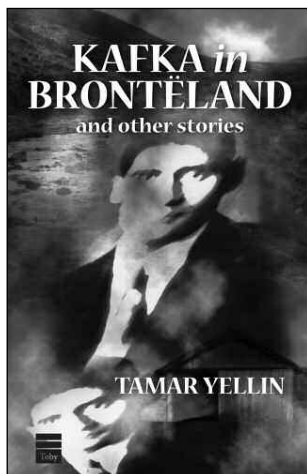
### KAFKA IN BRONTËLAND AND OTHER STORIES

Toby Press, 2006.

### TALES OF THE TEN LOST TRIBES

Toby Press, 2008.

Reviewed by Sara L. Jackson



“And it fills me with wonder, that failure can be so beautiful.”

—from *Kafka in Brontëland and other stories*, page 134

The principal narrator in Tamar Yellin’s entertaining and pleasant three-volume fiction collection is, like Yellin herself, a curious woman, educated at Oxford in Hebrew Studies who searches the world, her family, and herself for some answers to the meaning of life as a Jew and a woman. Her three books *The Genizah at the House of Shepherd*, *Kafka in Brontëland and other stories*, and her latest work *Tales of the Lost Ten Tribes* all deal with an undying interest in lost souls and their failures. She searches for beauty and humanity in those who

have fallen short of their dreams, in a lyrical style that is rich in Jewish symbolism, both modern and ancient.

Yellin addresses contemporary Jewish themes such as secularism, assimilation, and care for the elderly. These issues appear to reflect some of the biographical elements in her books. What does it mean to be a secular Jew searching for meaning in a religious past? Does assimilation mean disappearance? What do we do with and for our parents as they go into decline? These are some of the social issues she grapples with as she moves through time and space to try and understand her place(s) in the world.

Her award-winning novel *The Genizah at the House of Shepherd* is probably the most entertaining of the three books. Set in England and Israel, the novel is a combination mystery and Jewish historical fiction with a dash of magic realism. Here, the lost souls are four generations of Shephers—the narrator’s great-grandfather, grandfather, father, and herself. The his-

torical elements of the novel are drawn from the works of Yellin’s own grandfather, Yitzhak Yaacov Yellin, and the life of Rabbi Samuel Salant, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. In the novel we see similar characters as in her later works; lost fathers, frustrating mothers, and a narrator who is searching for herself through the history of others. In *Genizah* the lives of male family members show her a path towards self-awareness and acceptance as an academic, a woman, and a secular Jew. The novel is somewhat lighter in tone than her later works and suspense propels the reader towards the mysteries of her great-grandfather’s travelling and his sacred codex.

What I find most rewarding in *Genizah* are the historical details that coincide with insights into family life. From the *shtetl* to late-19<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem to post-Independence Jerusalem to England, Yellin shows humour, anger, and love within Jewish families. To Yellin, marriage choices are convenient and family obligations often frustrating. There is love, but it is rarely romantic. For example, Shalom Shepherd (the narrator’s great-grandfather) chose his wife because of her skill at cooking chicken. Her father chose his wife, well, because she was there. She writes about the unrequited drives for brilliance and success that her male family members suffer from—something that most of her narrators share.

The political aspect of the story is negligible. While Yellin does address Zionism in *Genizah*, she does not do so in a politically charged manner, or in a way that would clearly suggest her feelings on the Israel-Palestine issue. Considering that land is central to the plot of the book, it is somewhat surprising that the question “whose land is this anyway?” never comes to the foreground. Or maybe it isn’t so surprising. For if she did engage in the issue, then the book would no longer be fiction for fun, and would give her a more political and controversial

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Sara Jackson is beginning her PhD in Geography at York University in Toronto this fall. She appeared in Outlook most recently in our May/June 2007 issue with an article, “We Are Fighting for a Divorce”—The Combatants for Peace Winter 2007 U.S.A. Tour.”

public persona.

