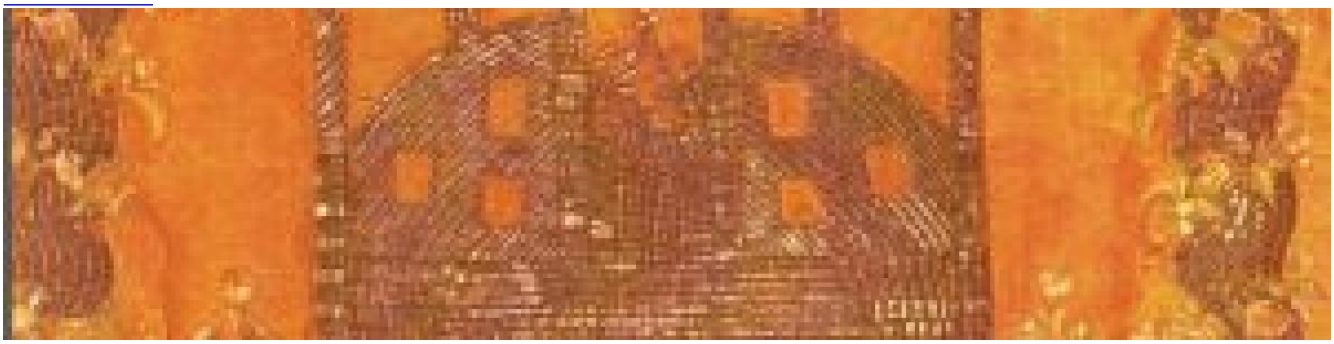
Book Review: "His Hundred Years: A Tale"... by Shalach Manot

View PDF



Gloria J. Ascher is Associate Professor of German, Scandinavian and Judaic Studies, and Co-Director of Judaic Studies, at Tufts University.

Gloria J. Ascher is Associate Professor of German, Scandinavian and Judaic Studies, and Co-Director of Judaic Studies, at Tufts University.

Shalach Manot, His Hundred Years: A Tale
A Sephardic Review

This is no ordinary book. It is a unique contemporary Sephardic novel that is best honored and illuminated by a Sephardic review. So instead of the usual essay with smooth transitions and a predictable progression, here are five (lucky number!) notes that focus on distinctive aspects of the book and their implications.

1. The shiny, hazy gold-bronze-rose-toned cover with its Turkish Jewish image, adapted from an 18th-century Torah ark cover from Istanbul, evokes a faraway fantasy world, which, indeed, bursts into life in the opening pages when we are transported to “Canakkale, 1911.” That world is, as we discover, not so far away--in time--after all. The paperback cover is strong and substantial, but pliable – like the main character of the novel it introduces. The combination of fairy-tale allure and Jewish tradition, of flexibility and tenacity, even stubbornness, is a thread that runs through and binds together the main character and other Sephardim (“Turkish Jews”) we meet.

2. The Tale is told in twenty-eight unnumbered episodes, each identified by location and year, with a break before the last four indicated in the list of Contents. The first is the earliest and the last the most recent, but the rest of the

episodes jump back and forth in time and place, with no apparent order. There are multiple tales in the same location and year, some presented consecutively, but two near opposite ends of the narrative. Some episodes take place at the same location in different years, and vice versa. Defying the limitations of narration in words, so convincingly delineated by the 18th - century German writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his Laokoon, Shalach Manot forces us to recognize that the order and meaning of the years of a life are not ultimately determined by chronology.

3. Like the years of a life, the episodes in this Tale are bound together by connections, relationships, associations, and correspondences. For example, the “explosion” heard by the main character as a schoolboy that signals war, remembered by the now retired man on a flight to London, is echoed in the episode that follows, sixteen years later in New York, by the “explosion” in his head as a result of anesthesia before surgery. Both explosions are recalled and recounted, the first to an African-American boy, the second to a lawyer. These encounters prove unexpectedly but typically meaningful, for this man, in all stages of his life, has the gift of relating openly to other people, of whatever age or cultural background. His openness and empathy extend to other creatures as well, like the donkey he buys as a boy in Turkey. He is, in Ladino, ben adam, a real, regular human being in the best sense (from the Hebrew for “son of man,” used often by the Biblical prophet Ezekiel).

4. This novel is replete with Jewish and particularly Sephardic references, elements, and, above all, values, like openness, commitment to family, and personal dignity. Encouraged as a boy in Turkey by the success story of the Biblical Joseph, the main character identifies throughout as a Jew, attending synagogue services, teaching an African-American boy about the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and their new life in Turkey, finding meaning and self-worth as an old man upon touching the Torah scroll on Simchat Torah – even if he does sell his first insurance policy on Saturday, Shabbat. He sings the Marseillaise at crucial times, reflecting the French influence on Turkish Jews. Perhaps most memorable are the songs, proverbs, and names of foods in Ladino, which are not merely colorful expressions of a culture that spice up the text, but can become crucial vehicles of meaning, for characters and readers alike.

5. Sien anyos en kadena es mas mijor de una ora debasho de la tierra. A hundred years in chains is better than one hour beneath the earth. Though this Ladino proverb does not appear in the novel, it expresses the essential meaning of His Hundred Years: the value of life. The main character continues to delight in life, to

find joy and strength and resourcefulness, to go forward to greater successes, taking pride in discovering new talents even as an old man. Beset by the chains of hunger and war, disappointment and loss, family fireworks and the accoutrements of old age, still he rises above them and persists, relishing hard-won moments of triumph. After his death he continues to impart this delight in life to an unlikely family member, and his one business failure is, in a way, reversed through a corresponding potential success, again involving family. He thus lives on, way beyond His Hundred Years!

These notes, as befits a Sephardic review, are far from exhaustive. Five of the many more aspects worthy of consideration:

1. the implications of the fact that the main character is never identified by name, but by what he is and what he does, as “the salesman,” for example (essence and substance rather than arbitrary label)
2. the sensitive and gripping portraits of diverse Turkish Jewish women caught in a patriarchal system
3. the Sephardic immigrant experience in the U.S.
4. the meanings of the subtitle: “tale” with mythical import, “tale” as folk tale, kuento
5. the short but thoughtful and useful Glossary

This Sephardic novel by Shalach Manot is, indeed, no ordinary book, but a gift for all seasons that entices you to join the adventure – and come up with your own list of notes, whether the number is 5 or 9 or 13! Mazal bueno, good luck, and enjoy!