The Genizah at the House of Shepher

By Tamar Yellin

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About this Guide
The following author biography and list of questions about The Genizah at the House of Shepher are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach The Genizah at the House of Shepher.

About the Book
For readers of The Ghost of Hannah Mendes and The History of Love comes a sweeping, award-winning novel of four generations of a Jerusalem family.

Returning to Jerusalem after a long absence, Shulamit Shepher becomes embroiled in a family feud over possession of the so-called Shepher Codex, a mysterious and valuable Torah manuscript discovered in her grandparents' attic genizah, a depository for old or damaged sacred documents. In unraveling the origins of the codex, Shulamit uncovers not only her ancestors' history but must reconsider her own past, her present and ultimately, her choices for the future. The tale of the family Shepher, their aspirations, feuds and love affairs, is a haunting one of exile and belonging, displacement and the struggle for identity.

About the Author
Tamar Yellin received the Pusey and Ellerton Prize for Biblical Hebrew from Oxford University and has worked as a teacher and lecturer in Judaism. She lives in Yorkshire, England.
Discussion Questions

1) “My heart is in the East and I am in the farthest West,” sang the poet Judah Halevy. How is the East/West dichotomy explored in The Genizah at the House of Shepher, and how does it drive the narrative? Do you think the pull of the East versus the lure of the West is a central Jewish experience and is it unique to Jews?

2) Genizah has been described as a thriller, a family saga and an exploration of identity, exile and belonging. How do these elements fit together and complement each other? Do you feel that the novel belongs to any particular genre? Is it important that it does?

3) Tamar Yellin has described the function of the Codex in the novel as “a metaphor.” How do you see the Codex working on this metaphorical level? What are the questions raised by the existence of a variant text of the Bible? Do they have answers?

4) The novel covers four generations, each through one main protagonist: Shalom, Joseph, Amnon and Shulamit. Which character do you empathise with most? What family characteristics do they share and how do they differ? Shulamit believes that spiritual conflicts and personality traits can be handed on through a family in the same way as physical features. Do you agree? Have you ever felt this way in your own family?

5) Though Shulamit is a woman, she focuses mostly on her male ancestors. Why do you think this is? Do you think Shulamit has more in common with her male forbears than with her female ones?

6) The history of the Jerusalem district of Kiriat Shoshan is paralleled to some extent by that of its neighbouring Arab village, Deir Yassin. What effect does this parallel history have? Do you feel that there is any political bias or message in the novel? What does the novel have to say about Zionism and the Middle East conflict?

7) Shulamit has a tendency to be “on the fence” about many important life issues and decisions. In what ways do her actions towards the end of the novel serve to resolve her dilemmas? Do you regard her as a weak or strong character? Where do you think her story will take her after the close of the narrative?

8) Through exploring her family history Shulamit—a “floating person”—seeks to rediscover her own identity and place in the world. To what extent can she really do this? Are we defined by family and how important is knowing our family history to our sense of who we are? Is knowledge of the past essential to building a future?

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