Although Yellin does not address the political aspects of Jews and land in Israel, she does explore the idea of Jews, place, and placelessness. Throughout Jewish history and mythology, place is not only the setting, but central to the narrative of what it means to be Jewish. Place is at the centre of Yellin's stories, as illustrated in *Kafka in Brontëland and other stories*. Decaying settings such as overgrown, once-flourishing homes do more than just contain her characters and stories. She uses physical decomposition as a metaphor for assimilation and the tension between religious and secular Jewish cultures. Perhaps the house of the people of Jacob is rotting, eroding, and weakening, but like a house overgrown with ivy and weeds, there is something beautiful and new in this elegant decay of Judaism. This is what her stories try to capture—the beauty that comes from exposure to the elements and time. Yellin expresses nostalgia for the loss of a vibrant, active Judaism but she also sees regrowth in the search for and remembrance of those lost and failed.

Homelessness, not in the sense of poverty but in the sense of place, creates the structure for

*Tales of the Ten Lost Tribes*. In ten stories we follow a woman, again resembling Yellin, who encounters ten people who represent the lost tribes. There is something incomplete about each person, something always shifting or fading. Through a sequence of people and their stories, Yellin unravels the themes of the lost tribes and we are moved from dispersal, to getting lost, to imagined places, and so on, but the narrator's search is never hers alone.

The tales begin with her Uncle Esdras, who introduces the idea of dispersal, planting the seed of the narrator's travel bug and search for the disappearing tribes. However, it was her father who began the search for the Ten Lost Tribes through books. He sought the tribes in countless volumes that he purchased from a nomadic antique dealer. The narrator took a much different path than her father. Following her uncle's lead, she left home and never looked back. Throughout her travels, the narrator floats from one setting to the next as an itinerant teacher—undoubtedly an English teacher. At some points she appears as a Jewish grown-up, melancholy cousin of Lewis Carroll's Alice. She never encounters the Cheshire Cat, but I'm sure she would very much like to meet him. There is no mad hatter. Her tea party companionship is limited to an old man who waits for news of the Messiah or another Holocaust. The Queen of Hearts is her vain, selfish, and ambitious mother. A blend of her father and uncle are the diminished King of Hearts and the flustered white rabbit. She makes brief connections with people and places until she moves on and ultimately finds herself lost, searching for *Manasseh* (or Kurtz?)

in the adult dream or nightmare of the heart of darkness.

The Ten Lost Tribes are undoubtedly central to Yellin's studies, interests, and identification with Judaism. In *Genizah* her great grandfather was obsessed with seeking out and finding the tribes. As the title of her most recent book suggests, the fascination with long-lost cousins takes centre stage as she uses the tales to create contemporary allegories of loss, failure, abandonment, and assimilation. Each story begins with epigraphs from ancient and modern Jewish histories. These epigraphs give the reader hints at the theme of each story as well as Yellin's own research experience.

Yellin's stories are about searching. It is almost as if because the Tribes (and perhaps all of us from time to time) are so scattered and so lost, that most of her characters are themselves fragments, incomplete, and ephemeral. She uses the searching and movement between places to drive from one story to the next. Despite this movement, place itself is not so much meaningless as tenuous, just as it has been for so many Jews for so many generations.

These are well-written stories with charm and some insightful historical details. They are not challenging, but find beauty and even comfort in failure. Lacking strong political or philosophical positions, they are good vacation books. If you are looking for an intense reading experience, Yellin will leave you disappointed and you would be better off reading Kafka, Conrad, or Carroll. But if you find yourself a little lost or melancholy and want some companionship, then Yellin might be well worth reading. ♦

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## ERRATA

In our March/April issue, we published a review by Bennett Muraskin of Avraham Burg's *The Holocaust Is Over: We Must Rise From its Ashes*. We omitted to mention that a shorter version of this review was previously published in History News Network.org.

In our May/June issue, the article "Ronnie Kasrils in Vancouver" was incorrectly credited only to Marty Roth. The byline should have read: "By Marty and Martha Roth." Our apologies to Marty and Martha.